The Many Deaths of Jason Todd

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The Many Deaths of Jason Todd

by Zoeleo

Summary

When Jason is the victim yet again of the Joker's personal war with Batman, the batfamily begins to tear apart at the seams. Tim spearheads a risky mission to recover their fallen brother in an effort to hold them together. The last thing he expects to find on the other side of a mortuary door is a very much alive Jason Todd. But Jason's resurrection raises more questions than answers and Tim finds himself at odds with the rest of the family as he tries to uncover the truth of the second Robin's apparent immortality.

Notes

Hey, guys—long time lurker here, first time posting. I have no beta, so please forgive any formatting/grammatical mistakes you may find. Constructive criticism is welcome but I’d appreciate if you keep it constructive.

Although the story is framed out and a decent chunk is already written- I am constantly rewriting. I only want the best for you dear readers. This means that I can’t promise quick updates, sorry! I have drafts of Jay/Dick and Jay/Tim, but haven’t quite decided between them yet, so we’ll see how it goes and I’ll adjust tags accordingly.
As a caveat, DCU continuity is a mess so I’m not going to follow it strictly. If that gets you prickly…my apologies. Otherwise, relax, roll with it, and enjoy.

Side note: if you’ve never read “The Many Deaths of the Firefly Brothers” I highly recommend it. That being said this story really has nothing to do with the novel aside from the title.
Blondes Aren't More Fun

Chapter 1

Jason watches the parade of socialites wobble in their ridiculous shoes over the salted pavement from above. He sneers when the proud old hags shrug out of their ankle length mink and sable long before they reach the coat check just to flaunt the wealth sparkling at their throats and wrists for the cameras. None of these people know what its like to feel true cold. None of them have ever had to line their clothes with newspapers or sleep in the sewers because its warmer down there with the dead and decaying things to survive the long nights of a Gotham winter. He eyes the clouds rolling into Gotham with distaste. Their low hanging bellies are a dirty grey, despite being lit from the twinkling trees and streetlamps below – Gotham’s feeble attempt at Christmas cheer. He hopes the snow holds off. Being a full time vigilante and crime lord is dangerous enough without having to worry about slick rooftops.

Across from his perch is the Gotham Museum of Fine Arts. There is a gala there this evening celebrating the opening of the museum’s new wing, generously funded by the Martha Wayne Foundation for the Arts. According to a press release, the new wing will host an internationally acclaimed traveling exhibit of Renaissance works. The jewel of the collection: Da Vinci’s controversial “Adoration of the Magi.” Jason had pre-ordered tickets. They were sitting in a sock drawer in his current safe house. Visiting the museum predated the broadening of his cultural horizon as a Wayne. It was a thing Catherine sometimes did; taking him there on the rare days she was feeling well enough to leave the apartment. Admission was free except for special exhibits and they would wander the heated halls hand in hand. Catherine especially liked the colorful canvases of the Impressionists. He shakes his head and the memory away.

The flash of cameras and chatter from the sidewalk intensifies. He zooms in on the line of limousines pulling up to the red carpet in the hood’s head-up-display. Vicki Vale is shivering in her ball gown with microphone in hand, waiting to assault the person climbing out of a sleek black Bugatti Veyron. Jason gives a little sigh and eyes the car with lust. That was one perk he missed from his time as a bat—the sweet ass rides. No member of the Wayne family would ever be found in something as blasé as a limousine. Bruce emerges from the Bugatti in his full blown Brucie Wayne persona and tosses the keys to a waiting valet with a vapid smile. Red Hood isn’t interested in watching Brucie Wayne play the crowd though.

He switches his focus to the second figure uncurling from the passenger seat. Too tall to be Demon Brat and too slender to be the Golden Boy, the Replacement joins Bruce in front of the crowd. Jason bites back a growl. He has to remind himself he doesn't hate the boy anymore. He isn’t sure if he had ever really hated him. Well, that wasn’t true. He had hated him enough to try and kill him. But it wasn’t Tim Drake that he hated, it was the new Robin that Bruce had dressed up and sent out as if Jason had never died. As if he had not mattered. As if he had not mattered. The acidic green burn of the pit in his veins had made it impossible to differentiate between the two. Perversely, Drake’s own replacement by the Hell Spawn had done a great deal to soothe away much of the lingering bitterness he held towards the third Robin.

Drake’s attendance tonight is a boon; with Bruce and the Replacement locked into a long evening of handshakes and champagne, patrol will fall to Dick and the Demon Brat. And from what he's seen, Dick will be spending half his energy just trying to corral the kid. That gives him more time and space to work without fear of interference. He spares the duo on the red carpet one last glance before grabbing his gear and mentally applauds the Replacement as Drake ignores the press of photographers and journalists as coolly as a fucking cucumber.
Drake doesn’t have the natural charisma Bruce and Dick exude so effortlessly in public but he looks a hell lot more comfortable than Jason ever did at those events. He always felt like he was about to twitch out of his skin. Drake’s expression however is schooled into haughty disdain. It fits nicely with his role as the heir of Wayne Enterprises. Jason snorts. Time to go.

He makes sure the rifle is well secured across his back before firing his grappling gun. For the past few months he’s been keeping tabs on a fledgling drug ring. They’ve managed to stay mostly under the radar distributing street drugs; cocaine, heroin, a little meth on the side. Nothing laced with venom, fear toxin, or any Joker concoction. He hasn’t caught them selling to kids and they pay their forty percent to him on time. Hell, they don’t even have a proper name for themselves. Nothing that would be a high priority for the Red Hood usually. Until some disturbing rumors started circulating that they were trying to get their fingers into the prostitution pie as well.

Jason wouldn’t go so far to say that the street walkers of Gotham looked to Red Hood as their personal saint… But he did try to watch out for them best he could. Sometimes he brought them fresh donuts and coffee when he made his rounds, making sure the johns weren’t getting too rough. Life in Gotham was harsh and he wasn’t about to judge anyone exchanging their body for a hot meal and a night off the street. He’d be a goddamn hypocrite if he did. So when some of the girls (and boys) started coming to him, with stories that made him see green, Red Hood decided it was time to step in. It was one thing to sell your body to a john and give a cut to your pimp—it was another thing entirely for a pimp to pump his girls so full of drugs they couldn’t say no to a john if they wanted to. Issues of consent were involved. Red Hood has firm views on consent. He needs to nip this organization in the bud before it gains any more traction.

On the up side, the operation is still small enough that a few well-placed bombs and bullets should dissolve it easily. On the down side, it isn’t big enough yet to go toe-to-toe with the families and set up shop in a nice cozy warehouse by the docks. Instead, the group has settled into an abandoned garage right at the edge of Red Hood’s claimed territory. Too close to Bat country for comfort. Jason’s been waiting for the opportunity to hit them without threat of chiroptera shaped intervention.

He grapples across the city, gradually losing altitude as the skyscrapers give way to tenement buildings and smaller businesses. He runs the calculations he’s been working the past few weeks over in his head again. The garage is small in comparison to most of the buildings he’s rigged. Two charges on the roof spaced along the main beams should be enough to bring the ceiling down on the lab and storage facility below. He’s brought three just in case. It’d be fun to go overboard and blow the place sky-high but there are residential buildings close by and squatters in the abandoned building next to the garage and Red Hood doesn’t do collateral damage. Not after he’d been collateral damage in Bruce’s campaign for justice and all that bullshit.

Based on prior reconnaissance there are six to ten shitheads inside on a typical night. Jason should be able to wipe them all out in one fell swoop. It’s only half of the total estimated ring but it will be the brains and brawn half. Their loss will make the whole operation unsalvageable. Red Hood isn’t worried about tracking down the multitude of runners, mostly hungry skinny teenage boys, who will be left behind.

Jason lands on the apartment building on the opposite corner of the garage. It’s the tallest building on the block, three floors taller than the garage, and it gives him a good vantage point to snipe the scum when they try to escape from the north and east exits. There are no doors on the west side of the building and Red Hood has made sure the only exit on the south side is blocked by a dumpster, thanks to a few bills placed in the hand of a municipal waste truck driver. Jason slings the sniper rifle off his shoulder and spends the next few minutes making sure the M24 is properly set at the best possible position to sweep the area. He switches the HUD from the night vision image enhancement setting he uses to navigate Gotham after dark to infrared. He reads nine heat signatures inside the
garage. No one hears the light thud when he grapples down to lay the charges or the quiet zip as he flies back.

He wishes he could tap into the Bat commlink network to track Dick and Demon Brat's position, but he's pretty sure Bruce specifically ordered the Replacement to upgrade the network so that he couldn't. Red Robin's new system is damn near flawless and Jason is ashamed to admit it's slightly above his pay grade. He had tried bribing Barbara to grant him access, but she refused on the grounds she was still angry with him for trying to kill the Replacement. He can't help but notice her silence regarding his other victims though, and Jason gets the feeling she doesn't completely buy into the Bruce's ideology either.

When she learned that Jason was operating without any emergency contacts she had (after a long scolding) set him up with a direct link to her. For when you run into something you can't handle on your own. He had laughed and flippantly asked, “Like what Barbie? Dying? Been there, done that, handled it all on my own.” She kicked him out after that. It took chocolates and the complete boxed set of Sailor Moon on Blu-Ray to buy back her favor and she'd popped up in his ear a week later with a tip.

Red Hood situates himself on the roof behind the rifle and pulls off his helmet so he can put his eye to the scope. He waits for his eyes to adjust without the enhancing capabilities of the hood’s lenses. He retrieves the remote detonator from a pouch on his belt and fingers it while counting down from ten. Takes a breath, turns his head to the side so the blast won’t blind him and clicks the trigger. A wave of heat ripple past him and he immediately puts his eye to the scope.

A person bursts from the front doors onto the street and directly into his crosshairs. A second man close on his heels trips over the first's body before the side of his head erupts in a bloody spray. Red Hood swivels to check the eastern exit. The flames illuminate two figures attempting to limp down the sidewalk, one leaning heavily on the other. He takes them both with nice clean headshots. No one else stumbles from the exits. Red Hood waits. Any second someone will call in the explosion to the GCPD and then Nightwing and Robin will be on his tail. He needs to hoof it, but he also needs to make sure the job is finished. Patience. He sweeps the scope around the surrounding streets a few times til he's comfortable enough to start packing up. Boom and snipes aren’t his favorite, he prefers more physical confrontations where he can use his fists and burn out some energy but he’s satisfied with the small adrenaline rush of a job well down.

He scoops up his discarded helmet and jams it on his head, ready to roll out. By the time the Dynamic Duo arrives he’ll be sprawled across the couch of his closest safe house watching Hell’s Kitchen reruns and chowing down on leftover Thai. His comm is already crackling with the promise of Oracle’s distorted wrath. That’s Jason’s cue to tap out of the network before Barbara hails him. The small pop of static when he’s in mid-jump surprises him.

“Hood! I know you're there.”

Jason swallows, “Uhh. How did you…”

“What, did you think you if you just turned off the comm I wouldn’t be able to override it?”

Jason says nothing, because...yes. That is exactly what he had thought.

“Hood. Did you have anything to do with that explosion on Franklin Street?”

“Explosion? What explosion?”

“God, Hood. You are the worst liar,” Oracle's electronic sigh echoes oddly in his ear.
It's true. Jason is terrible at lying. It isn't that he's averse to it... He just isn't much good at it. Being anything other than straightforward chafed. He had failed miserably the few times Bruce had him go undercover and he suspected it was the reason he had failed so spectacularly at being Bruce's son as well. You could put him in a suit and take him to a gallery opening but he could never pull it off. Couldn't yuk it up with the high society of Gotham like Dick, or the Wayne Enterprises investors like the Replacement could. He just sat there sweating profusely and eyeing the wealth and privilege surrounding him uncomfortably.

He used the wrong fork, his hair refused to be tamed by any comb Alfred threw at it, he never could bring himself to back down from a fight in the schoolyard, and always managed to say exactly the wrong thing. He couldn't pretend to be anything other than a foul-mouthed bull-headed street kid. No wonder why he was the Batman's greatest failure. Fuck. No. He was not going into this shit now. He had moved on. He was the motherfucking Red Hood. Jason growls and gives his head a little shake.

"Hood? What's going on? Are you ok?"

"Fucking fine," he grumbles.

"I've sent Nightwing and Robin to Franklin Street to investigate. I tried to get you on the comm first but obviously you didn't hear me. Please tell me this wasn't you."

Jason doesn't reply.

"Hood! Don't you dare ignore me. What did you get yourself into?"

A scream tears through the air nearby. Jason tilts his head towards the sound. His fists clench at his side.

"Hey, O. Gotta go. Sorry I can't help. If you sent Wingding and Bat Brat I'm sure they'll have everything under control though."

Jason peers over the edge of the roof he's on. Two men are herding a woman into the dead end of the alley beneath him.

"I swear to god, if you had anything to do with this and they throw your ass in Blackgate I will not lift a finger."

"Sorry. Busy here, O. Gotta go do the hero-thing now. Keep the public safe and all that. Unless you want me to sit back and watch this lady get mugged?"

Barbara starts to rage but Jason powers down the HUD completely and enjoys the silence now that the hood is nothing more than a protective piece of headgear. Jason grins. Maybe he'll get that fist fight tonight after all. He toes the edge of the roof and watches as one of the men grabs for the woman's arm. Her reaction is uncoordinated and jerky rather than slow. Tweaking then, not drunk. He rolls his shoulders. Taking down two asshats shouldn't delay him from his return to his safehouse for more than a couple minutes. He drops onto one of the men, breaking his collarbone, and uses him to springboard into the other. The second man goes down and Jason grabs his head and smashes it into the asphalt a couple times before he can recover. Less than a minute, then. Jason straightens and looks over his shoulder to where the girl is.

The woman gives a nod that's more of a twitch. Platinum dyed hair swings back and forth around her ears. Usually he would ask her name and story and walk her somewhere safe, give her the number and address of a temp agency or something, but he's in a rush tonight. He needs to get off the streets
before Nightwing and Robin hunt him down. He’ll have to settle with the heroics-abridged version
tonight. The girl fumbles a bit but catches the wad of cash he tosses her, enough for a meal and
room. She thumbs through it and her eyes go wide before she throws her arms around Jason’s neck.
The first time he’d gotten this reaction he had reeled away in shock. He’s more used to it now. At
least enough that he doesn’t automatically flinch back. He even allows himself a small grin behind
the mask. Moments like these remind him why he does what he does. They remind him vigilantism is
more than just a release for his anger. It lights a little warm flare in his chest. She turns her mouth
towards where his ear would be.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispers.

The little warm flare shrivels with the cold slide of a needle into the slip of unprotected skin between
his collar and helmet.

Jason staggers, simultaneously trying to push away and steady himself against a wall. He doesn’t feel
himself fall. One moment he’s watching her back away under the orange glow of the nearest
streetlamp and the next he’s seeing stars. Not actual stars, the sky of Gotham is blotted out beneath a
layer of polluted clouds, but there’s little pricks and bursts of color going off behind his eyes. He
thinks, and is disturbed by just how hard it is to think right now, that he should probably be calling
Oracle. But his mouth is dry and his lips wont move to form the voice command to activate the
comm.

He hears something. There’s the man with the broken collarbone groaning pathetically in the
background, but that’s not it. There’s the quiet rustle of his own breath in and out of the mask’s filter.
That’s not it either. He can’t turn his head to see but he thinks he hears…laughing.
Chapter 2

Tim twirls the smooth glass of a champagne flute back and forth between his fingers. The small repetitive motion helps keep him grounded while he feigns interest in the conversation around him. Usually he keeps a keen ear tuned to the talk at these events. He is always surprised how careless some people are; gossiping about stock options and investments. He takes a certain smug satisfaction in mentally noting it all down so he can exploit their idle chatter in Wayne Enterprises board meetings the next day. Tonight however, the dialogue is decidedly dull. It’s a three on his scale of excitement: one being trapped in an elevator with no signal and the Demon Spawn, while ten is getting his picture taken with George Takei at Comic Con.

People are actually discussing the art, of all things.

Tim lingers between Mr. and Mrs. Etheridge-Sanford and Herr and Frau Braun as they compare their travels through Italy in a less than subtle attempt to one-up each other. He watches the pale liquid swirl inside the glass and wonders if anyone has noticed he’s been holding the same flute for the past twenty minutes without taking a sip. Probably not. The alcohol is an accessory more than anything. He may technically still be underage but drinking champagne is expected at these events and people are more at ease and more likely to accidentally drop little interesting tidbits when he's holding a glass. He doesn’t even like drinking. He prefers to be full in control of his faculties at all times.

Just because he isn’t on patrol doesn’t mean it's safe to relax. This is Gotham after all. He half expects a dozen wannabes armed with AKs and bad attitudes to waltz in at any moment demanding everyone’s jewelry and wallets. He’s more than a little disappointed that no one has yet. Instead, Mrs. Etheridge-Sanford continues to rave on how seeing Giotto’s frescoes in situ is the only way one can truly appreciate his genius. Tim starts to eye his drink as his boredom mounts and his resolve weakens. After all its not like one flute of champagne is really going to inhibit any of his senses, right?

The comm in his ear buzzes and he jerks upright. Tim excuses himself, equal parts relieved and concerned. He catches Bruce’s eye across the room and gives his ear a small tap as he makes his way towards the bathroom at the main entrance. Bruce has started frowning in mild disapproval at the length of Tim’s hair when he thinks Tim isn’t looking, but its not like Bruce can hide an earpiece in his crew cut either. It’s a tactical advantage, Tim thinks smugly. He gives the bathroom a quick sweep under the stalls to assure he’s alone before responding.

“What’s up?” he asks without preamble. He’s surprised and irritated when it’s the Demon Spawn’s voice on the other end instead of Dick’s.

“Drake.”

“Field names, Robin,” Tim scolds automatically, “This better be an emergency. Otherwise you should be calling me on the—

He’s cut off by Damian’s clipped, “We don’t have time for that. Although I would perhaps not qualify it as such, Dick is adamant this is an emergency.”

likely wouldn’t deign to contact him unless Dick was unable.

“Nightwing is uninjured.”

“Ok, so why are you—

Demon Spawn cuts him off again, “Neither of us are injured, but Nightwing is…indisposed. I am taking control of the situation.”

Damian taking control of any situation sounds like a colossally bad idea. Tim feels a small ache start to grow behind his eyes. “Really, Robin, if this isn’t an emergency I’m going to hang up on—

“Fine, it is an emergency then,” Damian cuts him off again and its starting to piss Tim off.

“I thought you said you and Nightwing were fine. That doesn’t sound like an emergency to me.”

“Ttt, Drake you are so stupid. If there was an outbreak at Arkham surely it would be classified as an emergency even if Nightwing's and my well-being had not been compromised. Is that not true?”

“Field names!” Tim barks in aggravation, "Now what the hell is going on Robin? Was there an outbreak at Arkham?"

“No you fool, I was merely using an outbreak as an illustration. It's Hood."

“Hood?” Tim parrots.

“Red Robin, I do not have time to enumerate all of the ways in which you are an idiot currently. Yes, Hood. As in the Red Hood. He’s had the poor sense to go and get himself killed again and Grayson is being completely useless.”

Tim doesn’t even bother to correct Damian this time as he tries to absorb what the boy is saying.

"Wait, wait! Stop. Hood is dead?” Tim asks recovering from his shock.

“Not as of yet, but he will be soon.” Damian answers shortly.

Tim takes a breath, holds it, steadies his thoughts, and exhales. “Ok, Robin. What’s Hood’s condition? Is it something that we can handle back at the cave?’’

“Catastrophic trauma to the chest, extreme loss of blood. Most likely to be fatal even with immediate medical attention.” Damian responds quickly though less clinically than Tim would prefer.

“Ok, that sounds like its beyond even Agent A’s capabilities. Go ahead call a bus. Is Hood geared up or in civvies?”

"Gear."

“Alright, is there any chance you can strip him down, get him in civvies? What’s the site look like? Is there any clean up that needs to be done before the bus or the GCPD get there?”

“There’s…I don’t think…”

The hesitancy in Damian’s voice eats at him. Tim doesn’t like the kid, he’s been a royal pain in the ass ever since he appeared on the manor doorstep with an attitude as pleasurable as a biblical plague, but for maybe the second time since he’s known the Demon Spawn, Damian sounds like the little kid that he is.
“I don’t think there’s anything that can be done to clean this up.”

Tim swears under his breath.

“Send me your location. I’m going to clue Bruce in on what’s going on and then I’m coming to you, okay? Tell Nightwing I’m on my way.”

“Okay,” Damian pauses, “Nightwing is insisting that Batman go immediately to Gotham General Hospital and meet us there.”

Tim nods, momentarily forgetting the other boy can’t see him.


“Ttt. I hardly need your praise Red Robin, I have everything under control,” Damian scoffs.

Tim rolls his eyes as he speeds back to the exhibit, trying to walk as fast as possible without breaking into a run and bringing attention to himself. He slams into Bruce’s chest careening around a corner.

“Oh good, you’re here,” Tim quips, “I was afraid I’d have to hunt you down in the crowd.”

“Is everything alright? I saw you leave the exhibition and came to check. Are Dick and Damian—

Taking a cue from the youngest Wayne, Tim breaks him off mid-sentence.

“Cliff notes version: Damian pinged me, they’re both ok. It’s Jason. He’s hurt, its serious. He may not make it. Dick said for you to meet them at Gotham General ASAP.”

Bruce opens his mouth but Tim barrels on, “Oh and you need to go as the Bat. They don’t have time to strip Jason out of his gear so he’s going in as Red Hood. Unless you want to risk connecting Bruce Wayne to Red Hood, you better change.”

Bruce’s face goes tight and the set of lines around his mouth and across his forehead that appear whenever Jason is involved carve deep in his skin. Tim is never quite able to decipher the emotion behind this particular expression. Is it regret, wariness, nostalgia, anger, shame, or uncertainty? Whichever it is, Tim doesn’t have the time to try and dissect it tonight.

“What are you going to do?” Bruce asks.

Tim isn’t expecting a question so bizarrely straightforward from Bruce when everything concerning Jason is always so messy.

“I’m, I’m going to drive to their location right now. See if I can figure out what happened. Dig for clues. If possible try and wipe down as much as possible before GCPD gets there. If not then I’ll stick around and talk with the cops. Try and do some damage control.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

Tim is shocked by Bruce’s quick assent. Because this is Bruce, and Bruce always has something to say; whether its pointing out potential flaws or proposing a different strategy. It’s a habit Tim is 98% sure is just to remind them all that ultimately Bruce is the one in charge and gets to make the final call. This time however, he just nods and accedes to Tim. It’s enough to slow Tim down on the track he’s been rolling along. Bruce should at least be offering a token argument of why he should be the
one to visit the scene and investigate.

“Bruce, are you...are you ok?”

Bruce’s eyes flick in a micro expression Tim almost misses before going soft.

“One day, if you ever become a father, you’ll understand. It doesn’t matter what they do. You will always love your sons. Even when they hate you in return.”

Tim’s jaw drops. Bruce just doesn't say shit like that.

“I need to make my excuses to the museum director,” Bruce states quietly and then he’s gone, moving with impressive speed through Gotham’s aristocracy despite his bulk.

Tim decides he really doesn’t want to stop and assess Bruce’s words or tone. He doesn’t want to think about what it means; how willing Bruce is to drop everything and run without question to the estranged murderous son. He is afraid he might find himself resenting how much effort they are all suddenly putting in to save a man who has tried not just to kill Bruce but Tim as well. He might find himself thinking it would be better just this once not to try so hard to save someone. So instead, Tim does what Tim does best: he focuses on the mission.

He snatches his coat from the coat-check and has the attendant call the valet to bring the car around. Tim walks between the massive black granite pillars that flank the entrance and onto the street and is relieved to find the sidewalk now empty of reporters. A gust of frigid wind makes him tense up and a few flakes fly past his face. Its cold enough the paparazzi didn’t stick around after they got their shots of everyone coming in. Tim turns the collar of his coat up against the cold night air and hails Oracle.

“Red, how can I help you?”

Is it just him or does Oracle sound preoccupied?

“I need a ride, ASAP. Nightwing and Robin have a situation I need a drop to their location and I’m leaving the car for Bruce.”

“Wing and Robin? Are they okay?”

“They’re fine. You haven’t been monitoring their line?” Tim asks surprised. Usually Dick and Barbara won’t shut up over the comms, exchanging flirtations and barbs ad nauseam.

“Sorry, I’ve been trying to get in contact with someone,” Oracle answers vaguely.

Tim contemplates her phrasing. Oracle wouldn’t have any reason to be obtuse if it was one of her Birds of Prey she was worried about. Not for the first time, Tim wonders exactly how many and who Barbara has for contacts.

“Are you still at the museum?” she asks.

“Yes, I need to grab my uni from the car.”

“I’ll send BG to pick you up, she’s closest.”

“Thanks, Oh, and Oracle? Give Nightwing a call. Please. Robin said he’s really upset. It’d probably be good for him to hear from you,” he signs off when the car rolls up.

The valet smiles, opens the door and attempts to hand him the keys. Tim waves him off.
“I just need to grab something, but Mr. Wayne will be here shortly. Something’s come up, he’s in a
bit of rush. Here, just in case he forgets,” Tim presses a bill into the valet’s hands.

Bruce won’t forget. The rules of polite society have been branded into his behavior since birth. Tim
knows however, that there’s at least one old snobbish couple (hint: it’s the Etheridge-Sanford’s) who
don’t believe in tipping if the person is already earning a wage for their time. They’re so happily
wrapped in their lives of privilege they have no idea how difficult it can be to survive on an hourly
wage and what a difference tips make. Not that Tim really understands what its like either…but
<em>he</em> is not an asshole, and that’s the point.

Tim wrestles to pull a small knapsack out of a hidden compartment under the passenger seat and then
takes off at a casual jog with his squashed prize in hand. It takes him four blocks before he hits an
alleyway he can safely duck into to change. The air is bitterly cold and he bites his lip to keep from
letting out a stream of “frack-frack-frackity-fracks” as he skins out of silk and into Kevlar. It's not his
complete regalia with bandoliers bursting with gadgets or wings (they don’t exactly fold up enough
to fit into the little bag he has) but an abbreviated version. Armor, batarangs, and one slim belt with a
lighter selection of toys. He’s just pressed his mask on when he hears the roar of a motorcycle
approaching.

If Barbara hadn’t told him she was sending Bat Girl, Tim would have known long before he could
make out the bat symbol emblazoned across her chest. He'd recognize Stephanie Brown’s ear-to-ear
grin from a mile away. Steph doesn’t even bother bringing the bike to a full stop, only slows down
enough for Tim to vault on behind her.

“Sorry I don’t have a second helmet right now,” she apologizes over her shoulder.

Tim just nods and tucks his face into the back of her jacket and out of the wind. He buries his nose in
her hair. To prevent it from getting frostbitten he tells himself. It smells like her favorite shampoo
(picked out solely for its punny name: Pear-anormal), sweat, and something slightly caustic like
bleach. He wonders what she was up to before this. Stephanie weaves them in and out of traffic
expertly, if not as fast as he would on Redbird.

He can feel the muscles in her torso shift under her jacket as she leans into the turns. Tim tightens his
grip a shade and leans with her. He misses this sometimes. Her. In moments like these when he’s
reminded of how well they work as a team. He wished he knew why that hadn’t translated into how
they worked as a couple as well. Focus on the mission, Tim. He turns his head and watches the
buildings flashing by degenerate as they drive into the slums. There’s a sinking feeling in his chest
that grows the closer they get to Park Row. They’re maybe three minutes out when an ambulance
screams past them. Tim has to yell into his comm to be heard above the rush of air.

“Robin! I just saw a bus coming out of Crime Alley. Was that you?”

There’s a crackle and then Damian's haughty voice breaks over the static.

“Yes, Nightwing and I are accompanying Hood to the hospital. We couldn’t wait for you. Your
tardiness is appalling Red Robin. Are you traveling by tortoise?”

“I caught a ride with Bat Girl. I don’t think she’d appreciate the tortoise comparison. Our ETA to
ground zero is two minutes. Anything we should know before we get there?”

“Batman is hailing me,” Damian brushes off the question and the line goes dead.

“Thanks Demon Baby,” Tim grouses to himself.
Stephanie slows their approach as flashing lights come into view. Tim’s lips thin. It isn’t often the GCPD make their way to Crime Alley. Even Gordon seemed to tacitly agree it isn’t worth wasting officers lives in a losing battle. A police presence here is rare to begin with, to have them stick around is almost unheard of. Whatever happened here was big. Yet, Tim doesn’t see any signs of an explosion rocking the area. There’s no panicked screaming mob. No gunfire. Everything is quiet, eerily so. He thinks he catches the scent of something burning but whatever it is must be too far away to be related. Steph brings the bike in between two patrol cars and cuts the engine. She moves to dismount and freezes. Tim raises his hand from her waist to shoulder in concern. He’s about to ask her what’s wrong when his jaw drops for the second time this night.

"I think I might be sick," Stephanie mutters before vaulting off the bike while simultaneously wrenching off her helmet.

In her haste she almost trips over the kickstand. Tim doesn’t move to help her. There’s a spotlight shining on the side of an abandoned building edging an empty half lot populated with dumpsters. Sometime ago, all the windows were bricked in, leaving an unbroken wall with ghostly outlines where old openings had been. A series of three holes are gouged into the brick about four and a half feet off the ground, each sticky and dripping with red. The central gouge is the largest and there’s a large smear of blood stretching down from it into a gorey puddle on the cracked concrete. It’s what’s above the gouges that captures the totality of his attention in crudely painted letters.

*Christ of Crime Alley.*

Tim is 87% sure he knows what happened here, and he is 100% sure that he would rather be wrong. He climbs off the bike with more poise than Stephanie managed and makes his way towards the officers milling about. He ignores the youngest one eagerly handing Bat Girl something to wipe her mouth with and singles out a capable looking man with silvering hair.

“Excuse me, Officer…” He glances at the name embroidered across the jacket breast, “Saltz. Can I ask what happened here?”

“It’s Red, right? Red Robin?”

Tim nods.

“Sorry, sometimes its difficult remembering all the different masks running around. Don’t see you too often though, huh? Gordon says you’re one of the smart ones though, so sure. I guess.” Officer Saltz purses his lips, “Uh. Where to start? Geez. Dispatch got a call for a bus from an anonymous number. Our squad car,” Saltz hooks a thumb towards the floppy haired buffoon now making cow eyes at BG, “was the closest so Jeremy and I played escort. Nightwing and Robin were already here when we arrived. They were trying to uh…cut the vic down.”

"The vic?" Tim asks.

He knows the answer but wants to gauge the officer's response.

Saltz looks uncomfortable, "I think it was Red Hood. I hope he isn't a friend or nothing."

"He isn't," Tim answers curtly.

"I wasn't sure, him being another mask and all."
"Don't worry about it," Tim reassures him. "You said you think it was the Red Hood? You aren't sure?"

"Well, he didn't have the hood on. And couldn't really see if he had the bat on his chest with all the..." Saltz peters off and waves a hand over his midriff for emphasis, "But he was wearing body armor and a leather jacket. Fair number of holsters on him, though they were all empty. Red Hood is supposed to be a crack shot, right?"

Tim grunts grudgingly in affirmation.

"Geez. If it really was him, he was not what I was expecting. He looked real young. Too young, you know? To be doing everything we got in his file. Then again you look awful young too."

"Have you gone over the site yet?" Tim asks, ignoring Saltz's implication.

"Not really. Mostly we've just been trying to secure the area, turn away the curious. People don't need to be seeing it and I don't really want to have a crowd form up."

That's good. It gives Tim time to do a little detecting before the scene gets anymore mucked up.

"Mind if I look around a bit?"

Saltz narrows his eyes at Red Robin then gives a sigh, "CSU will be here in twenty or so. Make it quick. And don't touch anything, ok?"

Tim wanders away and channels his inner Sherlock, sweeping his eyes back and forth under the lit section. Dull silver catches his eye. A scrap of duct tape. It's twisted and stuck to itself in places, looks like its been tread over, but when he squats down he can see a clean line where its been cut. Jason was bound. Tim entertains and then dismisses the idea the duct tape could have been on someone other than Jason. The modus operandi and message on the wall are too scripted, too intentional. This was planned out in advance, not a random attack or the result of a job gone side-wise. Jason had been specially targeted for a reason.

While footprints are near impossible to distinguish on the asphalt, there are a pretty clear set of drag marks leading to this spot. So he'd been incapacitated elsewhere, bound, brought here and then cut himself free. Unless someone else did. Once he was free, he'd put up one hell of a fight. Tim doesn't spot any shell casings, which matches up with what Saltz had told him. Jason's guns had been taken away. Tim knows from personal experience though, that Jason can be just as dangerous with his fists. There are plenty of scuffle marks and splatters of blood to back him up on that. He pulls swabs from his belt. He bets when he tests them, the results will identify multiple sources. It would take more than one person to bring Red Hood down, and there's no way that would happen without Jason making them bleed in turn.

Tim straightens and scans the area. There are two noticeably darker patches. The one to his left about fifteen feet looks like a scorch mark. Now he knows what happened to the hood. The one to his right is a heavier concentration of blood spatters. Larger drops, pooling, some smears. A pattern consistent with wound seep rather than fighting. This is where Todd finally went down. A second set of drag marks towards the wall where Nightwing and Robin found him confirms it.

Tim doesn't feel any of the usual satisfaction from completing the puzzle, sequencing the series of events. He turns slowly. Something is bothering him, but he isn't sure what. It's almost too easy. Too easy to find all the pieces necessary. Is he being paranoid? Maybe it's just because everything is so
nicely illuminated by the sun-lamp and usually he's trying to do this by flashlight. He wonders if
that's a new thing: the lights. Maybe the GCPD got a grant? Saltz had said the CSU was still on their
way. It was a bit odd for the first responders to have one ready. Tim trots back to Saltz and taps him
on the shoulder.

"You done?" Saltz asks.

"Yeah, I think so. Almost. Hey, do you know who set up the spotlight?" Tim asks.

Saltz shakes his head, "No, that was already set up when we got here. Didn't give it much thought.
Figured the first couple masks set up to help them I guess. Why?"

Tim is already running towards the lamp before the question fully leaves Saltz's mouth. He throws an
arm over his eyes to cut the glare. The thing is plugged into a portable battery set up on the sidewalk.
He feels his way up the support pole and stops halfway, fingers brushing against an adjustment knob.
Something small is looped over it. Tim makes sure his body is blocking the view before he grabs it.
He squints. It's a USB drive with something scrawled across the case in sharpie. A smiley face. Tim
swears and pockets it. Whatever is on this drive isn't meant for the GCPD's eyes. He stalks back over
to the squad cars where Steph is standing with Saltz's young partner. They both have paper cups
clenched in their hands. When Stephanie sees him approach she lifts one of the cups in his direction.

"Where the hell did you get coffee?" Tim snaps more harshly than he had intended.

"It's my superpower," Stephanie winks, "I can find coffee anytime, anywhere."

When Tim doesn't smile she nods at the young man beside her, "Officer Poole told me there was a
24-hour corner market nearby."

Tim grabs the offered cup and shotguns it in one go.

"Thank you, Officer Poole," Tim says coolly.

Officer Poole swallows and takes a step back. Tim is glad the young man has sensed the glare he is
leveling at him through the lenses of his mask. Tim grabs Bat Girl's arm and starts dragging her
towards the motorcycle.

"We're done here. We need to go," he says brusquely.

Bat Girl's expression turns murderous but she follows him. They make it a whole five blocks before
Stephanie abruptly turns into the darkest, most decrepit alley she can find. She rips off her helmet
sending blonde hair flying.

"What. The. Actual. Fuck. Tim!" She hisses, dropping her voice at his name. "If you ever touch me
like that again I will smash every one of your offensive little fingers with a brick."

"Is your bike equipped with a read-out screen and a USB port?"

"Uh. Yeah. What does that have to do with anything?"

Tim dangles the USB drive in front of her face. She takes it from him with exaggerated confusion.

"I found this at the scene. I want to see what's on it before handing it over to Batman."

Steph nods and plugs the drive into port on the bike console.

"Ok, but don't think we aren't going to finish this conversation about your manhandling later," she
warns.

A faintly green glow extends over the windshield.

"Alright. There's four files on here. Looks like one audio and three image files."

"Play the audio," Tim commands.

There is no mistaking the cackle.

"Merry Christmas Batsy! Did you get my gift? I've been told this is the time of year to give presents to ones we care about. You're a hard man to shop for Bats. You already have so many fun little toys. So I thought instead of a fruitcake that I'd help you out in your heroic crusade to get criminals off the streets just this once. And you know what? It really is true - tis better to give than receive. I feel all warm and fuzzy inside just picturing your face when you find there's one less crime lord in Gotham to worry about. Though to be honest, I'm surprised you hadn't managed to bag and tag him yet. He wasn't particularly challenging to find. All I had to do was play a little game of victimize the innocent and he came running in to save the day. Once a birdie always a birdie, eh? Or is he a criminal now? It's so hard to keep up with your dysfunctional family dynamics. Oh dear. I hope I got it right because I lost the receipt. Non-returnable. Better keep a close eye on your other chicks. Wouldn't want any of them to go bad as well. Though I suppose if one did there's always birthdays as well..."

"Oh my god," Steph whispers, eyes glued to the screen.

"Fuck," Tim agrees.

"I really don't want to open those image files do I?" Steph asks quietly.

"Probably not," Tim agrees.

Stephanie clicks on the next file.

"Tim, I think I'm gonna be sick again."
Christ of Crime Alley

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who left comments! I tried/will try to reply to them all because I want you to know how much it means to me.

I uh...decided I might need to change the rating to 'Mature'? I don't really know how important ratings are to anyone. But didn't realize how much of a potty mouth I have until now. And exactly how graphic is graphic violence?

This chapter is a little shorter than the others but it took FOREVER. Writing and rewriting and rewriting some more. I'm not terribly comfortable with action sequences, but oh well. Here goes.

Anyway, I'm afraid this one's gonna hurt. I'm sorry. I promise the whole thing isn't like this. There are even future chapters that are supposed to be funny if you can believe. Waaiiiit for itttt.

Chapter 3

His teeth are buzzing. And his ears tickle. He doesn’t like it. Groans. Almost chokes because his throat is so dry. Goddamn fucking Christ on a popsicle stick, he hasn’t felt this way since the one time he got into Bruce’s liquor cabinet when he was fourteen. Feels like someone sandblasted the inside of his skull. Mouth full of cotton. Eyes scooped out with a melon baller and salt poured in the open cavities.

This time though, he’s fairly sure there will be no Alfred standing at the ready with a glass of orange juice in one hand, a warm towel in the other, and a quip of dry British humor at his expense.

There’s a jerk and it sends his stomach rolling. Another jerk pops one of the vertebrae in his neck. It takes a long time swimming through fuzzy thoughts before it clicks: someone’s trying to take the hood off. They couldn’t get past the security on the helmet’s hinge lock and now they’ve resorted to just tearing it off. At this rate they’re going to take his head off with it. Jason thrashes sluggishly and uncoordinated before his brain catches up to his body.

Something slams into his chest pinning him down right as the hood comes off. It scrapes past his jaw, lips, nose and ears painfully enough to make Jason wince because damnit, it is not designed to come off that way. The wash of icy air stings against the raw skin on his face, but also helps shock him back into awareness.

His arms are trapped beneath him, taped at the wrists and pulled behind his back. His frantic movements are shredding the skin between his jacket and gloves on the gritty pavement. There’s a flash of red in his periphery, and when he twists his head to the side the darkened eye-holes of his discarded helmet stare back at him. His gaze skitters across the cracked pavement and crumbling brick around him. He’s not in the same alley he blacked out in. He knows this place. Shit. He knows it better than anywhere else in the city.

“Ah! Haha! He is risen. Look loves! It’s the Christ of Crime Alley. The Savior of the Slums.”
The voice makes Jason’s blood run cold even before it breaks off into a mad cackle. The claw end of a crowbar strokes down the left side of his face. He’s not quite able to hide the flinch. He keeps his eyes fixed on the scuffed spat planted on his sternum until the metal tip digs into the flesh at his chin and forces his stare upward. The pressure on his chest increases as the Joker crouches down.

“There we go, I want to be able to see that pretty face again when its screaming,” Joker smiles and taps one gloved finger against Jason’s cheekbone.

“Well, here we are again, Kiddo. Just like old times. Little birdy in shining armor comes swinging in to save the day!” Joker mocks, clasping his free hand to his chest. “Only to be cruelly betrayed by the damsel in distress,” he draws the hand across his brow. Every motion is an exaggeration. Parody. Joker drops the play-acting and grins, leans conspiratorially towards Jason, “I made sure she was blonde, just like your mommy. Did ya like that?”

Jason wants to spit in his face but his mouth is still too dry. He settles for a raspy, “Fuck you,” instead. It’s not Shakespeare, but it gets the point across.

The Joker frowns, “Rude.” He’s fast. Faster than anyone Jason has come against before or after his resurrection, speedsters excluded. Faster than Dick even, though with significantly less grace. It’s his speed coupled with his unpredictability that makes him such a dangerous opponent. Jason is left wheezing, struggling to regain the breath knocked out of him from the crowbar. The pain is a wake-up call. He is not fifteen anymore and this will not be a repeat of Ethiopia. He is bigger, stronger, and more disciplined now. He refuses to be scared of this clown and his pathetic attempts to rile him up.

Jason slides his eyes to the side and surreptitiously tries to count how many thugs Joker brought with him. He can see at least six but judging by the way a couple of them are turned as if in conversation he’s guessing there’s at least three more out of his range of sight. Harley’s there too. Great. The thugs look like typical Joker goons picked off the street, no one with serious training.

They shouldn’t be too much of a challenge even without his guns. He doesn’t need to look to know those are missing. Their comforting weight is gone. He may still have some knives in his boots and jacket if he’s lucky. He just needs to get free and with his hands taped rather than cuffed he thinks his chances are fairly good. There’s a shim hidden in the ring he always wears now that Gotham’s vigilantes have upgraded from good old-fashioned rope to zip ties. The edge is serrated and should be able to cut through the tape.

“Wowee! Now that felt good!” Exclaims Joker, rocking back on his heels. “Really brings back the memories, doesn’t it sport! The dream team, together again. You, me, Mr. Crowbar! We’re gonna have a blast! I’m so excited I almost don’t care that you ruined my big joke.”

The Joker’s eyes narrow and his smile slips, “Y’know, its’ really rude to upstage someone like that. My joke was good. Tore off your wings and left your barbequed body for the Bats to find…but yours was better. Coming back the way you did. I’ve never seen old Batsy all broken on the inside like that.” Joker lowers his head towards Jason, “Now tell me, how did you do it?”

“Just resilient I guess. Takes more than a crowbar and a clown with some C4 to kill me,” Jason drawls. He’s managed to get the shim out and is trying to saw at the tape without dropping the slim band of metal.

“No, no, no,” Joker shakes his head vehemently. “Maybe the first time. Beginner’s luck. But when Daddy Bats decided he loved me more than you? That was a lot of blood,” he sing-songs in Jason’s ear.

Jason glares at him and hope it hides the uncertainty he feels. The scar slicing across his neck itches.
Anger and hurt followed by a vague uneasiness surfaces whenever he thinks about that night. Joker is right. Jason has cut enough men’s throats to know when an artery has been opened. He should have bled out that night. Was too upset at all his careful planning going up in flames to question it when he woke up a week later in the abandoned house he’d dragged himself into still covered in his own blood. Laughter brings him back to the present. The Joker has a knuckle between his teeth, giggling around it like a school boy.

“Not very chatty are we? It’s okay. I get it,” he stage whispers loudly enough for the motley crew ringed around them to hear, “Trade secrets, right?” He pulls the finger out of his mouth and holds it up to his lips. His lanky form unfolds as he stands.

“Unfortunately, I really don’t like the competition. See, what Batsy and I have is special. But with you out running around stealing all the attention, it’s just no fun anymore. Batman is too busy looking for his poor lost puppy that he won’t come out to play!” Joker gesticulates wildly. Suddenly he twirls, purple coat tails fanning out behind him and idly slaps the length of metal against his thigh. “So let’s get started where we left off. This time I’ll make sure the punch line sticks.”

Jason’s head cracks to the side, teeth cutting the inside of his cheek. He spits out blood and runs his tongue around the inside of his mouth but it doesn’t feel like anything’s been knocked loose.

“Hey! You know,” Joker leers, leaning on the crowbar like Fred Astaire on a movie-prop cane, “We never really resolved that one question. Backhand or forehand?”

The next three blows land so quickly Jason has a hard time distinguishing them from each other. He fights the urge to roll on his side into the fetal position. He has to keep his hands hidden. Jason tries to keep his body loose so the hits don’t do as much damage while he works at the tape. The priority is avoiding serious injury until he’s free. Keep his limbs intact so when the time comes he can use them. Most of the blows fall on his chest and stomach. They hurt, but his armored vest and the layers of muscle he’s built up over the years do some to soften them. It’s the strike to his hip that finally makes him cry out. He feels the crest of bone fracture and it overwhelms the slice into his wrist as the shim severs the last of the tape.

“Ahahaha! Forehand it is, Harley!” Joker turns to his assistant, "Write that down for me, wouldn’t want to forget. It might come in handy when I run into another birdy!"

Jason takes advantage of the moment to roll over and boost himself up with his freed hands. The knives in his boots are gone but he flings the ones in his sleeves and launches himself at Joker before his first victims fall. The clown collapses beneath Jason’s assault, laughing through the fingers locked round his throat. Acidic green rage is spitting in his veins now. It’s a constant battle, trying to keep the pit’s effects under control. Tonight he doesn’t even try. His mouth stretches wide enough to match the Joker in a smile that’s all teeth and cedes to the madness.

He can hear the men moving into place behind him and his pulse races in anticipation. Choking will take too long, so he transfers his grip to the sides of the clown’s head with a growl, preparing to crush his skull into the cement like he did to the man in the alley earlier. He curls his fingers into the greasy green hair and gets two good slams in before the world tilts madly and he topples to the side. Blood runs into his right eye making his vision go hazy while he pulls himself to his feet. It’s the goddamn harlequin bitch with her fucking hammer. He’s shaky but he manages to roll out of the way before her second swing connects. The momentum of the hammer unchecked sends Harley into a spin and Jason lands a high kick to the center of her back sending her reeling away.

Unfortunately it also sends him off balance, his equilibrium thrown by the knock to the head. He goes down on one knee in front of a charging thug. Jason snags his helmet from the ground and clocks his assailant in the jaw with it. He grins, nothing like a little blunt force trauma to liven up the
day. Then he takes out another two fuckwads using nothing but his helmet to bash their faces in and lobs it into the groin of a third. He stares the remaining men down. They’re standing in a loose semi circle armed with an assortment of weapons. Pieces of pipe, chain, and a stun gun. He should probably be more concerned with the stocky man holding the stun gun but he can’t stop himself when he sees his own Heckler & Koch P30 pointed at him from the grip of some barely out of his teens dipshit whose so scared he’s shaking.

Jason growls and lunges forward. The kid yelps and pulls the trigger. Forgets to take the safety off. Jason slams into him bodily, sending the gun clattering to the pavement. He hears the crackle of electricity and diverts his momentum, swinging the coward and throwing his body between him and the approaching stung gun. He’s moving to retrieve the gun when he goes down, fingers mere inches away.

It’s the crowbar to his knee that sweeps him off his feet in a bad way. He grunts when his mangled kneecap cracks against the ground and things quickly go down hill. A strike to his chin knocks him backwards and he doesn’t throw his hands back quickly enough to break his fall. The back of his head bounces off the pavement. He sees stars. Stars? In Gotham? They are faint and swinging slightly in the little slice of sky above the rooftops. The stars are cold when they land on his face. He blinks. Oh, it’s snowing.

Jason screams as his ankle shatters. He’s not sure if it was Joker with the crowbar, Harley with her hammer, or the boot heel of one of their hoodlums. He just knows its strategic; a deliberate hit to ensure he won’t be getting up again. It’s that realization that finally bypasses his training and the pit fueled rage. Jason fights the feeling growing in his chest, forces deeper slower breaths. It’s not easy while he’s also having the shit beat out him. He manages to regain some control before a kick rolls him onto his back and bony fingers dig into his cheeks. The Joker laughs and combs back his hair with his free hand.

“Well done Shortpants! Woowee. I did not see that one coming. You’ve gotten better. Not as good as the Bats, but then again who is? I’m quite impressed. First you took your beating like a man. No passing out this time! And then you took out, let’s see, one, two, three…six of my poor little stooges.”

And because Jason is an asshole he curls his thumb inside his jacket sleeve and presses the patch sewn into the lining. The dead man’s switch on his helmet activates. He grins at the boom and the gurgle of pain that follows. “Seven. Fuck you very much,” Jason flashes his best shit-eating grin. Its one he specifically designed to tick Dick off the most in his first life and perfected in his second.

A frown flickers across the clown’s face, “Well, I always enjoy our little reunions Zomboy but playtimes over.” The Joker releases his grip on Jason’s face and pats his cheek. The gesture is almost affectionate and makes Jason shudder. He snarls to cover the slip-up. There's blood in his teeth and from the way Joker's surviving henchmen take a step-back it must look brutal. Good.

“Ahh, come on now Shortpants. Don’t be like that. Its been fun. A real laugh. I’m gonna miss ruffling your feathers,” Joker punctuates his statement by zigzagging his fingers through Jason’s hair.

Jason yanks his head back and snaps, teeth coming perilously close to the Joker’s fingers before the clown snatches them away.

“But I love using you to ruffle Daddy Bat’s even more,” Joker laughs and gestures to the men behind him.

Stun-gun and the man who’s balls had gotten intimate with the Red Hood. Jason briefly considers fighting the pair of them off but decides his chances will be better if he can get to his feet so he lets
them haul him up by the arm pits. He bites back a moan when the motion sends a ripple of pain down his body. He feels bone scrape against bone and wonders how many ribs are broken versus cracked. There is something amiss with his right shoulder and a sharp ache at the base of his spine that has him worried. He fears he’s more injured than he’d thought. He blames the concussion.

Jason hangs in his captors’ grips unable stop the tremors running up and down his frame and ashamed at the show of weakness. He knows his left ankle won’t support his full weight but he shifts his weight experimentally anyway to see if it will hold him just long enough to lash out with his good leg in an escape attempt. He’s shoved against a wall before he can act on it.

“Do you like art Shortpants?”

“The fuck?” Jason automatically and eloquently responds, thrown by the non-sequitor.

“Art!” The Joker gesticulates with the crowbar, “’Y’know, Picasso, Dali, Da Vinci. That crazy son of a bitch who cut his ear off?!”

Jason stares at the madman in front of him blankly. He is less puzzled by the abrupt conversational shift than Joker’s standard of comparison for sanity.

“You mean Van Gogh? Nah,” Jason grates out, voice rough with the pain flaring in his chest at every word. “I’m more of a poetry guy really.”

Joker gives a deep bellied guffaw, and Jason bristles. The Joker’s laugh has haunted his nightmares ever since he crawled out of the Pit, but right now its more offensive than anything.

“Do not go gentle into that good night, old age should burn and rave at close of day; rage rage against the dying of the light,” Jason recites sulkily.


Jason smirks.

“Though wise men at their end know dark is right, because their words had forked no lightning, they do not go gentle into that good night.”

By the end of the stanza it takes effort to speak and Jason is panting between words, but the Joker just cocks his head to the side and watches him with narrowed eyes. Jason plays for time, maybe if he keeps going long enough Nightwing or one of the others will come across their little pow-wow. Surely they’ve made enough noise by now to pop up on someone’s radar.

So he continues,

“Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright, their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay; rage, rage, against the dying of the light.”

He has to stop. The words are starting to slur and if he doesn’t start concentrating just on breathing he’s going to pass out. The Joker shoves his face into Jason’s.

“Huh. Who was that?”

“Dylan Thomas,” Jason rasps.

“Interesting. And here I always thought you were the dim bird of the flock.”

The Joker starts to fiddle for something in his pocket.
“Well, back to the topic at hand. Art. They say life imitates it. And since you ruined my big punchline, Lazarus, I think its more than fair you take your proper place as the sacrificial victim again in my masterpiece tonight,” the Joker says as he pulls two long masonry nails from his coat. “Have you ever seen the Isenheim Altarpiece, Laz? It’s on display at that big hoopla they got going on at the museum tonight. Its one of my favorites. Artist really knew how to capture death in all its agonizing beauty.”

Jason’s insides go cold. He doesn’t like where this is going. He fights hard when one of the men holding him starts to stretch his left arm out but the other pins him against the brick with a forearm to his throat and he’s standing too close for Jason to attack effectively with his legs. The dull point of the nail pushes painfully into the center of his palm.

“Harley, be a dear and let me borrow that hammer of yours,” the Joker purrs with his hand held out expectantly.

Jason screams when the nail drives past bone through flesh. He’s still screaming when they move to his right hand. The Joker steps back and admires his work, smile stretched grotesquely far even for him. Jason slumps and bites through his lip trying to stifle the whimper when his weight pulls down on his mangled hands. When the Joker turns away Jason thinks that this is it: that they’ll leave him pinned to the wall like a fucking bug as a message for Batman. Batman will find him and it’ll hurt like a bitch, but he’ll take him down and after a long miserable lecture on the error of his ways Jason will slink off to lick his wounds in humiliation while Batman hunts down the Joker for some non-fatal retaliation.

But then the Joker turns back around with that goddamn crowbar in his hands and Jason is flooded with the same hopeless resignation from when he was fifteen and he’d dragged his broken body all the way across the warehouse floor just to find the door was locked. That moment when he realized Batman wasn’t going to make it and let himself slide down to watch the red numbers flick down the final count. He closes his eyes and sighs, waits for the whistle of iron through air. It doesn’t come. Instead he’s poked sharply just under the breast bone. Jason blinks down in confusion at the pry-bar end digging into seam between the plates of his armored vest.

“Try rising from this on the third day,” the Joker cackles.

He holds the crowbar straight with two hands while Harley swings.

It takes five swings. Two to puncture the vest. Once to spike the bar through his chest. Two to hammer it deep enough into the wall behind him that it stays put when his body sags around it. His mouth hangs open, working soundlessly as blood pools in his mouth and flows over his lips. He can’t breathe, his lungs are filling. Distantly he’s aware of hands on his face and a mouth mockingly whispering next to his ear,

“Father, father, where are you going? O do not walk so fast. Speak father, speak to your little boy,
or else I shall be lost. The night was dark no father was there, the child was wet with dew. The mire was deep, and the child did weep, and away the vapour flew. That's William Blake, birdy."

Fingers dip into the hole in chest but he barely feels it. Everything goes dark around the edges and all he’s left with is the sounds of his own gurgling final breaths and laughter. And…and maybe it’s not so bad this time. He isn’t afraid of dying. Death isn’t what woke him screaming at night. Hell, dying a martyr…maybe Bruce will finally be proud of him.
Dick vs. The Batmobile

Chapter Notes

Hey guys. Thanks for the kudos and comments, replies are in the comments section (Anon, if you’re still here there’s a nice long one for you). I’m going on a cruise (AHMYGAWDIMSOEXCITED) so it will be a while before next chapter is up because I will be too busy swimming with Manta Rays and drinking copious amounts of alcohol to write. And I’ve been told its like $30 for an hour of wifi, so yeah. That’s not gonna happen. If there’s no new post—my apologies I probably fell overboard. Hopefully in a wild booze filled birthday extravaganza where I died happy.

Sorry this one took a while to get out. I did more research on homicide/autopsy/mortuary procedures than I ever want to have to do again. It was not as fun as I thought it would be. This isn’t quite as exciting a chapter as the rest, but its necessary to set up the rest of the plot.

For those of you who are interested I tried to model the argument Dick and Bruce have here off the one they have in the New Titans #55 to keep it in character.

Chapter 4

It’s like a bad Lifetime movie. One of the ones Stephanie used to make him watch with her. They’d sit on the couch with a bowl of popcorn ripping apart plot holes and giggling over cliché lines. There’s always that scene where the main character gets the phone call that their lover/spouse/child has been in an accident/cancer/poisoned and they run frantically through the hospital halls, lights blurring overhead, time slowing. It’s just like that. Tim leaves Stephanie behind, outstrips her as soon as the nurse at the lobby gives him a room number. He didn’t even have to ask. Although he supposes its obvious he would be joining the other masks. There’s a growing weight in his belly with every step. The room is easy to find. Its the one with a police officer stationed outside of it.

He knows when he skids into the room. It's quiet, too quiet. There's no beeping and hum of machines like there should be. Nightwing is sitting with his chair pulled as close to the bedside as possible, gently clapping a wrist. One of his thumbs brushes back and forth across the skin there, carefully avoiding any contact with the punctured palm. Steady as a metronome. Robin has planted himself next to Nightwing. He stands with his arms crossed over his chest looking for all the world like he's trying to glare the second Robin back to life. It takes Tim a moment to notice Batman. The Dark Knight is standing in the corner furthest from, almost tucked away behind the door. Tim studies the face beneath the cowl. He wishes he was better at decoding expressions. All he sees is the grim slash of Batman’s mouth.

“I’m sorry,” Tim blurts out.

He doesn’t know why he says it. Is he really sorry for Jason’s death? Or for bursting in the way he did? He feels like he’s intruding. On a private moment, a family moment. Tim has been feeling like an outsider among these three with growing frequency, and he can pinpoint the day it started. He keeps his face forward while his eyes slide to Damian beneath the lenses of his mask. Now is not the time to dwell on his own issues. He forces his gaze back to Batman in time to catch a curt nod of
acknowledgement.

Tim takes a hesitant step towards the foot of the bed and makes himself look at the figure in it. He tries to connect the man before him with the grisly scene Tim just left. There’s some bruising and scrapes on his face. His domino is gone but there are still faint lines across his across his cheeks and the bridge of his nose. Skin is chalky. Most of the blood has been wiped away, although there are still flakes at his hairline and in the small creases at his eyes, nose, and mouth. The gaping hole Tim knows spears through the middle of his chest is covered by a blanket drawn up to his shoulders. It’s the hands that give away the illusion. Tim can’t look at them for long before creepy crawlies tickle the back of his knees.

Tim isn’t sure what he feels. He’s never been very good at the whole feelings thing. Reading or expressing them. Something Stephanie likes to remind him of often. In fact, a lot of their issues had circulated around Tim’s inability to tell when Stephanie was feeling hurt or ignored until it was too late and she had already crossed into pissed-the-hell-off territory.

He gazes at the face of the man who was his childhood hero, adolescent crush, and ultimately inspired him to take up the mantle. The man who came back angry and tried to kill him. He finds himself at a loss. Should he feel relief? After all, there is now one less highly trained and dangerous criminal with a personal vendetta against him off the streets. But then Tim’s mind flicks back to tall letters, finger-painted over brick, and the idea of finding relief in this man’s death makes him sick.

Both of Jason Todd’s lives were short, brutal, and ended bloody. Tim is overwhelmed with the cosmic unfairness. Why give Jason Todd a second life if not as compensation for the wretchedness of the first? Red Hood was an enemy, no doubt about it. But all things change with time.

If they just had more time, more opportunities to reach out… Could they have brought him back into the fold? With enough time could Red Hood and Red Robin have one day worked together? It clicks. That is what he is feeling. Regret. Regret over the loss of any possible future in which Jason Todd could have moved past the hurt and rage eating away at him. The guy was an asshole but, no one deserves to go out like that. Twice.

Tim winces and turns to Robin in part to distract himself. Robin’s jaw is clenched tight. Tim is willing to bet his knuckles are white under the gloves where they’re gripping his biceps. His feet are shoulder-width apart and his back is straight, but Tim gets the feeling he’s one step away from hugging himself. Tim reaches out a hand, calculates the probability of Robin taking it off, and brings it back.

He settles for, “You ok?” instead.

“Tt. Why would I not be?”

“Oh I dunno. You were witness to something pretty traumatic.”

“The death of Red Hood is hardly enough to traumatize me. Why should we mourn the loss of an adversary?”

“Robin, I saw the site. You don’t have to like him to be—

“Stop projecting your inadequacies on me Pretender.”

If the kid keeps this habit up Tim will start cutting him off with a punch to the throat. Tim’s fingers twitch. He moves behind Dick instead and places his hand on the older man’s shoulder instead. It feels almost like a reward when Dick reaches up and places his own over top of it. Keeping Tim
there, close to him for comfort, like he’s the only thing holding him together. Tim can't help but think this is where Bruce should be rather than lurking in the distance.

A tall woman in a lab coat and a clipboard strides in with Commissioner Gordon close behind. The woman glances around before her gaze falls on Batman and she waves him over. Her voice is soft and surprisingly low when she speaks.

“I'm sorry to interrupt, and I know this isn’t easy but there are some matters that must be discussed,” she flicks her eyes warily towards where Tim stands with Dick and Damian. “If you would join me and the Commissioner so we could speak in private perhaps?”

“Whatever you want to say you can say in front of all of us,” Nightwing says flatly without looking up.

“I don’t feel comfortable holding this conversation in front of a child.”

Robin bristles, “I am not a child!”

“None of us are. Not anymore,” Nightwing muses grimly.

Tim feels the tension mount in the room. A corner of Bruce’s mouth twitches.

“Of course Dr. Lawal. I understand there are certain arrangements that need to be discussed, we can talk further in your office,” Batman inclines his head towards her before heading for the door.

His statement is cold and clinical. This is not the man who spoke to Tim with tenderness and yearning mere hours ago at the museum. The Bat has buried him. A black curl of anger makes Tim purse his lips. If it makes Tim angry, Dick becomes enraged. Nightwing spurs into motion fluidly inserting himself between Batman and the door.

“Arrangements? You haven’t been here fifteen minutes and you’re already thinking about making arrangements?” Dick hisses. “Have you even looked at him! Or were you just hiding in the corner til you could come up with a good reason to leave?”

“Nightwing, I know this is difficult but practical matters still need to be settled. He’s gone. My presence here won’t change that.”

Dick’s face twists into something ugly.

“Don’t speak to me like I’m a child, B. I know what needs to be done. And last time you made the arrangements, I missed the funeral because you didn’t take two seconds to pull your head out of your ass and call me. I wouldn’t have even known he died if I hadn’t hacked into your network! So forgive me if I don’t trust you not to fuck it all up again!”

Holy shit. That had not been in any file Tim ad read. Lifetime writers, eat your hearts out. Tim sees his own expression mirrored in Gordon’s. His eyebrows have shot up so high they disappear beneath his fringe of greying hair. Tim can see the man trying to piece together what Nightwing are referencing. Batman’s mouth thins and Tim is disappointed that the first emotion he’s shown tonight is one of annoyance.

“Nightwing, you are clearly emotionally compromised. The situation regarding Red Hood’s remains are delicate. It must be handled with caution. Something you are not capable of at the moment.”

Judging by Nightwing’s face Tim reckons there’s a solid 99% likelihood this conversation will end in blows.
“May I ask what situation you are referring to?” Tim interjects, hoping to diffuse or at least postpone the coming argument. It’s a huge mistake.

Gordon clears his throat, “Red Hood’s death is clearly a case of homicide. By law all homicides require an autopsy.”

“An autopsy?!” Nightwing shouts, “What the hell do you need to do an autopsy for? Isn’t it obvious how he died? Someone shoved a goddamn crowbar through him! What else do you need to know?”

“Nightwing, calm down,” Batman warns.


Lawal frowns and cuts her eyes towards Robin one last time, clearly unhappy with the turn of conversation.

“The Commissioner is right, by law we are required to turn any homicide victims to the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner.”

“Ok, so you do an autopsy. What’s the big deal?”

Lawal raises a hand in a conciliatory manner to soothe Nightwing, “The OCME doesn’t officially allow viewings. They prefer we identify the body before handing it off to them when possible.”

There’s a flurry of movement as masked and unmasked eyes try to read each other in mild panic.

“What…What happens if the body isn’t identified?” Tim asks.

“If you can’t provide us with anything then the ME will take pictures and prints and do their best to identify the body and make contact with next of kin or friends,” Gordon answers.

Tim swallows. There isn’t a database in the world with his, Dick, Damian, or Jason’s prints. Even if there was, Jason doesn’t have any friends or family left to care except for those already in the room and Alfred.

“And what happens if they can’t?”

Gordon sighs, “We can usually hold the body for three to four months. Sometimes this can be extended if we believe it will be helpful in solving the case. If no one comes forward to identify it by six months we enter prints, dental, and DNA into CODIS in case it matches up with any future missing persons. Then the City becomes responsible for disposal. Usually they’re cremated and then buried with a numbered marker in the cemetery’s potter’s field.”

Tim watches all of the color drain from Nightwing’s face.

“That’s what I came here to discuss. I was hoping one of you would know or be willing to disclose the victim’s identity to me so we can ensure his remains are treated with the utmost respect,” Dr. Lawal says hopefully.

Her statement is met with awkward silence.

“Could the body be released to someone if it isn’t identified?” Tim asks hesitantly.

Gordon’s brow furrows.

“If someone wanted to take responsibility for the cost and planning of a service, the City would be
amenable. We cannot however, release a body to an individual unless they identify themselves and prove they knew the deceased. So if there’s anything you can tell us that would help, please do. There’s nothing sadder than a tombstone without a name and a funeral without mourners. This boy deserves better than that.”

He gives Batman a pointed look. Past and present Robins turn to the Bat.

“I'm sorry Dr. Lawal. We can't help you. Although we were familiar with the Red Hood, I'm afraid we don't know who he really was,” Batman speaks up for all of them.

It's not Bruce’s fault really. His even measured tones lack any sort of passion that would hint at a personal relationship. Dick is the problem. As if his earlier outbursts weren’t enough…Tim sees it coming, the way Nightwing’s feet shift, the tension in his back, the subtle curling of fingers into a fist. If Batman sees it coming as well he makes no attempt to dodge. Nightwing’s fist flies squarely into his face.

“You fucking ass! Don’t do this, B. He is your son! For once in your life act like his goddamn father! Just tell Gordon. He’s a good man. Just give him a name and sign whatever goddamn papers they need you to so we can take him home. Please.” Nightwing’s voice breaks.

Tim can see Batman's teeth grinding together, but the man doesn’t say anything.

“Fine. If you won’t I will,” Dick snarls.

Suddenly he’s bent double, wheezing, a gauntlet-shaped indentation in his stomach.

“Don’t you dare! I am doing the best I can to protect all of you!” Batman growls. He rolls his shoulder back and raises his chin. “I am not interested in continuing this conversation with you. Now get out.”

“Let me guess; pack my things and leave my keys with A on the way out?” Dick wheezes.

“Maybe you should.”

Nightwing uncurls himself slowly and Tim wonders how hard Bruce hit him. He limps back to the bedside and although his body is vibrating with rage he is gentle when he picks up the dead man’s hand.

“I’m not going to let him do this Little Wing,” Tim hears Dick whisper.

“Robin, let’s go. Red, come with, or meet us in the Cave,” Nightwing rasps.

Tim looks back and forth between Nightwing and Batman, torn.

“Uh, coming with. I guess. I gotta catch BG up first. Give me five minutes.”

“We’ll pick you up out front. Be there in five or I’m leaving without you.”

Tim raises his eyebrows but doesn’t say anything. Dick holds one hand out and Tim is momentarily confused, but then Robin steps forward and the hand lifts to ruffle through his hair. Robin allows it. It’s obviously something they’ve done before, if not often. Tim’s throat goes tight at the interaction. Dick used to do that with him. He shoves back the resentment before it can dig its nasty little claws in. He needs to update Steph. Besides, he’s grown at least a foot since then. It’s childish to be jealous of a child over childish things. The duo walk out, Nightwing knocking his shoulder aggressively against Batman as they pass by. Tim follows them in brushing past the Bat, but he slows to press the
USB drive into Batman’s hand.

“This was left for you at the scene. Wing doesn’t need to hear it.”

Stephanie is waiting outside in the hallway. Pacing. Twirling the ends of her hair in her fingers then combing it out again. Her head snaps up when they exit. Nightwing and Robin peel away and Tim wishes he was going with them. Someone has to be the bearer of bad news though. Stephanie stills. He can feel her eyes taking him in, see the moment when the realization hits. She knows by his face just like he knew from the silence when he ran in. She closes her eyes and sighs. Tim steps close and bumps his forehead gently against hers. He probably shouldn’t, but he lets her wrap her arms around him. Tells himself its more for her than him.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers.

“It’s ok. It’s not like we were friends.”

“I know. But. He was also like your nerdy little hero crush at one point. And no one—

“Deserves that, yeah. Thanks.”

“So, what the fuck happened in there?” she asks.

“B and Wing had a…disagreement.”

“To put it mildly. I heard lots of yelling.”

“Yeah, I don’t really want to talk about it right now. I’m going back with Robin and Wing. Will you be ok?”

Tim backs up and takes her face between his hands. Steph nods and forces out a smile.

“I’m good. I just don’t look forward to telling O.”

“You want me to stay while you call her?”

“No,” Steph shakes her head. “I don’t want to call it in. Some things you need to do in person.”

Tim cocks his head, “Were O and Hood close?”

Stephanie mimics the action, “I don’t know about close... But they were in contact pretty regularly. Even ran into him a time or two at the Tower. She always seemed sad afterwards. She’d hook him up with tech and he would send in leads. You didn’t know?”

“No. No I didn’t. I don’t think any of us did,” Tim muses. He thinks he knows who O was trying to get in contact with earlier now. “Give O my sympathies. And be safe, okay?”

“I’m Batgirl, I’m always safe.”

The smile she shoots him this time is a little more real.

”Alright, I gotta go. Call me if you need to.”

“Don’t be a stranger Red,” she calls out after him as he jogs down the steps.

Tim keeps his eyes forward, tries to ignore the soft smiles and muffled giggles of the nursing staff nearby. Just what he needs, to be plastered across tabloid covers at the grocery store check out
tomorrow morning: *Illicit love affair between Bat Girl and Red Robin.*

As promised Dick is waiting at the main entrance, engine idling.

“The Batmobile, really? I get the feeling B did not give his blessing.”

“Fuck Batman. He can find his own way home,” Dick grunts.

Tim shrugs, climbs in, and maybe accidentally knees Robin as he crawls into the back seat. He’s barely buckled in before Dick takes off. Tim quickly reevaluates his decision to ride along. Dick flagrantly ignores traffic laws as he drives. When he takes a hairpin turn through a red light, narrowly avoiding a collision only by hopping up on the sidewalk Tim can’t stop himself from grabbing the roll bar. Damian yelps from the passenger seat.

Tim waits for Bruce to call, to reprimand them for stealing the car. Or just override it and shut the engine down remotely, but he doesn’t. Tim kind of wishes he would. Apparently swinging across all the rooftops in the world isn’t enough to prepare him for Dick’s emotionally compromised driving. He’s got his head between his knees when the crunch of gravel under tires comes far too soon. Congrats Dick, you made the Kessel Run in under 12 parsecs.

Alfred is waiting for them when Dick skids the Batmobile into the cave. He’s out of the car and halfway across the garage before Tim and Damian manage to scramble after him. A massive crash echoes through the garage. Dick has upended a worktable, scattering tools across the cement floor. Alfred shepherds Damian out of the way when Dick starts chucking socket wrenches at the Batmobile’s windshield. They bounce harmlessly off of the reinforced glass. With a growl Dick scoops a tire iron from the floor and attacks the hood. His ferocity is terrifying, and Tim finds it hard to look away. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Alfred attempting to draw Damian away from the scene.

“Come on Master Damian, let’s get you cleaned up. I think it best we give Master Grayson some space.” The old butler’s voice is as calm as ever but it sounds hollow.

The two disappear further into the cave. Dick is screaming now. Tim can see tears spilling down his face where his mask has come loose. If it was any other car the front would be destroyed. Considering it’s the Batmobile, Dick has accomplished an impressive amount of damage.

“Dick.”

Dick aims a kick at a headlight that Tim knows would break toes if he wasn’t wearing reinforced boots.

“Dick!”

Dick climbs up onto the hood and rips off the windshield wipers. Anyone who called Jason Todd the angry Robin obviously never saw Dick Grayson throw a tantrum.

“DICK!”

Tim wraps his arms round the older man’s waist and forcibly pulls him off the car. They collapse into a mess of limbs. Dick wriggles in his grip but its little more than a token struggle and quickly dies off when Tim refuses to let go.

“Dick, talk to me. What’s going on?”

“What’s going on? Jason is dead! My little brother is dead. Again! I wasn’t there last time and I was
too late this time and Jason is dead. And Bruce…” Dick makes a choking noise somewhere
between a laugh and a sob, “Bruce is being a bastard.”

"Isn't Bruce always being a little bit of a bastard?" Tim asks wryly.

Dick gives a small huff before sighing, "He’s doing it again."

“Doing what again?”

“Shutting down. Distancing himself. The first time Jason died he put up a glass case and called him
a fallen soldier.” Dick spits, “He wasn’t a soldier, Tim. He was a fifteen year old boy. He was
funny and passionate. And smart. He was so smart, Tim. Maybe not like you or Barbara, but
smarter than me. He would read anything he could get his hands on. Would wait for the latest issue
of National Geographic to come in and read it cover to cover in one afternoon...One time we were
fighting this thug, big guy, one of Penguin’s I think, and Jason called him as ugly as a...a four-
headed-echidna-dick. I laughed so hard I got clocked in the face. On the ride home I asked where
the hell that had come from and he starts reciting this entire article he’d read on the marsupials of
Australia or something.”

“Monotremes.”

“What?”

“Echidnas are monotremes not marsupials. Marsupials have pouches. Monotremes are mammals
that lay eggs,” Tim corrects.

Dick twists enough to cast Tim a withering look.

“Sorry. Not the time, I get it. It just kind of slipped out,” Tim apologizes.

“The point is, Bruce took this beautiful, smart, funny, kid and reduced him to a warning. An example
of what happens to Robins who don’t follow orders. And this time, fuck. This time he’s not even
going to do that much. He’s going to let them bury him without even a name. It’s like he’s erasing
Jason from existence. You don’t do that to family. What if it was me? Or you, or Damian? What
would he do then?”

Tim tucks his head into Dick’s neck.

“He’s trying to keep us safe, Dick.”

“From what? Gordon? How long has he been working with Batman? How many times has he
almost figured it out on his own? Would it really be so bad to finally clue him in? Babs has known
for years.”

“And look where that got her,” Tim murmurs, knowing he’s treading dangerously.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Dick snaps, pulling away.

“Keeping our identities secret isn’t just about keeping us safe, Dick. Knowing who we are puts
anyone who knows at risk also. Look, I’m not saying Bruce is doing the right thing. It sucks.
Everything about this sucks. I’m just saying Bruce is doing what he thinks is best to keep everyone
as safe as he can.”

“And what do you think?”
Tim rolls his eyes and groans, “I think he’s going about it in the most asshole-ish way possible.”

“What would you do if you were in his position?”

“I—”

Tim stops. What would he do? If he was the one calling the shots, would he let one of their vigilante brethren, as estranged and misguided as he may be, pass into anonymity? Tim wonders what it would be like. For Timothy Jackson Drake to be swept under the rug and forgotten. It’s an odd thought, but it doesn’t bother him as much as it maybe should. Then again, there wasn’t much special about Timothy Drake except for the fact he’s Red Robin. Tim never felt more alive than when he was wearing the cape and mask, helping people. What does that say about him? That his persona feels more real than his actual life.

Dick’s conflict over issues of family aren’t what’s eating at Tim. It’s something about… Well the whole idea of disposing of the body. Letting them cut Jason open on a slab, sit in a freezer for six months, then cremate him. It feels wrong. It’s standard procedure, nothing abnormal; all corpses are subjected to the same process up to a degree. His parents were. But, Jason Todd isn’t just any corpse.

Tim’s read the reports. He had wanted to know as much about his predecessor as he could, so he could live up to the name Robin and be the best partner he could for Batman. He read the reports and case reviews over and over again. All of them, even the ghost files Bruce thought he had hidden. Jason Todd had inexplicably dug himself out of his own grave once before ever getting close to a Lazarus pit. What were the chances it could happen again?

It’s a crazy idea. He knows it is. But how crazy is it to expect the impossible a second time?

“I think I need your help.”

“To do what?” Dick looks up at him, wiping tears and snot away on his fingerstripes.

"To steal Jason's body."
"Wait, what?"
Ready, set...

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone who has read, reviewed, and left kudos. You are amazing and I appreciate the time you take to leave input.

Cruise was great, returning to the real world less so. Work has picked up so updates will probably be monthly.

Oh! If anyone was wondering the emergency ring referenced in Chapter 3 is a real thing. And very nifty. Check it out: http://www.uniquetitanium.com/Titanium-Escape-Ring_p_493.html

Chapter 5

His own snore wakes him. The chair swivels wildly when he jolts up from where he’d passed out, bent over the smoked glass of his desk. Tim paws at his face and peels a drool soaked blueprint off his cheek. Well, that’s disgusting.

He reaches for the Darth Vader mug sitting on a stack of case files (shoved aside when this took priority) and takes a swig only to find it empty. Tim sighs and pushes his chair back. He hasn’t been out for long, maybe three hours. Three hours of sleep after running on fumes for the past twenty-four. It’s nowhere near enough to make up for all he’s missed this week but it will have to do. It always does. Tim digs the heels of his palms into his eye sockets and stifles a yawn.

After letting Dick cry himself dry and manhandling him into bed, Tim had immediately sat down to work. He and Barbara spent most of the day pulling up blueprints and picking apart the security systems of the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner. He can’t remember when Oracle left the discussion. He wonders if Barbara ever falls asleep over a keyboard. If she does, he hopes there’s less drool involved. He can’t quite conjure a mental picture of the former batgirl so discomposed. It’s dark outside his window but the time at the top right corner of his computer screen tells him there are still a few hours before they usually head out on patrol. Time to get moving.

He gets to his feet and leans back, hands pushing his hips forward until his spine gives a satisfying series of cracks from lumbar to cervical. He swipes the coffee mug up and makes his way downstairs. He’s tried more than once to install a coffee pot in his room like he has back at the Titan’s Tower, but it always disappears. If it was anyone but Alfred, Tim would unleash hell upon the culprit, but he can’t be mad at the avuncular old man for trying to keep him sane and healthy (as misguided as Alfred is in this particular case). Tim is fairly sure that at nineteen, it is far too late for coffee to stunt his growth. Damage done.

Lights are on in the kitchen. He isn’t the only one up and about. The thin frame of the butler is silhouetted in the entryway. For the first time Tim can recall, the elderly gentleman’s posture is slumped.

“Alfred?” Tim asks quietly, setting Vader down with a clink.
Forgive me Master Timothy, I’m afraid I’ve just made a mess. Let me tidy this up before you come in.

Tim can see the remains of a teacup scattered across travertine tiles in a pale puddle. Alfred begins to kneel but Tim stops him with a touch.

“It’s ok, I’ve got this.”

Tim starts mopping up sharp edged shards of porcelain with a paper towel. He doesn’t recognize the service—pale green with pink flowers and gilt trim. He pretends not to see Alfred pocket one of the larger fragments. Once the floor is clear he wraps his arms warmly around the old man. He wonders who told Alfred. It wasn’t him. He hadn’t seen Alfred since the butler herded Damian upstairs during Dick’s meltdown, had been busy afterwards developing a plan with Barbara. Did anyone tell Alfred? Or did he just put the pieces together from the broken expressions on their faces? Tim is hit by a wave of guilt.

“I’m so sorry Alfred,” he murmurs, “How are you holding up?”

“Oft, in the stilly night,
Ere slumber’s chain has bound me,
Fond Memory brings the light
Of other days around me:
The smiles, the tears,
Of boyhood’s year,
The words of love then spoken,
The eyes that shone,
Now dimm’d and gone,
The cheerful hearts now broken!
Ere slumber’s chain has bound me,
Sad Memory brings the light
Of other days around me.”

Alfred responds in verse then squeezes Tim’s shoulder and pulls away. He turns his back on Tim and returns to the tea service on the counter.

“That was beautiful Alfred. What was that?”

“It’s a poem Master Timothy, by Sir Thomas More entitled, The Light of Other Days,” Alfred answers as he carefully pours another cup.

“I know that name, he was one of King Henry the Eighth’s councilors, right? The king had him beheaded later.”

“Lord High Chancellor, yes. As well as a philosopher, Renaissance humanist, and gifted writer. He
is most famous for his social commentary *Utopia*. Have you read it Master Timothy?"

“I haven’t. Sorry,” Tim smiles wanly.

“There’s no need to apologize. Neither Master Bruce nor Master Richard were ever particularly keen on 16th century literature either,” Alfred assures him.

“Was Jason?”

“Not for 16th century literature in particular, but Master Jason did have a great passion for reading. I recognized in him a kindred spirit for the love of written words. That poem was one in a book of English poetry I gave to young Master Jason his first Christmas with us.”

That... does not make Tim feel any better. He watches curiously as Alfred starts to rummage in the cabinet above the refrigerator, finally pulling a small vial out from behind a waffle iron. Alfred tips a short stream into the steaming teacup. He sets the cup upon a silver tray already weighted with a bowl of the pumpkin curry soup from lunch three days ago.

“Master Bruce arrived home two hours ago. He has yet to come upstairs. If you would so kindly deliver this to him. I do not believe he has had anything more substantial than the odd hors d’oeuvre since last night.”

Tim arches an eyebrow, “And what was that for?”

“It will be rather difficult for you and Master Dick to carry out the plan you have been conspiring with Miss Gordon over all day if Batman refuses to retire for the evening, don’t you think?”

Tim’s throat goes dry, “How did you—why? Why are you helping us go against Bruce?”

“Young Master Timothy, it is my duty to take care of Master Bruce. That does not always coincide with obeying his wishes. I fear what may happen if Master Bruce continues on the course of action he has set for himself. That he might do something he will forever regret.”

“Thank you, Alfred,” Tim ducks his head respectfully as he takes the tray.

“And it may be selfish, but I would not like to be denied the privilege to attend upon Master Jason even in death.”

Tim frowns and tightens his grip. The unfailing love of the butler strikes him hard. No matter where Jason oscillated along the spectrum of hero to villain for the rest of them, it was clear Alfred’s devotion had not once wavered.

“We’re bringing him home, Alfred. Dick already has a spot in mind where he’d like to bury him on the manor grounds if that’s okay.”

“I think that would be quite acceptable Master Tim,” Alfred affirms.

Tim starts to turn away when he’s reminded of an awkward practically, “Oh, and Alfred? Is there any place we could keep him until then? You know...uh. So he doesn’t...”

*Rot.* Tim doesn’t finish the sentence. He has already arranged to have a casket delivered the next day (no questions asked—being the son of one of Gotham’s wealthiest families and the ward of another has its benefits), but he intends to make a few...unconventional modifications before its put to use. Modifications he has no intention of sharing with Dick, Barbara or even Alfred.
Alfred responds knowingly, “There’s a walk-in catering freezer that was used quite often back when we still held social events here at the manor. It should do nicely. Though it’s been several years since it was last used. I’ll make sure there’s a space prepared upon your return.”

“It will need to be set at two degrees Celsius.”

Alfred nods and immediately sets off through one of the kitchen’s service doors. Once it swings shut behind him, Tim winds his way towards the study. He has to pass by the main living area to do so. His feet freeze. The open room is bathed in a warm flickering glow from the fireplace. The lights of the Christmas tree Dick had forced them all to go shopping for together twinkle innocently in the corner. He had completely forgotten it was Christmas Eve. They should have been spending the night gathered on the couches and floor cushions with cups of cocoa and eggnog, not breaking apart at the seams. The sight of the sixth stocking, carefully crafted with the same affection as the others though clearly less full, hanging at the far right end of the mantle spurs Tim back into motion.

Tim carries the tray through the study, clock, and down the staircase into the cave without spilling a drop. Thank you, bat-training. If he ever drops out of the vigilante life-style there’s a career in waiting tables ready for him. The tinny sound of old audio echoes up the stone steps. A young voice laughing, “Come on old man, we got bad guys that need chasing!” Tim slows his descent, sliding forward silently. Bruce sits stiffly in front of the console screens. He’s pulled off the cowl and left it hanging limply over the back of his chair.

“What is it Tim?”

Bruce jumps forward and fumbles to close the open window. He’s not quite fast enough. Tim watches a small skinny boy grin from atop the Batmobile’s roof shout, “This is the best day of my life!” before the page minimizes.

“What is it Tim?” Bruce grumbles.

“I, uh. Alfred asked me to check on you. He said you’ve been down here for hours.”

Tim sets the tray down within Bruce’s reach but a safe distance from the computer if anything were to spill.

“Thank you, Tim. Tell Alfred not to worry, it's appreciated but not necessary.”

“I don’t know if worried is the correct sentiment.”

Bruce pinches the bridge of his nose, “He’s upset with me too, isn’t he? Like Dick.”

“Well he hasn’t tried to destroy the Batmobile yet so maybe not quite like Dick is…but no. He isn’t happy with what you’re doing.”

Bruce sighs and Tim feels for him, he really does, because suffering Alfred’s disappointment is absolutely crushing.

“I’m just trying to keep all of us and our identities safe. It's the logical thing to do.”

“I know, and I agree.”

Bruce looks up at him in shock.

“It is logical. But Dick and Alfred don’t see it the way you and I do.”
“I’ve been trying to think of alternatives. I went to the Watchtower to talk with the League. The League may be willing to make arrangements for a service, as Gordon mentioned. They could erect a monument somewhere in the city in recognition of his service to Gotham.”

“You were able to talk the League into erecting a monument for a crime lord? How?”

“Because I asked,” Bruce growled, “And as loathe as I am to admit it, the crime rate in the Narrows has dropped seven percent under his reign. I strongly suspect he’s also the donor behind the construction of the Sisters of Mercy Home for Battered Women. He should be remembered for that.”

“As the Red Hood.”

“Of course.”

“They won’t like that. Dick wants to remember Jason as his brother, not the Red Hood. Alfred wants to be able to place flowers on his grave without fear of arousing suspicion. They won’t be able to do those things if you go through with this.”

“Then what would you do, Tim? Expose us all to satisfy their emotional needs?” Bruce doesn’t shout, but his voice is sharp. His broad shoulders hunch and he buries his head in his hands.

“I can’t do it, Tim. It’s not, it’s not like with you and Dick. Dick knew the warmth of his parents’ love since the day he was born. I never intended to replace them. I just wanted to help a little boy who suffered the same loss as me. I know the circumstances with your family were different.” Tim shifts uncomfortably at the mention of his parents, because that is a whole other issue he’d rather not discuss with Bruce. “But likewise, I never conceived myself as a substitution for them. And Damian… I’m trying to do well by him, Tim, even if it doesn’t always seem that way. Damian was raised like a prince with his mother among the League before coming here. But Jason, Jason didn’t have anyone. He was so young and small but fierce and resilient, and he had no one looking out for him. No one he could count on. I wanted to be that one person he could. Not just his guardian or mentor,” Bruce’s voice breaks, “but his father. I can’t do it, Tim. I can’t bury my son again. It’s too much to ask.”

Tim looks away. He sucks his bottom lip between his teeth and worries at it. Steam is no longer curling up from the soup. He sticks the spoon in it and gives it a few mindless stirs. What is he supposed to say after that?

“I know you don’t want to hear this but I think you’re too close to this, Bruce. Have some dinner, go to bed and get some sleep. I’ll take Robin out, Barbara will call up her birds, let us take care of patrol tonight. Dick and Alfred need you here.”

“Can’t.”

“Bruce—“

“The Joker is still out there, Tim. I saw the files on the drive, I heard the message. I can’t just sit here while that monster is still out there. Not after what he’s done.”

Tim pauses. Bruce’s insistence is not unexpected, but it’s clear he’ll have to approach this from a different angle.

“Ok. That is a terrible idea, going after Joker. But I can’t exactly stop you. At least eat something before you go out. If you fall out of the sky because you blood sugar drops and you pass out, then Alfred really will be pissed.”
Tim levels a glare at Bruce. Bruce can’t really protest, not when he’s been the one to try and push the same argument on Tim. *Remember to eat, Tim – the body needs energy to fight. Remember to sleep, Tim – the mind needs rest to perform at peak acuity. When was the last time you went outside, Tim? Bones become brittle without enough Vitamin D.*

“And it would kind of ruin the Batman image, you know?” Tim tacks on at the end in a last attempt.

Bruce breathes out a resigned grumble and reaches for the tray. He shoves a spoonful of soup in his mouth almost spitefully. Tim watches him eat until the bowl is empty, anxiety coiling in his gut until finally, Bruce’s hand twitches towards the teacup. The tiny delicate thing looks absurd in his gauntleted hands. Tim counts his swallows until the porcelain tinks lightly and empty when Bruce sets it back down.

“What was that? Lapsang Souchon? It had a stronger flavor than Alfred usually prefers. Smoky. I liked it.”

“I have no idea.” Tim confesses truthfully. He glances back and forth between Bruce’s face and hands for any little sign that Alfred’s secret ingredient is working. Bruce goes rigid under his stare. His eyes sharpen and Tim’s insides knot up. Oh god, what Alfred didn’t put enough in? Batman points an accusing finger at him.

“What did you do, Tim? What did…” the finger wavers, “Did you drug me?”

“Sorry, Bruce. Its for your own good. And it was totally Alfred’s idea, not mine.”

“Goddamnit. You. Alfred. In so much trouble. When I wake up I’m—

Bruce manages to slur out before his head slumps to the side. Tim rolls him to the elevator and pushes the desk chair inside. He waits until the doors close and the ‘up’ arrow on the control panel goes out, signaling that his comatose passenger has been delivered safely to Alfred’s care before tapping the comm in his ear.

“Hey, O. The Bat is taken care of. You and BG ready to roll out?”

“BG will be there in 15.”

“Awesome. Hey, think she can pick up some coffee on her way?”

His only reply is a snort. Tim smirks. The smirk falls from his face when his fingers hit the keys, bringing back the videos Bruce had been watching. A curly headed Robin with a gapped tooth grin jabs a thumb at his chest and proclaims, “Because I’m a Robin and being Robin gives me magic!” Tim force quits the player.
It’s quiet here. No sound. No light, no dark. It’s neither hot nor cold. There’s no joy or excitement. But that’s okay, he doesn’t need those things, because there’s no pain either. He is so tired of being in pain. It’s peaceful. Just like sleeping. Even better because there are no nightmares.

Except…there is something. A tug. He tries to ignore it, wrap himself back in the consolation of nothingness. Then there’s a nudge. Followed by a light bump. Then more. Until a hundred ghostly hands are pushing at him. He growls, fighting against it. He does not want to go. Not again. It’s not fair. Why can’t they just let him rest? Here. Forever. But they won’t let him. Whispers slide past his ears. He’s unable to catch more than one or two words at a time…Not…Time…Not…Yet. The touches are growing stronger, more determined. Clawing, dragging, shoving him back into the confines of skin and bone, two arms, two legs, a body.

He wakes with a gasp and the pain is almost enough to send him careening back into the blackness. The second breath seizes in his chest, held hostage in a battle between brain and body. He needs air, but fucking Christ almighty, breathing is an exquisite agony. He loses the fight. His mouth opens and sucks in a great gulp of air. It feels like its ripping apart his lungs from the inside out. The third breath brings involuntary tears. They run hot from the corners of his eyes.

There is something deeply wrong in his chest, ribs, lungs. He feels cracked open, like an egg. He thinks about yolk dripping viscously from the jagged edges of a broken shell and his hand twitches toward his chest. Numb fingers skitter across cold skin and freeze. He knows every one of his scars intimately. He has spent long nights in front of the mirror, memorizing how they map his skin and remembering how they got there. There are less than there were—many washed away by the pit, but the ones he carries now seem to bear more weight. Especially the slice across his throat.

This thick ridge of skin across his pectoral is foreign. He traces it, a diagonal line towards his breastbone where it splits and changes direction down the center of his stomach and past his navel. His hand starts shaking. He jerks it away.

He looks down reflexively and ignores the flare of pain it ignites, because there are worse things than pain. There is fear. There is the taste of grave mould in your mouth. There is the hollow realization that no one is coming for you, that you are utterly alone. There is the unrelenting and suffocating press of true darkness.

His hands are moving again, instinctively reaching for the zippo that’s always in his jacket pocket before he remembers there is no jacket. His elbows crack against something hard. He has six inches to either side of him and maybe ten above him. He’s trapped on all sides by a smooth metal surface that’s so cold his skin burns against it. He tries to stretch an arm above him to see if his confinement extends past his head. He bites back a whimper as the movement tears muscles away from bone and his fingers meet another barrier.

How could it be worse? How could anything possibly be worse than before? Has he not been through enough? Now he doesn’t even have a lighter to relieve the pitch black. No belt buckle to dig his way out. Even if he did, what good would a belt buckle do against unrelenting steel? Jason laughs. A single bitter bark. Wasn’t this just his luck. Jason Todd, the Universe’s favorite fuck-up to take a shit on. He screams and beats his hands against the roof of his prison. He kicks out and the crashes echo deafeningly around him. He screams because it’s the only thing he can do.
The Great Corpse Caper

Chapter Notes

Wow. Everybody, thank you all so much for the support. I’d like to say I would have kept writing and posting no matter how many kudos and comments this story received, but the response has really just been incredibly heart-warming and motivating. Can’t believe this has gotten over a hundred kudos. Y’all are the best. More than the kudos though I really do love getting your feedback and reactions in the comments, replying back is one of my favorite things, don’t be shy.

Also, just a heads up: the next chapter will probably take a while to get out. It’s the only chapter that I’m writing from scratch and having nothing for it yet. I kid you not- when I was plotting out the story’s over all structure I just left a blank bullet that said, "Transitional Chapter?" for Chapter 7. Sorry. But uh, it will still be awesome! I promise! Yeah.

Chapter 6

As former and current Robins, they are generally as prepared as possible for any scenario. But apparently not all. Like the sight of a giant green monstrosity of a clunker in the cave garage.

“What is that?” Dick asks.

“That is our ride, Wing,” Stephanie chirps back far too merrily for the occasion. The glint in her eye tells Tim she is reveling in Dick’s obvious distress.

“No. That is…well, I’m not sure what that thing is, but I am not riding in it,” Dick continues to protest.

“It looks like a giant pickle,” Tim adds in his own brand of awed disbelief.

“Hey! It was the best I could do on short notice, okay? Besides, what was your plan, genius? Shove his body in the trunk of the Batmobile or strap him onto the back of your bike? It’s not my fault you boys don’t own anything except stupid flashy sports cars,” Steph defends herself, arms crossed over her chest.

“If Bruce would just spring for a surveillance van like I asked, this wouldn’t be an issue,” Tim shakes his head and sighs.

He takes a final gulp from the paper cup in his hand, lets the hot bitter flavor of the coffee ground him. It’s too late to abort and he wouldn’t even if he could, but he really really dislikes going against Bruce so directly. Oh frack, oh shit. He can’t believe he actually helped drug Bruce. He tries not to think about Bruce’s reaction upon their return. Would Bruce bench him? No. Pull it together, Tim. He’s not Robin anymore, he’s Red Robin. Red Robin is his own and neither Bruce nor Dick can take
that away from him. They no longer have the authority to bench him. He’s a Titan now, and if Bruce throws him out he'll just go back to the Tower.

Tim takes a deep breath and crumples up the cup. Dick is still fishing for an alternate form of transportation while Steph counters with the merits (its spacious interior and plethora of cup holders) of the beat-up old van. Tim opens his mouth to call them to attention, because really, they are all adults and professionals and don’t have time for this. He’s interrupted by the light *swoosh* of the elevator doors opening.

“Are you going to stand around bickering like idiots all night or shall we continue on with this ridiculous venture?” Damian snarls and sweeps past them.

Tim swears under his breath.

“What are you doing here?” He sneers.

He had not counted Damian in on the plan nor shared it with him. The brat is even wearing his stealth gear with no visible logos, just as Tim had requested of the others. Tim glares at Dick. Of course, where Thing 1 goes, Thing 2 must follow.

“I’m here to make sure you amateurs don’t get caught and stain father’s reputation. Any further than you already have, that is.”

Tim rolls his eyes and doesn’t bother hiding his snigger when the boy has to pull himself into the van because the running board is above his knees. Dick, on the other hand, reacts with abject horror.

“Dami! Dami, what are you doing? Get out of that thing!”

“Dick, give it a rest. If it’s good enough for his Majesty, its good enough for you,” Tim grouches and swings himself into the driver’s seat.

He won’t risk another trip with Dick at the helm. Steph calls shotgun and scrambles in beside him, tossing him the keys and leaving Dick looking rather put out. It’s a good call. The snow has just gotten thicker while they regrouped and now the roads are dangerously slick, evidenced by the number of empty cars they pass, abandoned in ditches. Conditions are a little better in the city where road crews have sprayed the asphalt with ice melt.

They ride in tense silence. Stephanie’s fingers wander towards the radio once or twice but Tim smacks them away. There is absolutely no soundtrack appropriate for the moment. He’s concerned by the number of pedestrians out this late, last minute shoppers and couples enjoying the romantic gleam of lights against the snow. His fears prove unfounded as they leave the business district behind and the number of potential witnesses thin out. Tim slows as they approach the block of drab civic buildings.

When they’re one street over from the parking deck Barbara identified as their best point of entry Stephanie swats at his shoulder. “Hey, hey! Pull over, I have an idea!”

Tim lets the van coast to a stop.

“What?”

“Okay, so instead of trying to dodge the poor security guards who pulled the short straw working tonight, I’m thinking of a diversion.”

“What kind of a diversion?”
Steph grins evilly.

“Like a car that someone forgot to pull their parking break in accidentally sliding into that transformer over there?”

The blonde points to the metal canister mounted on a nearby power line.

“Huh, then we wouldn’t have to cut the power. Definitely would look less suspicious. Added benefit of drawing the guards from their station while they call in the power company. Good work, Steph,” he praises.

“You don’t have to act so impressed,” Steph pouts without dropping her smile.

“Then don’t act so impressive,” Tim flashes her a smirk, “Remember we’ll be on the bottom level of the parking deck off 1st street, that’s the East side entrance. Need any help?”

Steph jumps out and rolls her shoulders, “Nah, this will be a piece of cake. Catch you on the flip side!” She gives them a jaunty wave and stalks toward a white Cadillac parked on the street with a predatory air.

“Hey, O,” Tim taps into the comm system, “Slight change of plan. BG is blowing the transformer to the block. Will that cause us any problems?”

“Shouldn’t. Actually it will make it easier for me to loop the security cameras before the back up generator kicks on. Might even knock out some of the alarms. That’s my girl.”

They don’t see the crash but it echoes through the parking deck as they pull in. A crackling boom follows seconds after and the lights flicker out. Tim backs the van up to the service elevator and steps out, leaving the keys in the ignition with the engine idling. The slide of the side door alerts him to Dick and Damian following suit.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he asks bluntly.

Damian scrunches up his nose, “I’m coming with you, of course.”

“No you’re not,” Tim growls.

“And why not?” Damian challenges, his face screwing up even more.

“No, you’re really not,” Tim grits out.

He does not have the time nor patience to deal with Damian’s ego. Tim doesn’t understand how Dick can stand to patrol with the little twerp. He can’t say that though.

“Because we need someone to stay with the car in case BG doesn’t meet up with us and we need to leave quick,” he says instead.

The moment the words are out of his mouth he regrets it. Oh god, he did not just appoint an eleven year old as their getaway driver. The idea is almost as terrifying as Dick behind the wheel. He knows between Damian’s training with the League of Shadows and Batman that the kid can drive most vehicles, but still... He’d need a booster seat to see over the steering wheel. Damian looks like he is about to argue further but checks himself and backs down. Tim would like to think it’s due to his excellent reasoning skills but he’s 80% sure it has more to do with the hand Dick places on Damian’s shoulder. There’s a hum and the lights struggle back on, dimmer than before.
“Alright boys, I’ve deactivated the lock on the door. You’re good to go.”

Tim waits for Dick to steel himself and give a slight nod before trying the door. They move quickly through the building with Oracle giving them directions based on the blueprints Tim had dug up. They pass by restrooms, a reception desk, and a viewing room.

“The ME’s office is to the right. You want to take the hall to the left.”

The hallway is short with only two doors with plaques reading 'Exam Room' and 'Cold Storage.'

“Which is he in?” Dick asks, his voice unsteady.

“It depends.”

“On what?”

“Whether they’ve done his autopsy already or not.”

“It’s only been one day though and it’s a holiday…surely they haven’t already.”

Tim grimaces, “It’s also a high profile case. That may take priority. But let’s check the Exam room first. O, let us in please?”

The light on the ID swipe strip turns green and Tim hears the snikt of a lock sliding out of place. He shoulders the door open. It’s heavier than expected. Dick shudders next to him and Tim doubts its due to the cold. The room doesn’t smell of decay or blood, there’s too much astringent in the air for that, but the sense of death still lingers. Tim searches around the doorjamb until his fingers find the light switch. Four sterile tables shine under the fluorescent glow. One wall is inset with a dozen steel hatches. He is mildly surprised to find they’re closed only with a heavy slide lock. Then again, he supposes not too many people are interested in stealing cadavers. What has his life become?

“How do we know which one he’s in?” Dick asks.

“I don’t know, there should be some kind of…” Tim spins around looking for a list, file, something. He’s just noticed the clipboard sitting in a plexiglass tray on the wall when he’s startled by a harsh clang. Dick is throwing latches back and ripping trays out.

“What are you doing?” Tim hisses, but Dick is a whirlwind of movement as he moves down the wall. His movements grow desperate.

“He’s not in here! He’s not in here Tim!” Dick cries.

“Shut up! Calm down, Wing! It’s okay. He must be in Storage already then. He’s just in the other room,” Tim raises his hands palms out.

Dick shakes his head and blanches, “Oh god. I don’t…I don’t think I’m ready to see him like that.” Tim thinks of blue lips and black stitching and silently agrees. He grips Dick’s bicep, “It’s okay. I’ll be right there. You can do this.”

The door to Cold Storage is even heavier, and Tim grunts a little as he pushes it open. There’s the faint hiss of air escaping a seal before it gives. Instantly, Tim knows they have it right this time. There’s a muffled metallic pounding that snaps both his and Dick’s heads up. The sound echoes strangely in the room making it difficult to identify where its coming from. Dick whines and whips his head back and forth. All three of the walls they face are lined with hatch doors. The room itself is bigger as well, easily holding five times as many bodies as the exam room did. Tim surges towards
the clipboard on the wall and rips it from its mount. He mumbles out loud as he reads.

“Sarah Wilkins, Emilio Ruiz, Clark Harrison, Dante Mandelli, Eli Stephens, Mary Walker, John Doe —B3!”

“B3 what?” Dick shouts.

“This isn’t Bingo, Nightwing! He’s in B3!” Tim points to the wall of hatches on their left.

Nightwing makes a strangled noise of frustration. Tim lurches past him towards the second column, third drawer down. He reaches for the lock and jumps when a fresh round of banging rattles the bolt. Holy fuck. He slings back the bolt and the sound triples. Tim grips the tray and pulls it forward a little too earnestly on its ball bearings. He gets a fist to the face. Tim reels back, split lip leaking down his chin.

“Nightwing! I need help!” He shouts over his shoulder.

He wrestles the body thrashing on the slab. It's taking all his weight just to try and keep the reanimated Robin pinned down. Tim’s stomach does a slight roll when he notices that Jason’s violent attempts to get free are tearing open the thick stitches down the center of his chest. “Nightwing!” he screams with an edge of panic. Finally, Dick shoots into action. He leapfrogs over Tim and climbs up behind Jason, wrapping his arms around him. With Dick restraining his upper body, Tim moves to his legs. This time he gets a knee to the nose. Dick gets a similar treatment when Jason slams his skull back into Nightwing’s face. Dick jerks away then leans back in at a different angle, repositioning himself so he can get his mouth close to Jason’s ear without earning another hit.


The lights reflect off the tear tracks carving down Jason’s cheeks. Tim turns away. He may not know Jason beyond his file and homicide attempts, but he knows enough that Jason would not appreciate an audience at such a vulnerable moment. Especially not with his “replacement” as a witness. That’s what he tells himself. He doesn’t turn away because he finds himself once again feeling like an outsider, the awkward friend that somehow got invited to stay over for family dinner. Watching Dick clutch his fallen brother to his chest in heart-rending anguish most definitely does not make him doubt where he ranks in Dick’s affections.

Dick has always had a need to be needed, and with Jason and Damian so obviously in need of warmth and affection, Tim can’t help but wonder if there’s really enough room in Dick’s heart for them all. It’s not a fair thought. He tamps it down quickly, burning with shame. He gives them as long as he can till O buzzes back in his ear.

“Red Robin, Wing. The guards are starting to return to their stations again. Time to move.” she warns.

“Noted, thanks for the heads up.”

“Did you...have you secured the target?”

“Target secured, we’re on our way.”

He thinks he hears a mechanized sigh, but it could just be the background fuzz of the line. Tim looks over his shoulder. Jason is still trying to twist out of Dick’s grip although his movements are losing momentum and his screaming has petered out into hiccupping sobs. Dick’s constant stream of gentle shushing seems to be helping but Jason is not lucid, not by a long shot, and they are running short on
time. Tim fishes in one of his bandoliers. Dick is so focused on the man in his arms he doesn’t even notice Tim slide up beside them until Jason goes limp. Dick looks up at Tim in surprise. Tim waves the empty hypodermic needle between his fingers.

“Sedative,” he explains, “Oracle says we need to hustle.”

Nightwing nods and slides off the tray. Tim gets his hands under Jason's knees while Dick hoists him up from under his arms. Lifting Jason is difficult, moving him quickly is going to be nearly impossible. Tim drops his legs much to Dick’s consternation. He is quickly forgiven when he returns with a gurney.

“Oh thank god,” Dick murmurs, “I was afraid I was going to throw my back out if we had to carry him all the way.”

“What does he eat? Rocks and the souls of the men he’s murdered?” Tim huffs.

“Little Wing, we’re gonna have to talk about you going on a diet when you wake up,” Dick says pointedly to their unconscious charge.

They roll back out down the hall and through the lobby. Tim leads the way while Dick pushes. One of the wheels on the gurney squeaks and wobbles the whole way, fighting them at every turn and setting Tim’s teeth on edge. Oracle stays one step ahead of them, opening doors and telling them when to move and when to pause. There’s one frightening moment when they’re cornered by the sound of approaching footsteps and realize they can’t fit the gurney in the janitor's closet with them, but the footsteps take another route and soon pass out of hearing. After that, they practically sprint back to the van, squeaky wheel be damned and Tim lets out a little puff of relieved laughter when the doors of the service elevator close behind them once more.

When they open to the parking deck Stephanie is waiting for them in the driver’s seat of the van, hands on the wheel while Damian leans out the passenger window. Oh thank god, the eleven year old isn’t the one driving, he thinks as he helps Dick lift Jason into the vehicle. It takes a few grunts and some manhandling before all limbs are safely inside and Tim falls in, slamming the door behind him. Steph steps on the gas before he can get settled and he topples onto Jason as they take off. Tim flinches away from cold bare skin and scoots backward until his back meets the exposed metal siding of the van.

Tim lets his weary gaze fall on the object at the center of it all. It’s only the second time he’s seen Jason without his body armor. Tim is slightly terrified to realize he’s not any smaller under it all. Jason is big. In all ways. Tim's face heats up and he tries to keep his eyes strictly above the waist. Jason's musculature isn’t the lean graceful build shared by the other Robins. He is a powerhouse, every muscle so clearly defined he could be an anatomy model (trapezius, pectoralis major, deltoid, biceps brachii, serratus, external and oblique abdominals). His shoulders aren’t quite as broad as Bruce’s but he rivals the Bat in height, might even be an inch taller. He reminds Tim more of Kon, except not even Kon had thighs like that. Damnit. Keep it above the waist, Tim. Robin twists backwards over the seat and Tim has never been so glad for the cretin’s interruption.

“What happened to you two? Don’t tell me you both lost in a fight against a dead man. Tt. Pathetic,” he leers and gestures at their bloody noses.

“Not dead,” Dick shakes his head as he pulls Jason’s limp form into his lap.

“What? What do you mean?”

“He’s not dead,” Dick shrugs and slumps forward, burying his face in Jason’s hair.
Robin’s eyes shoot to Tim for a more logical explanation.

Tim takes a breath, holds it for a moment so his voice doesn’t shake from the rush of adrenaline and answers, “He’s sedated. Not dead. I don’t know how, but he was alive and kicking when we found him. Kicking being the operative word. Had to sedate him to move him out.”

“But that’s not possible! I was there. I saw him die. We were there in the hospital for hours after his heart stopped. And he couldn’t have gotten to a Lazarus pit between now and then!”

“I don’t know what to tell you Robin. I don’t have any answers but I can one hundred percent guarantee you that he’s not dead any more. I did not do this to myself,” Tim points to his nose as evidence. That reminds him, “O, we’re on our way back to the cave now but I need you to call Dr. Thompkins and have her meet us there ASAP, okay?”

“Dr. Thompkins? Why? Did something go wrong? Who’s hurt?”

“Everyone’s fine. We’re all good. Unless you’re counting attitude-wise, then Robin is his usual awful self, but we’re all safe. It’s for Jason.”

“I don’t understand.”

Tim’s eyes dart to the Y splitting across Jason’s chest. Jason may have come back but it didn’t seem to be the result of some meta healing factor. His skin is marbled with pre and post-mortem bruising. As bad as that looks Tim knows what’s hiding beneath is worse, a mess of shattered bones and ruptured organs. It’s in the way Jason’s skin shifts over his torso with the movement of the van. He doesn’t envy the task awaiting Dr. Thompkins, but he is clinically curious how one would go about treating what were fatal wounds.

How is Jason breathing and screaming anyway? His lungs should be punctured and flooded; his stomach should be leaking bile into his chest cavity. Tim is tempted to press his hand over Jason’s chest to see if there’s a heartbeat. He wishes distantly that he had his tablet with him so he could start jotting down notes. Two columns: Resurrection vs. Reanimation, with neatly bulleted arguments and evidences for each. As he watches dark sludge-like blood starts to bead up along the mortician’s stitching. Huh, well that’s interesting.

“Me neither. But he’s alive. Somehow. He came back again. He’s going to need a doctor. And I’m pretty sure he broke my nose, so there’s that too,” he gingerly traces the offended feature through his gloves.

“Well. I. Okay. I will do that,” Oracle states unsteadily, just as mindfucked as the rest of them.

Even Tim, who had been preparing for the possibility of this outcome, had not expected it to play out so soon. They had never been able to find out exactly how long Jason had been dead before digging himself out of the grave during his first resurrection but Tim had always assumed it had to at least have been months later. He would have to rethink that now. He would have to rethink a lot of things, like basic laws of nature and what the return policies on caskets are.
This Is For the Kids Who Die

Chapter Notes

I am sincerely sorry this took so long. I was trying very hard to get it out in less than a month but it ended up being a total bitch to write. It may not be a perfect draft but I decided it was more important to get it out instead of keeping ya'll waiting any longer. If you see any major flaws, please point them out to me so I can fix them. I was juggling like three different documents and cutting and pasting from them into a final. I don't think anything got cut our thrown out of context but I've been looking at this for so long I'm not sure I'd notice if I did. Speaking of... anyone just really love beta-ing? Next update will take way less time I swear - things have calmed down at work and its %80 already written.

Oh, do ya'll think it would be a good idea to rewrite the summary? I initially posted as is because I didn't want to spoil any surprises but I think we're far enough into the story now that most of you are returning readers rather than new.

Stay tuned in and you will be rewarded with some giggles and snark next chapter.

Chapter 7


He tries to open his eyes. Fails. Too heavy. Instead turns his face into the hand carding through his hair. Breathes in and smells Kevlar and bourbon. He feels like he should be pulling away. But he can’t remember why. It feels nice.

“Hey man, you awake?”

Jason blinks.

“Jason?”

The voice sounds hesitant. He turns his head towards the source. Is met with blue eyes slightly narrowed. In concern? Or something else? He knows them. He knows he knows who they belong to. Tries to think of how he knows them.

“Replacement?” he croaks.

It hurts, the word burns like salt in an open wound. But the pain slips away just as quickly as it came,
like drops of oil. Painkillers. Lots of them. The feeling that his head has been replaced with a lump of cotton batting makes sense now. The blue eyes narrow further, definitely not in concern. More like annoyance.

“Well there goes my hopes for amnesia,” the Replacement drawls, “Dick and Alfred on the other hand will be thrilled.”

Is that sarcasm he detects? Jason squints. The younger man swallows and leans back slightly. “What hap’nd t’ yer face?” Jason says with a scowl, tongue tripping over the question.

The Replacement laughs nervously and ghosts his fingers over the bridge of his nose. “Uh well, you did actually.”

“Huh.”

“You were pretty out of it. I’m not surprised if you don’t remember.”

Jason looks down. Blankets are drawn up to his shoulders but his hands lay outside, trapped in plaster casts. An IV line runs to the inside of his left arm. He wiggles his fingers curiously. Gives a little gasp when it hurts, but just like before the pain quickly slides out of existence.

“Do you want me to get Bruce or Dick?”

“No,” He shakes his head emphatically and immediately regrets it. He's a little surprised when it doesn’t roll right off his neck onto the floor.

“Alfred?”

“No,” he says again, less sure this time.

“Okay. Do you want me to leave?”

“No,” he says before he registers the question. “I mean, whatever. Don’t care,” Jason snorts to cover his lapse.

The boy raises one elegant eyebrow.

“Ohay,” he says and settles back in his chair, turning his attention back to tablet on his lap.

The younger boy’s posture never fully relaxes even as he curls his legs up beneath him. Jason catches his eyes shifting over to him every once in a while as he reads. The idea the kid may be afraid of Jason attacking him right now is so absurd its laughable. It floats through his mind that the reverse however isn’t. Replacement could smother him with a pillow right now and he wouldn’t be able to lift a finger to stop him. He closes his eyes and decides he’s too tired to care. He falls asleep to the occasional click of the stylus against the tablet.

The next time he wakes up Bruce is in the room. He knows it without even opening his eyes. It’s in the way the back of his neck prickles. He pretends to be asleep, wonders if Bruce can tell or not. It doesn’t matter much in the end, as pretend quickly gives way to the real thing.
He listens to the conversation going on in the doorway.

“Come on, Dick. You need to take a break. Alfred has dinner ready. He’s waiting for you downstairs.”

“It’s okay, Tim. I’m good for another couple hours.”

“That’s what you said a couple of hours ago.”

“Well, it’s as true now as it was then.”

There’s a pause.

“Dick. I drugged Bruce a few days ago. Do you really think I won’t do the same to you if necessary?”

Drugged Bruce? Well shit, kid does have some balls then.

“I just…what if he wakes up? I don’t want him to wake up alone.”

“He won’t be. I’ll stay. I brought some R&D reports to catch up on. If he wakes up I’ll call you.”

“Promise?”

“First thing.”

Dick takes a heavy breath, “Okay.”

Jason cracks one eye open just enough to see the Replacement pushing Dick into the hallway through his lashes. Once the door closes behind him, Tim moves into the chair Dick vacated. He takes his time getting comfortable, propping his legs up on a bookshelf and crossing them at the ankle. He pulls his tablet out once again and draws his fingers across the surface. After a minute or so he speaks without looking up, “So how’s it going? I know you’re awake, by the way. You can drop the act.”

Jason opens both his eyes.

“Ha, thought so,” Replacement muses. Jason frowns, disappointed in himself for falling for the bluff.

“Drugged Bruce and lying to Dick, huh?” Jason asks.

“Yup,” the Replacement answers flatly, popping the ‘p’ at the end.

“Isn’t lying against one of your self-righteous codes?”

“Not really,” the other demurs.

When it’s clear he’s not going to be riled up, Jason deflates a little and focuses on trying to find a more comfortable position. He is largely unsuccessful given that even the smallest movement seems to cause shockwaves of pain.
“Why do you do that?”

Jason looks up to find the Replacement’s eyes on him.

“Do what?”

“Pretend to be asleep when the others are in here. They’re all worried about you, you know.”

Jason groans and rolls his eyes, “Because I don’t want to see them. I don’t need their pity and I don’t want to see it in their faces every time they look at me.”

The Replacement is silent for a while. His face is screwed up, one side kind of sucked in like he’s chewing on the inside of his cheek. Jason shifts restlessly. His body aches and he thinks maybe if he could just turn a little onto his side it would relieve his back.

“You don’t think I pity you?” Replacement asks.

Jason feels the blood drain from his face. Turning was a bad idea. The white hot flare from his hip leaves him a little nauseous.

“Honestly kid? I stabbed you in the chest, I’m guessing whatever you feel for me it ain’t pity. And secondly, I don’t give a rats ass what you think about me.”

His delivery is only slightly marred by the slight clack of his teeth as he shivers from a cold sweat.

“So you care what they think of you?”

Jason snaps his head up to glare at the teenager.

“I didn’t say that,” he snarls. The Replacement gives him a look, the little shit.

“Fuck you.”

Everything hurts and he’s shivering. Seriously, how cheap is Bruce keeping the thermostat this low in the dead of winter? He can afford to turn the heat up a little. Jason fumbles around looking for his drip. He’s assuming they’ve got him on morphine. It feels like morphine. Suddenly the trigger to an infusion pump that Jason can’t figure out how he missed is held before him. He stares at the Replacement suspiciously before clumsily taking it with the exposed fingertips of his wrapped hands.

“Thank you,” he says, but he does it with a sneer so the Replacement doesn’t get any ideas about fostering some kind of Florence Nightingale camaraderie bull-shit.

He clicks the release button rapid fire until there’s the familiar sensation of everything constricting in his chest for a beat before it blooms out in a glorious rush. He sighs in relief.

“Need anything else?” the kid asks with a wry lilt.

And because Jason can’t help but be an asshole sometimes, “Yeah. A goddamn blanket. I’m freezing. This place is a icebox. Tell Bruce if he’s gonna keep it this cold he better go full on Mr. Popper. Like, there better be penguins and shit.”

He huddles further under the covers and turns as much of his face as he can into the pillows. He’s asleep again before he can feel the weight of a second blanket settling over him.
“Good morning Master Jason. Master Timothy informed me you were up and communicative.”

“Lil traitor,” he rasps.

Now that the word is out his time is limited before Dick barges in. Jason eyes the window and tries to approximate how long it would take him to crawl there and throw himself out. Alfred raises one eyebrow at him, as if sensing his thoughts. His mustache twitches in a way that projects both disapproval and amusement. Jason pushes himself as upright as he can against the pillows. There’s a narrow two tiered cart in the room made of polished brass and etched glass. It looks like it's meant to carry refreshments for afternoon tea. Instead of plates of pastel macaroons and finger sandwiches however, the top tier holds a small covered bowl and a neat array of medical equipment. He can’t make out what’s on the bottom tier from his position.

“I was hoping you might feel up to trying to eat something today. Dr. Thompkins said no solid foods for another three days, so its just broth for now.”

Jason licks his lips a little at the memory of Alfred’s broth. The healing brew of proteins and collagen was a staple when he lived at the manor—maintaining and rebuilding connective tissue a necessity in the vigilante lifestyle. Of course, Jason is left to make his own now and he rarely has the time. When he does, he can never get it to taste quite the same as Alfred’s, much to his disappointment.

“But first, as always, one must clean up before dinner.”

Alfred sets about inspecting the various exposed superficial injuries. He lifts gauze and hums when he’s satisfied at the rate of healing or frowns when he’s not. Methodically he cleans and swabs every little scrape before applying a fresh layer of ointment. He pays particular attention to the still tender knot behind Jason’s right ear and the slice in his wrist right where the cast starts. He uses a damp cloth to wipe down the rest of him, his face, his arms, and right leg. Most of his left leg is encased in casts and wrappings. Jason moans in pleasure when the cool cloth rubs away the grime at the back of his neck. With Alfred’s help he leans forward to give access further down his back. Jason would be more mortified at the sponge bath if it didn’t feel so damn good. He’s almost disappointed when Alfred puts the cloth down without repeating the treatment for his chest. Until he sees the butler exchange it for the covered bowl.

His stomach growls at the familiar scent of lamb broth. Handling a utensil is well beyond him at the moment so Alfred brings a taste up to his lips. It's not the first time he’s found himself on this end of Alfred’s spoon (cracked jaw at thirteen from getting clocked with a wrench after chasing a car-jacker into a garage). Alfred’s quiet pragmatism puts him at ease and the tips of his ears only burn a little at being fed like an infant. The bowl is empty sooner than he’d like, but he knows it not a good idea to force too much right now. He relaxes back against the pillows as the broth warms him from the inside out. His eyes grow heavy now that his stomach’s full. Alfred sets the bowl back down on the cart with a clink at smiles at him.

“Despite the circumstances, I am glad you’re home Master Jason. You were easily the most sensible boy this house has ever seen. Master Dick would eat nothing but sweets if he had it his way, and it'd be easier shoving a feeding tube down Master Timothy’s neck than it is to get him to eat properly. But you always understood the importance of a good meal.”

He doesn’t bother to point out he knows the importance of a good meal because he knows what its like to go without one. Or several. Alfred knows that.

“What 'bout Damian?”
Alfred sighs, “Young Master Damian’s preferences fluctuate so frequently I sometimes have
difficulty keeping up. One day he declares he’s sworn off dairy, the next its grains. Perhaps he will
grow out of it. Master Bruce was a notoriously picky eater as a child.”

"Didn’ like broccoli, huh?"

“Did not care for anything green at all, rather!”

Jason chuckles and sags back. He’s having a hard time keeping his eyes open.

“It looks like you could use some rest. I don’t want to keep you up, but I do want to give you this
even if its too late to be a proper Christmas,” he bends over and retrieves what was lying on the
bottom of the cart.

It’s long and lumpy and green. His name is stitched neatly in golden thread diagonally across the
stocking—Alfred’s handiwork, and large uneven puff-paint snowflakes decorate the rest—his
product. Something painful sticks in Jason’s throat. Alfred places it gently in his lap and starts pulling
items out of the stocking since Jason lacks the dexterity to do so on his own.

“Some socks, you always wore yours til I had to throw them out they had so many holes in them.
I’m sure you can use some new ones now. Your favorite chocolates from back home,” he lays out an
assortment of Double Decker and Lion bars along with a chocolate orange. “I don’t know if you still
enjoy baseball, but if you do there’s two tickets to any Gotham Knight’s game this coming season.”

He reaches into the toe of the stocking and pulls out the last gift, a pocket sized edition of The
Collected Poems of Langston Hughes. The eyes that Jason was struggling to keep open earlier are
now burning at the corners. He forces them to lock onto Alfred.

“I missed you Alfred. More than…more than anything. I’m sorry. Sorry for everything I’ve put you
through.”

Alfred pats his thigh, “There was never anything to be sorry for Master Jason.”

Jason wakes with a drowsy snort at the light squeeze on his arm.

“Hey you.”

Barbara beams at him from her wheelchair. He can’t help the lazy smile that crawls over his face.

“Heyyy Barbie.”

Barbara laughs and it makes him smile even wider because it sounds like bells.

“Oh wow. They have got you drugged up don’t they?”

“To the gills,” he agrees, nodding sagely.

“I can see that. Tim says you’ve been playing possum. Wasn’t sure if you’d be up for a visit, but he
seemed to think you wouldn’t mind if I dropped by.”

“Never mind it when a pretty lady drops by t’ see me.”
Barbara laughs again but this time it breaks into a little hiccup at the end. She leans forward so she
can place her hand at his temple. She strokes the hair there back with her thumb.

“Hey, hey, hey. What’s wrong Barbie? What are you cryin’ for?”

He wants to wipe away the tears starting to run down behind her glasses but he’s afraid of poking
her in the eye with the awkward way his fingers stick out from his cast.

“I’m sorry. Everything is fine. I’m crying…I’m crying because I’m so happy. I thought we’d lost you
again. But you’re not—you’re here. And that’s what matters, and I am so happy.”

Something she says or the way she says it doesn’t quite track for Jason but he’s not running at full
enough capacity to figure out why.

“I’m not goin anywhere, Barbie, promise. Can’t get rid of me that easy,” he jokes with a lopsided
grin.

She forces a smile around trembling lips. Jason frowns because it hurts. Not in the aching, throbbing
way his body does, but seeing Barbara cry is uncomfortable. Knowing she’s crying over him makes
his chest heavy. He can’t remember the last time he felt this way. Even when he stabbed the
Replacement he’d been angry at himself for losing control rather than guilty.

“C’mere,” he says and Barbara acquiesces.

She rests her head gently at his collar and moves her hand to splay over his heart. It itches a little, but
not enough for him to make her move it. He closes his eyes and counts his breaths, tries to fight
against the burn building under his eyelids. Eventually he stops counting and loses track of time.

“Hey Babs, Tim said I’d find you up— Jason! You’re awake!” Dick bursts in startling Jason out of
his cozy doze.

His teeth flash white in his tan face reminding Jason of a model in a toothpaste ad. Albeit a model
with a black eye. He decides not to ask Dick where his came from. Barbara sits up and Jason wants
to whine at the loss of her warmth. He settles for gloowering at Dick instead. Dick either doesn’t catch
his expression or doesn’t care, he keeps looking at Jason like he’s the biggest bowl of Lucky Charms
Dick has ever seen. Its unnerving. This is why Jason has pretended at sleeping whenever Dick is the
room.

“Little Wing,” he breathes, voice hitching. He reaches out and Jason flinches.

“Don’t.”

Dick drops the hand, hurt flashing across his handsome features before schooling back into
something less earnest. He settles the hand on Barbara’s shoulder instead. Barbara’s eyes flick to it
and go tight at the corners. It looks about as welcome there as it would be on Jason.

“Its good to see you up Li—Jay. Barbara, I came to let you know we’re getting ready to suit up.”

“Ok, I’ll be there in a couple minutes,” she promises Dick. To Jason, she says with a roll of her eyes,
“I guess that’s my cue to leave. Work work work, all the time.”
“Sorry about interrupting. I wouldn’t, but we—Bruce really needs her expertise tonight,” Dick apologizes.

Barbara leans forward and places a chaste kiss to Jason’s forehead, “I wish I didn’t have to go, but Gotham has gone to shit these past few days and someone has to keep these guys out of trouble. Ends up things go kind of crazy without the Red Hood keeping everyone in check.”

Jason’s thoughts stall, he only half listens to Dick.

“I can stay, if you want. I mean if you want someone to stick around for a bit. I’ll tell Bruce they can go on without me. It won’t be an inconvenience. Bruce has Robin and Onyx with him. If they really need a third I’m sure Tim will cover for me if I ask.”

Dick has never voluntarily wanted to spend time with him before. Sure he did a little for training and introduced him to the Titans, but that was always under Bruce’s heavy suggestion. Dick hated him. He had avoided Jason as much as possible when he was Robin (usurper) and even more after his return (traitor). Now Dick is looking at him with big hopeful puppy eyes. What the fuck is going on?

“We can put on a movie or something. You’ve always liked Bond right? Or not. We could do something else,” Dick continues babbling.

What had Barbara said—Gotham was going crazy without Red Hood to keep things in check? Just how long had he been here? Jason looks around, really looks around for the first time he can remember. He’s set up in his old room. Same posters on the walls, same books spilling over the shelves into piles on the floor. His guitar propped up in its stand next to the laundry hamper. The only difference is the large rosewood sleigh bed has been pushed a few feet over to make way for his hospital bed. It looks the same it did his last night here when he was fifteen, sweating, knees curled up to his chest watching the red numbers on the bed side clock tick by until it was time to grab the bag he’d packed earlier and hidden under the bed. It makes his skin crawl.

“Dick, shut up.”

Dick’s jaw snaps together audibly.

“How long? How long have I—

His throat catches and the question disappears into a coughing fit. Barbara’s fingers tighten on his arm and Dick disappears into the bathroom returning with a glass of water. The glass is pushed against his lips.

“Small sips.”

Jason glares and accepts Dick’s help much more grudgingly than he did Alfred’s. Jason seriously considers spitting it back in his face, but his throat is Sahara dry. As soon as it eases up he snarls, “I know how to fucking drink, Dick.”

Dick’s grin slips.

“Now how long?”

“How long what?”

“How long have I been down? “ He turns to Barbara, “You said days. How many?”
“Eight.”

Jason’s mind grinds to a halt.

“Eight? Eight days? But…shit. I have to… I have to get out of here,” he struggles to push up onto his elbows, gritting his teeth against the pain.

“What are you doing? Jason lie back down,” Barbara places a forearm across his chest.

“I have to go. I have to get out of here.”

“Jason, no. Lie down. You have to stop or you’ll hurt yourself.”

“It’s fine, Jay. Everything’s fine, just relax,” Dick adds in.

“Fuck you! Everything is not fine, Dick. I’ve missed important drops. There are people I need to talk to. Meetings I need to reschedule.”

“Don’t worry about that right now. All you need to worry about is concentrating on getting better,” Dick says firmly.

“You don’t understand. I’ve been gone too long already. I have to get back. I have to start trying to fix things before it all starts to unravel. There was an arms shipment supposed to be coming in soon. Triad. And there’s a rumor Two-Face’s right hand is planning on staging a coup—"

He attempts to rise again but is blocked by Dick this time.

Barbara retreats and sighs, “It’s too late, Jason. It’s too late for that. The damage is done.”

“No!” he protests, “I can fix this. Let me go and I can fix this.”

“You have a dislocated knee, a hairline fracture in your hip, a herniated lumbar disc, a perforated liver, and four pins in your ankle! You can’t even get out of this bed, there’s no way you’re getting back in the field for at least nine weeks, if not longer.”

Jason growls at Dick, “Maybe, maybe not. But I need to get in touch with my lieutenants. Let them know what they need to do to keep things running til I get back. Let them know I’m coming back, that I’m not dead.”

He doesn’t miss the glance Barbara and Dick exchange. It pisses him off. For all his obnoxious frippery Dick has far more training in the art of deception than Barbara. Jason focuses his attention on her.

“What aren’t you telling me? There’s something you’re not telling me. All of you. Even goddamn Alfred. Stop tiptoeing around the fucking daisies and tell me!”

She looks to Dick for help but his face remains carefully neutral. Her lips purse and he can practically see her picking and choosing her words, drafting the things she wants to say cautiously before opening her mouth.

“Jason, it’s too late because your lieutenants already think you’re dead. Everyone does, it was in the news. Because…well, because you did. Joker—"

He doesn’t hear her. Her voice distorts until it sounds just like the blood rushing in his ears. None of them fucking understand. None of them ever bother to try. He can feel his lungs trying to inflate
against the cold bar of steel and shrinking back. Without him Gotham’s seedy underbelly will boil and burst into an all out gang war. Chipped bone piercing soft insides. Black Mask and the Falcons and every other criminal gunning to fill the power void. Blood in his mouth. Violence will spillover into the daylight and the suburbs. Burn of acid. Innocent people will get hurt. Gotham needs him, it needs the Red Hood.

“No. No. If I can just call them. I just need to,” He’s babbling and he knows it.

But he has to explain, has to explain before he can’t talk anymore because his lungs aren’t working right. Its like he’s drowning. Drowning while Dick and Nightwing and Robin and Barbara and Batman and even that new kid, the Replacement, are all breathing. Breathing like it’s the easiest thing in the world. How can they? How can they all be breathing so easily, so effortlessly? Then he sees it. Sees it dribbling out their mouths, their noses, their eyes. Don’t they know they’re drowning too? He has to break the surface, has to get out of here. He’ll come back for them. He will. But first he has to free himself. Has to rip the nails out of his palms before…

Jason tears the IV out of his arm and twists, trying to get his legs over the side of the bed. He’s shaking and sweating and swatting away at the hands reaching for him. Dick does his best to restrain Jason but is hampered by the effort of trying not to inflict any further injury. Jason has no such qualms. He shoves hard at Dick, its for his own good, and sends him a few steps back. Its not far, but its enough to lurch forward off the bed.

“Jason! Don’t! Your catheter! Stop!”

But its too late, his momentum is already carrying him over the edge. Dick catches him before he smacks face first into the floor, but not before something rips him from the inside out. Everything goes white. Barbara screams. Dick is shouting.

“Shit! Shit! Fuck. Fucking fuck! Tim! Alfred! Someone get Alfred!”

Jason watches the growing pool of blood spread out around him.
As I Learn From You

Chapter Notes

So. I've never been a huge fan of poetry before this. Always thought it was a bit pretentious. Maybe it's because I'm older now, been a fair while since I was forced to parse a poem at a desk. But I was so so wrong. If there is one good thing coming out of this fan fiction it's my growing love for poetry. Langston Hughes is amazing and the titles of this chapter and the past one are coming from him.

I know I promised giggles and snark this time round but that's been postponed to the next update. I really needed more Jay/Tim time to build a stronger bond before those events. The chapter grew too massive and I had to split it into two, the promised giggles/sanrk were in the second half. Its one more chapter of feels but we'll finally be leaving the manor soon.

Riddle, I hope you are feeling better. I was sick too so I ended up getting a lot of writing done while I was in bed yesterday - this chapter is for you :)

Chapter 8

"What're you here for? S'cide watch?"

Tim glances up from the latest issue of WIRED, "Should I be?"

"Dunno," Jason slurs, "Got anythin' sharp on you?"

Tim frowns and dog-ears the corner of the page he's reading so he can come back to it later.

"Just my wit."

He studies the man in the bed. Jason looks worse than he has in days. His skin is sallow and there are dark smudges beneath his eyes. The eyes themselves are dull and drawn. He realizes the bitterness he holds towards Jason is nothing in comparison to self-disgust Jason has for himself.

"Yes. I'm here to make sure you don't flip out and try another ill-conceived escape, but that's only because Dick finally convinced Barbara to let him take her home and Alfred is on the phone with Dr. Thompkins." He hopes Jason doesn't notice his glossing over Bruce, the damn moron had run away to patrol as soon as Jason had stabilized. "They've all been crying their fracking eyes out over you for days so don't you dare say shit like that, not even as a joke. Especially after everything we've done to get you back. You ungrateful lunk."
Tim takes a sharp breath, surprised at his own vehemence. Jason is similarly taken aback, mouth hanging slightly open. He blinks slowly and Tim wonders how much of that Jason actually absorbed through the new pharmaceutical cocktail they’d pumped into him.

Finally he turns his head away and Tim hears him mutter under his breath, "Probably wouldn't have done any good anyways."

Annoyance spikes through Tim at the same time that his chest squeezes painfully.

“Well you can always try again during Damian’s shift. I’m sure he’d be more than happy to let you borrow his katana. Hell, he may even do the honors for you.”

Jason’s head whips back around, eyes wide. The series of expressions that flash across his face is comical: horror, suspicion, and irritation before feigned indifference. Jason gives a little scoff and silence settles around them. Tim thumbs the magazine, debating whether or not to reopen it.

He’s about to fold back the glossy pages once more when Jason asks, “Bat Brat doesn’t really have a shift, does he?”

Jason actually sounds apprehensive at the idea.

Tim snorts, “No! God no. I wouldn’t do that, not even to you.”

He can’t help but snicker a little at the relieved, “Thank fuck” whispered by the other man.

Jason closes his eyes again and Tim flips back to his article. He gets four sentences in before he’s distracted by rustling and a heavy sigh.

“Need something?”

“Yeah. Can you tell Bruce to stop bein’ such a Scrooge an’ let Bob Cratchit throw some coal on the fuckin’ fire?”

“Really? Are you still cold?”

“What does it look like?” Jason grouses rhetorically. He has the blankets bunched up around his neck so his head is the only part of him visible, “I got more goosepimples than a turkey.”

Tim has to bite his lip to keep from laughing. Goose pimples on a turkey? That is definitely not a phrase he associates with the violent and brutal Red Hood; scourge of the streets, and one of Batman’s toughest nemeses. He miraculously keeps a straight face and reaches for Jason’s forehead. Jason jerks back too slowly to avoid contact. His reactions obviously delayed by the drugs in his system. 

“Stupid, stupid, Tim!”

Tim turns to Jason as if expecting an actual response. Jason’s jaw is practically unhinged. Stupid, stupid, Tim! Of all the inconsiderate and possibly triggering things to say to someone who ripped
their fracking catheter out just the night before in a panic attack...

"Oh my god. I’m sorry. I’m so so sorry. I don’t know what I was thinking. I wasn’t thinking. I shouldn’t have said that. I’m…I’m gonna go get you another blanket.”

Tim looks frantically around. He’d already given Jason the blanket draped over the footboard the other day. He doesn’t see another one in the room.

“Be right back,” Tim sprints down the hall and ducks into his own room.

There’s a plaid fleece blanket crumpled on the floor in a heap of clothes. He grabs it, pauses, gives it the sniff test and decides it’s acceptable.

“This should do,” he says out loud when he returns, holding the blanket aloft like some kind of prize. He spreads it over Jason’s chest, much more awkwardly than last time considering Jason is actually conscious now.

“This blanket is like the warmest thing ever. Field tested and everything. I’ve brought it on stake-outs before. Hopefully not too warm though, I guess giving you the sweats won’t do you any favors while you convalesce huh?”

Jason’s eyes are almost perfectly round and Tim might be more surprised by how vibrantly blue they are if he wasn’t completely freaking out at how his jaw is still gaping wide. Oh god, he broke Jason. After all their efforts to steal the body and hours of surgery from Dr. Thompkins, Tim broke him.


Jason’s mouth shuts with an audible click.

“Shit, Replacement. You’re a mess.”

Tim takes a strangled breath. He closes his eyes and counts to ten and only opens them to meet Jason’s through sheer will power.

“I’m so sorry, Jason. I should have thought before I spoke, I didn’t mean to—

“What? Bring up the fact I died. Again, apparently.”

There’s a sharpness to the once Robin’s words and gaze that wasn’t there before. Its unsettling how quickly his mental state can change. Tim hesitates, unsure how to answer without upsetting Jason further. In the end he doesn’t need to say anything at all, Jason takes his silence as reply enough.

“Worried that you might accidentally set me off? Make the crazy Robin take another swan dive onto the carpet?” Jason laughs.

Tim has heard his fair share of fake laughs. They’re a necessity in business, both the corporate and vigilante kind. Dick’s is the most convincing. Jason isn’t even trying to hide how warped his sounds. It's made of sharp edges and fissure lines and cuts off without warning.

“Well stop worrying. You’re fine. Doesn’t bother me if you want to talk about it,” Jason crosses his arms over his chest a little awkwardly because of the casts.

“Really? You don’t mind?” Tim asks, thoroughly unconvinced.

Jason answers with a shrug reminding Tim of the powerful corded muscle there.
“What do you want to know? What’s dying like? Is there a heaven or a hell? Did it hurt? Can I see ghosts and talk to the dead now?” Jason’s tilts his chin up to match the challenge in his voice. “C’mon Replacement, no one’s ever asked me what it was like before. Now’s your chance to satisfy that morbid curiosity of yours.”

He doesn’t know if it’s the trauma or the painkillers or something else but Jason fracking Todd is offering him an opportunity that even Tim can feel the vulnerability trembling beneath. The weight of that responsibility is terrifying, especially with the knowledge that one wrong move could blow it up in his face.

“What was it like, death?” he breathes.

Jason swallows, his face vacant.

“Peaceful. There’s nothing that can hurt you there,” he whispers.

Tim keeps his voice library low, “So…then, if you’re not upset about dying, what happened yesterday?”

Jason flinches and pulls his one good leg up to his chest. He presses his forehead against it and squeezes his eyes closed.

“That wasn’t. That wasn’t what that was about. Not really. I mean, finding out I died again was a nasty shock but…that’s not what that was about. God, I wish I was still dead.”

“Jason—

“Don’t! I know what you’re gonna say and don’t! I was fine. I was at peace. And then I get dragged back, wake up in that goddamn refrigerator and find everything I have worked years for is gone!” His eyes flash open. “I know you think all I want to do is hurt Bruce and undermine you bats, and yeah its definitely a perk, but if you weren’t all such self-centered douchenozzles with hero complexes you’d of realized I could of done that without becoming the Red Hood. I do what I do to keep Gotham safe. I make the tough calls you won’t to protect its people. But now all of the planning, and organizing, and sacrifices I’ve made mean nothing. Eight days and Gotham’s falling back into chaos and I can’t do anything about it because I’m fucking stuck in this goddamn bed!”

“You won’t be stuck here forever,” Tim tries to pacify him. It fails spectacularly when Jason responds with another one of those brittle barks of laughter.

“Doesn’t matter. Barbara said as much. Everyone thinks I’m dead. By the time I get back on the streets, no one’s going to believe its really me. They’ll think I’m some I’m just some punk trying to pick up the mantle. I’ll have to start at the bottom and build the whole fucking thing back up again just to prove them otherwise. Fucking years,” his voice changes from sullen to apathetic, “I came back, but what’s the point when Red Hood is dead?”

Jason’s eyes drift to the ceiling and glaze over. Tim licks his lips and swallows. It isn’t right. He believes that more than he believes that the speed of light is 299,792,458 meters per second. Jason is strong and cunning and while he may not be good his intentions are. Well, most of his intentions are. Okay, some of his intentions. Tim takes in the room around him. It’s unnecessary, really. He snuck in here so many times when he was first starting out under Bruce, trying to puzzle together the Robin that came before. He has the space memorized. The photo with Bruce taken at the Gotham Knights diamond, the book report on *The Great Gatsby* at the desk, pages of mostly crossed out lines of poetry on looseleaf paper in its drawers, the guitar by the hamper.
“Jason. You are so much more than just the Red Hood. You’ll be okay.”

He feels Jason’s razor sharp focus zero in on him and tenses.

“Yeah? Tell me how okay it was when Robin was taken away from you. What did it feel like being regular old Tim Drake again?”

Tim goes rigid. He thinks he is starting to see why Bruce treads so carefully around the subject of his second Robin. That Jason Todd’s fists and aim may be the least dangerous parts of him.

“Like everything that made me feel worth something was ripped away,” Tim answers hollowly.

Tim doesn’t sleep that night. Bits and pieces of his conversation with Jason run through his head. Dunno, got anything sharp on you? What did it feel like being regular old Tim Drake again? No one’s ever asked me what it was like before. He gnaws on his lip till he tastes copper. Had no one really?

Bruce had crossed the country calling in favors and fording where he’d burned bridges for answers when he first suspected who the Red Hood was. Had he never actually asked the man afterward? Tim couldn’t believe the detective in Bruce would not continue to pursue the details of Jason’s resurrection just because his tests confirmed he wasn’t a clone, construct, or an illusion. But then Chemo had dropped and Jason had slipped from the priority list as new and greater threats arose. Passed out of mind until his appearance in the Tower. Tim shudders at the memory.

It's painfully obvious how contact-starved Jason is if he’s willing to confide in his “replacement,” the “pretender.” Tim isn’t like Dick, he doesn’t need attention to be content, though he envies the ease with which Dick naturally draws others to him. Or even Damian, who simply demands attention. Tim is quite happy closing the door on the world for days, sometimes weeks, at a time. He does some of his best work alone, where he can truly focus without distraction. But when the solitude and quiet starts to chafe Tim has Steph, Cass, the Titans, Kon, and Dick (increasingly less often now) to call when he needs a break—needs to commiserate with someone else who understands the toll this lifestyle takes. Other than the occasional visits to Barbara that Stephanie had hinted at, who does Jason have? The isolation the fallen Robin lives in must be incredibly lonely. Is it anything like the loneliness Tim felt everyday growing up in an empty mansion?

Maybe that’s why he comes back the next day. He waits about thirty minutes after he sees Alfred pulling out of the driveway to take Dr. Thompkins back to her clinic before climbing the stairs. Dick has beat him there but is already making a hasty retreat. The book that flies into the hall at his head gives Tim some indication as to why. Dick gives him a bewildered look and tosses his hands up, “I don’t know why I even try. I’ll be in the training room if you need me.”

Tim watches him leave, his gait twitchy with frustration. Tim estimates there’s a %64 chance Alfred will be making Dick vacuum sand off the mats and order a new punching bag in the next hour. Tim
gingerly picks up the small paperback projectile off the carpet and holds in front of him like an exorcist’s crucifix as he slips into the room. Jason is staring at the ceiling. There’s a tic in his jaw and his face is flushed. Tim turns the book over in his hands and reads the title. _The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes._

“Found this out in the hall. You must have dropped it.”

Jason automatically bristles then relaxes with a small snort, “Yeah, fell out of my pocket when I went on my morning jog.”

“Want it back?”

“Nah, just put it on a shelf. Wasn’t having much luck trying to flip the pages with these fucking paws anyway,” Jason sighs and nods at his hands.

“Ah yeah. That’s gotta suck.”

“Tell me about it. Can’t do anything with these stupid casts. Can’t read a book, can’t feed my self, can’t brush my teeth. Can’t take a goddamn piss on my own. Couldn’t jack off even if it didn’t feel like my dick’s been eviscerated.”

Tim simultaneously blushes and winces. One hand unconsciously drops down to hover protectively over his crotch in sympathy.

“Speaking of dicks…” Tim flicks his eyes meaningfully towards the hall, “Want to talk about it?”

“Want to share your feelings on Golden-Boy in the fall out of this post-Demon Brat nuclear winter?” Jason snaps.

“Touché.”

Tim bobs his head a little. Jason hasn’t thrown him out or anything at his head (yet) and that’s nice, but he isn’t sure of how to proceed now that the conversation has come to a stop. He just knows he doesn’t want yesterday to be the last and only chance he ever has to get to know Jason beyond their infrequent and often painful encounters behind masks. He tilts his head towards the chair.

“Um, is it cool if I hide out here for a bit?”

“Hide?” Jason raises one heavy brow. The white line of a scar cuts through the other.

“This is pretty much the only place I know Damian won’t come in.”

“What’s wrong with your room? Doesn’t the kid hate you? Figured he leave you alone in there.”

Tim waves a finger at him, “You would think so wouldn’t you? But how can he prove his superiority in every way if I’m not there for him to lord over? I swear he breaks in just to flex his Napoleonic complex.”

“What a little shit. I’m not sure if I should encourage him or give a him a kick in the ass.”

“Allow me to make a suggestion.”

Jason chuckles. Its a nice sound when its not so bitter and broken. Deep like Bruce’s but with more gravel. Jason turns on the TV and navigates through the channels with slow deliberate punches to the remote buttons. He politely keeps the volume low. Tim pulls the magazine from yesterday out of his back pocket and reads in comfortable near-silence. He’s just finished the article he’d marked when
he becomes aware of Jason restlessly moving in his nest of blankets peppered with sighs until Jason finally groans, “God I’m so bored.”

He rolls his eyes over towards Tim.

“What are you reading?”

Tim holds up the magazine so Jason can see the title, “There’s an article about some new light refracting polymers in here. They could have some pretty interesting applications for some projects I’m working on at WE.”

“Huh, is this something new or different from the stuff that German team at the Karlsruhe Institute came out with back in 2012?” Jason asks, leaning forward in interest.

Tim feels his face go slack. Dick had said Jason was smart, and he knew subconsciously that anyone Bruce picked up had to be of at least above average intelligence, but Tim had never expected Jason to be a fellow science nerd.

“Uh, new. New,” he stammers, “Ergin and Fischer’s design worked because the polymer was composed of rods spaced at a certain amount of nanometers apart that light would bend as it passed through the gaps in between. This is totally different. Some physicists in Sweden have developed a material that redistributes light equally across its surface no matter the strength or orientation of the light source.”

“So it wouldn’t actually make something invisible, it would make an object indistinct enough that the human eye couldn’t focus on any detail. I’m assuming they’re working under the concept that the brain won’t be able to interpret the visual signals its receiving so will simply skip over it?”

“Exactly!” Tim crows in excitement.

They spend the next hour or so debating practical applications of such a material before the conversation inevitably shifts towards its possible uses in the vigilante world. They're arguing over whether its properties would be maintained if it could be manufactured as a fiber and woven into a flexible mesh when Alfred rings the warning bell for dinner.

"Thirty minutes to clean up and get your ass downstairs, huh. Alfie never changes,” Jason quips with a smile that looks a little sad.

“Yeah,” Tim agrees and thinks about Jason sitting alone while he waits for Alfred to come up and feed him after he’s done serving the rest of them in dining room downstairs.

Then he thinks of a little boy in a big house eating in the kitchen with Mrs. Mac, despite how much it aggravated his parents, because it was better than eating alone in his room. Jack and Janet Drake didn’t do family dinners. He wonders if Jason cherished eating dinner together with Bruce and Dick and Alfred as much as he did when he first moved into the manor.

“Hey, so I saw Dr. Thompkins leave earlier today. What did she have to say? Any good news?”

Jason’s lip curls up in a silent snarl.

“The usual. Don’t take things too fast or I’ll slow my recovery. Be a good boy and eat my veggies.
Thank god real food is okay now. Smoothies and soup are alright but I’d kill for a burger…figuratively, that is. Said these fuckers can come off in a week and a half and by then my junk will be good to go as well so that’s serendipitous” he looks disdainfully at his cast covered hands, “but I fucked up my knee and ankle when I fell.”

“How long?”

Jason sniffs, “Twelve weeks minimum til I can walk on it again. Solid year of PT before I get full range of mobility.”

“Shit. That sucks, man.”

Jason plucks at the frayed end of a blanket.

“Eh. Doctors. What do they know, right? At least I should be able to get out of this room soon. She said she’s pretty sure my hip can handle a wheelchair.”

“Have you thought any about what you’re going to do after this?”

“What do you mean?” Jason’s brow furrows.

“Well, yesterday you said Red Hood is dead. So what now?”

“The fuck kind of question is that?” Jason growls, hackles rising.

Once again Tim is thrown by just how quickly Jason's moods can turn. He can practically hear the ice cracking beneath his feet at his misstep.

“Well, if you don’t want to stay at the manor you’ve got to find a way to pay the bills right?” Tim falters at the look Jason gives him, “Or maybe not? Because as a super successful crime lord you probably have millions in drug money stockpiled in some offshore account don’t you? That was a stupid question.”

"Actually, no."

"No?"

"No. I don't keep any of that shit. Or at least I didn't. I didn't have to I had--doesn't matter. I only take the little I need to live and operate. Wouldn't be right to keep any more. I give it back, to the community and stuff."

"Really?"

"God, you guys really do think I'm a piece of shit don't you? You think I'm as bad as Falcone and Ibanescu and the rest of those slimesacks! Well fuck you! You try to sit there and lecture me like Bruce and it'll be the bedpan not a book coming at your head, now get the fuck out!"

Jason's face turns ugly, contorted in rage. Tim raises his hands in surrender, desperate to reestablish some small fraction of the truce they'd forged today.

"Hey, hey. I'm sorry. I'm sorry! I swear I was not trying to imply that. I'm screwing all this up. Shit, believe it or not I was trying to compliment you and then--"

"You were trying to compliment me?" Jason's face is still red but smooths out. "Well, just to let you know, you're kind of shit at it. How the hell was that supposed to be a compliment?"
Tim waves his hands like he's trying to roll back time, "When I asked if you had any plans for the future, it was because you had some really good ideas. I head up the Research and Development department at Wayne Enterprises. I don't know if you'd ever want to work in the sciences but I think you'd be great at R&D."

Tim is momentarily afraid he's broken Jason again when the man goes completely still for several agonizingly long seconds. Tim bites his bottom lip. Finally, Jason's eyes slide to the side breaking the apprehensive spell.

"So, is that like...are you trying to...offer me a job?"

Tim shrugs, "Make of it what you will."

"But I don't have any degrees or anything. I didn't make it past 10th grade you know," Jason scratches the back of his neck.

His hair is getting just long enough there to hint at its curly nature.

"You say that like you're not friends with the greatest hacker of this generation," Tim grins.

Jason tilts his head back and looks down his nose at Tim, "Kid, you're good but you ain't that good."

Tim glares at him, "I meant Barbara you ass, but thanks for the vote of confidence there. Fake degrees are child's play."

Jason lowers his hand from his neck and focuses hard on his fingernails.

"Uh, thanks. For the offer and all. But I don't think that's in the stars. Let's be honest Replacement, as soon as the good doctor sings off on my bill of health, Bruce is just going to have me tossed in Arkham or Blackgate."

Tim draws himself up and rolls his shoulders back.

"You're not going to Blackgate. I'll handle Bruce," Tim says with almost as much confidence as he feels.

It's hard to maintain that confidence later at the dinner table. Dinner is quiet, strained. Tim chases a piece of ziti around his dish. Bruce is asking Damian about his day at school. Tim zones out, he doesn't really want to listen to another tirade on Damian's disdain for his teachers and fellow students. He jumps when Bruce calls him out.

"And how was your day Tim? Lucius said he was very impressed with your solution for shock reduction in the flex armor, that they're going to move it into the prototype stage next week. Any new projects on the horizon?"

Tim lifts his head to face Bruce directly, "Well, actually. There's a group of physicists in Sweden who have developed a light refracting polymer. I was discussing it with Jason earlier and he thinks it could be applied as a spray enamel to the Wraith and Kestrel. I thought it sounded promising."

Tim breathes the smallest sigh of relief when Bruce inclines his head.
"Certainly worth looking into. If you give me the contact information for the institute I can have a meet and greet set up with them"

"I think it would be a good idea if Jason were there. Since it was his idea and all," Tim holds his breath.

"Whathh?" Noodles fall from Dick's open mouth.

"He could even spearhead the project, maybe. That way I can continue focusing on the flex armor."

Bruce sets down his fork, "Tim..."

"Unless you'd rather ship him off to Blackgate. That's what he thinks you know, that you're just waiting til he's better to get rid of him."

"Tim," Bruce folds the napkin in his lap neatly, "It's good of you to take an interest in Jason's well-being but that's not a call for you to make."

"What, and you are? You haven't even been to see him since he woke up! And to be frank, it's not your call to make either. Jason's an adult and I'm the head of R&D. If I want to hire him I can."

"Forgive me if I don't think its a good idea to impulsively make him the leader of a potential multi-million dollar research deal at Wayne Enterprises after one conversation."

"So then don't make him team leader. Put him on the team, he'll be under my direct supervision the whole time."

Bruce voice sharpens, "Jason isn't well Tim. He'd be a liability at WE."

"Of course he's not well! He's stuck in a place he doesn't feel welcome where he's at the mercy of people he doesn't trust while everything he's worked for for years has been ripped out from under him."

"Are we still talking about Todd?" Damian jeers from his seat, eyes glittering darkly.

"Can it Chucky. Bruce, he needs purpose. Give him a little responsibility and a show of faith. Let him come work in the labs with me a couple days a week, whenever he doesn't have PT. It would be good for him. You can't keep him locked up in the manor forever. When he leaves, let it be on your terms or he's just going to make a run for it as soon as he can."

"It will be a long while before Todd's capable of running anywhere Drake," Damian murmurs snidely.

"I swear to God, Damian, I will sell you to the Doll Maker," Tim hisses across the table.

Bruce cuts them off. His fingers are steepled and he stares resolutely at his plate as he speaks, "Tim I appreciate your earnestness and desire to help but I think the situation is a little more complicated than that. Jason is deeply troubled. He needs more than just a job offer he needs a therapist. He needs counseling."

"He needs you! Okay and yeah some counseling would probably be a good idea too, but Bruce you need to talk with him as well. You know what he told me yesterday? That no one, no one had asked him what dying was like. I mean, he came back from the dead—that's kind of a big thing, and neither one of you ever once asked him about it?" Tim half-rises out of his seat, including Dick in his accusation.
"That's enough Tim," Bruce orders.

Tim sits back in shock at hearing him use the Batman voice at the dinner table.

"This is not appropriate dinner conversation."

"You know what, I'm not hungry anymore anyway," Tim sneers and stands, "I'd suggest we continue this conversation on patrol but it won't be appropriate then either. Maybe I can pencil you in at the office for tomorrow if that works with your schedule. Just not at 11:45, that's when I take my lunch."

He snatches his plate from the table and is it just him or is that a gleam of pride in Alfred's eye as he stalks into the kitchen to dump in the sink?

According to the roster he's supposed to patrol with Bruce tonight. He supposes he really shouldn't be surprised when Nightwing is waiting for him in the Cave instead.

"Hey there Baby bird."

He's not surprised. Just disappointed. It makes him angry because this is all he has wanted for months: some time alone with Dick, without the little troll tagging along. He finally gets his wish and he can't enjoy it because Bruce is being an asshole.

"Hey Big Bird," Tim forces a smile.

They don't talk much as Dick leads them on a figure eight around the south and west quadrants of Gotham. So far Batman has been able to keep the fall-out from the collapse of Red Hood's empire to the north and east sides. It's a quiet night for them in the more gentrified parts of the city. Still too cold to be worth it for most of the lower tier criminals to be out on the prowl. Snow is piled high on the sidewalks and halfway up the lights poles where plows have pushed it off the streets. Mostly they play, swinging across the rooftops without a goal in mind. Dick lets loose an occasional whoop like he just can't help himself no matter how old he gets and Tim grins. Its nice. Like old times.

They stop to rest on the roof of a WE building. Not one of the skyscrapers, just one of the extant offices. Tim leans his chin on his knees and admires view. He can feel the chill of the rooftop through the padding of his uniform but Tim isn't bothered by it. Not when he can actually see the stars. The sky is clear, the way it only is in Gotham after a big storm passes through. Dick slides down next to him and dangles his feet over the edge.

"Should've thought to bring a thermos of hot chocolate."

Tim "Hmm," in mournful agreement.

"So you spent the afternoon with Jason. Sounds like you two talked a lot."

Something withers inside of Tim. So that's why Dick wanted to patrol with him.

"Yeah. We talked," Tim replies evenly.

Dick takes a deep breath, "What did you talk about?"
Tim curls his hands into fists.

"Like I said at dinner, we talked about some new tech I want to research at work."

"Did you—did you talk about anything else?"

"What is it that you want Dick?" Tim asks coldly.

"I thought you might know why he's mad at me."

"We didn't talk about you at all actually."

"Oh, okay," Dick kicks his heels back against the concrete in an even pattern of muffled thumps.

"Did he tell you what dying was like?" Dick tries again hesitantly.

"Yes," Tim grinds out, "But if you want to know you'll have to ask him yourself. That's not mine to share and I don't want to betray his trust."

Tim stands, Dick following his movement.

"But how did you earn it? That's what I don't get. Yeah, I should have spent more time with him when he was Robin but he still looked up to me. Now he won't even speak with me, but he'll confide in you? He hates you! He tried to kill you!"

Dick pushes his hair back from his face, frustrated. Tim takes a step back. His heart is doing funny things in his chest, painful things. He takes another step. The motion catches Dick's notice and he turns to Tim looking horrified.

"That came out wrong, Red."

Tim keeps backing up. He can't let Dick get too close, doesn't want him to see how he's shaking.

"Red, I'm sorry. You know I didn't mean how that sounded."

"I don't know Wing. I think you meant exactly what you said. After all, how could anyone ever prefer my company to yours, the original Boy Wonder? I guess I really must be pretty miserable company if you prefer that Hell Spawn over me. You know, I thought you wanted to patrol with me tonight because I've been in San Francisco and we haven't really had a chance to hang out just you and me. Like you missed me and wanted to catch up, or make sure I was okay after that shitshow with Bruce at dinner. But no. You just wanted to know why Jason's mad at you. Well I don't know, he wouldn't tell me. But if I had to take a guess it probably has to do with the fact that you can be a real conceited prick sometimes."

Tim has never cut out of patrol early.

He's two roofs over before Dick finally gets past his shock and grapples after him with a cry of "Red! Wait!"

He moves faster than is safe, taking blind shots with the grapple onto ice coated ledges, but he
refuses to give Dick any room to catch up to him. He's back at the manor in less than an hour, face red and chapped with windburn. The Alfred inside his head is saying he should go to sleep. He has a meeting at WE in the morning and if he's not going to be running around foiling muggings and drug deals he should take advantage of the time to catch up on some sleep.

There's a manic energy burning through him though, the same he gets when there's a new case lead that he absolutely has to follow to its end. Tim drops to his knees in front of his closet and digs through the piles of crap heaped on the floor till he finds an old backpack. It's still full of books from his last day of class in high school. He rips the zipper back and shuffles around till his hands close on the plastic case of an old tablet he used for homework. Tim crosses his fingers and plugs it in, pumps one fist in victory when the thing actually powers on and charges. He spends the rest of the night wiping it and downloading every classic novel, poetry anthology, and scientific journal he can think. There's tentative knock at his door while *Great Expectations* is downloading but he ignores it. *Focus on the mission, Tim.* It's much better to keep his mind and hands busy with the task than let himself be distracted by the nauseous mix of emotions flopping around behind his rib cage.

When his alarm goes off at 5:30 a.m. there's a new crick in his neck and drool puddle on his desk. Tim gets ready for work quietly. Showering, dressing, excavating his briefcase from the sheets of the bed he didn't sleep in last night. There's just one more thing he needs to do before he can drown himself in a pot of coffee. He picks up the tablet and glides stealthily down the hall. He twists the knob slowly so the latch pulls back silently. When Jason's form doesn't so much as twitch Tim slips inside.

He can barely make out his features in the dark. It's strange to see his expressive face so blank and smoothed out. Some part of him thought Jason would be making faces even his sleep. As if reading his mind Jason's brows draw together a little, a line creasing between them, and his bottom lip rolls out a farther into a definite pout. Tim covers his huff of laughter with a hand over his mouth. He places the tablet gently on the bedside table where it will be within reach and leaves.
Hey everybody! Look at me, updating twice in a month! Aren't you proud? It would have been out earlier but I decided to take in a 5 week old stray kitten and it has been a handful. Hard to get a lot of typing done at home after work when you're constantly trying to keep an eye out to make sure Little Kitten doesn't go under the stove or get eaten by Big Kitty.

Big thank you to everyone who comments. The only thing I like more than crafting this thing is hearing your thoughts on it. Ya'll are the most eloquent insightful readers anyone could hope for.

For those of you who actually read the author notes I've got a question. I know there are a couple Supernatural cross-overs out there right now. How would ya'll feel about another one? Do you trust me to churn out a good one? I've already got 9 chapters ready to go if there's some interest.

Also if you see this get reposted a few times over the week, don't get too excited--I'm going to be making some grammatical edits.

The following week crawls by. Tim spends as much time as he can at WE. He devotes himself to getting the flex armor prototype into production for Lucius. When the rest of the technicians step away from their worktables and start to pack their bags Tim dreads the approach of the five o’clock hour. He spends Tuesday night on a cot with a carton of pad thai in his office and every intention to do the same on Wednesday.

His plan is foiled Wednesday afternoon when his secretary calls him at precisely 4:45 to let him know his driver has arrived for his dinner meeting. Tim steps off the elevator suspiciously. His planner doesn’t show any evening appointments for the week. He's chagrined when he sees Alfred waiting for him at the curbside with an imperious arch to his brows. Tim’s shoulders curl forward in shame.

“I know Alfred. I’m being just as bad as Bruce. Sorry. I won’t do it again.”

He doesn’t—tempting though it is to sequester himself at work where he doesn’t have to worry about avoiding Dick, and Bruce avoiding him in turn. Patrol is unbearably uncomfortable regardless of his partner for the evening. His nights off rotation make it almost worthwhile. Jason never says thank-you for the tablet but Tim considers the time the other allows him in his presence enough.

They almost talk less than Tim does with the other bats. Jason reads, flipping electronic pages with stabs of his index finger while Tim charts data sets. The quietude is companionable and far preferable.
to the silent tension that pervades the rest of the manor but Tim still jumps at the chance for real live conversation when Stephanie texts him with the offer of a coffee date. He escapes Saturday morning when Dr. Thompkins arrives for a check up, slipping out the backdoor of the kitchen while the rest of the family is occupied.

Stephanie is waiting for him at a wrought iron table on the sidewalk outside her favorite coffee haunt, Gotham Grind. The clear sunny sky is deceptive, it is still bitterly cold out. Tim doesn’t mind. It gives them a small amount of privacy with the rest of the café’s clientele electing to remain inside. The crisp air also brings a pretty flush to Stephanie’s cheeks. She looks over her venti-mocha-triple-whip-something-or-other-abomination at him.

“So, how’s life among the rich and the famous?”

Tim takes a long pull at his unadulterated dark roast and empties half his cup.

“That good huh?”

“Yeah, that good.”

“Does that mean you’ll be heading back to Frisco soon?”

Tim makes a gagging noise, “Don’t call it that.”

“What? Frisco?”

“Only tourists call it that.”

“Well you know poor lil ole me, I’m not all cultured and hip to your hipster city lingo,” she sticks her tongue out at him, “But seriously, you’re usually gone by now.”

“Trying to get rid of me?”

“Duh! I don’t get to kick nearly as much ass when I have to share with the whole bat pack.”

Tim chuckles then sobers, “Well, actually I have a project I’m working on at WE. I meant to stay till I finished the prototype and head back to San Francisco after that. End of January I figured if all went well. But then this whole thing with Jason happened and that’s pushed everything back. Heck, this past week was the first I’ve been to the lab since I got here. So who knows? Might be here till March now.”

Stephanie lights up, “Till March? Sweet! Usually you blow out of here before the ball drops. I can’t believe I’ll get a whole two months to hang with the elusive Timothy Drake-Wayne. We totally have to have a B-Horror marathon night.”

Tim can’t help but smile at her exuberance.

“Definitely. Vampires, aliens, satanic cults, whatever you want. I’ll even pay for the pizza.”

“You drive a hard bargain Mr. Drake,” Stephanie sticks her hand out. Tim shakes on it to seal the deal and they both giggle a little. Tim holds on to her hand.
“Thanks for calling, Steph. This has been nice. Actually getting to sit and talk outside of the night
life. I’m sorry I haven’t been here to do it more often.”

He lets her hand go.

“It’s okay, Tim. I’m sure its hard coming back here after what happened.”

Tim groans and flops his head forward, “It’s just the way Dick and Damian…and I got into with
Dick and now everything is somehow even more awkward and…”

“We don’t need to talk about that now if you don’t want to. Today is supposed to be fun. Screw
bendy, dark, and handsome. Moving on! How’s tall, undead, and handsome?” Stephanie waggles
her eyebrows.

“What?” Tim laughs, shoulders shaking, “Do you call him that to his face when he drops by the
Clocktower? Ah, he’s alright I guess? Not great, but he hasn’t tried to kill any of us yet so that’s as
good as can be expected.”

“Well that’s very civil of him. Barbara says you’re about the only one he’ll tolerate.”

Tim’s eyebrows snap up, “Oh? Where’d she hear that?”

Stephanie shrugs and takes a sip from her cup. Tim waits for her to elaborate but she just wipes at her
foam mustache with her sleeve.

“I guess. He’s certainly not too keen on being around Dick or Bruce right now. I don’t think he likes
them seeing him like that. Vulnerable. Honestly, I think he’s only been tolerating me because he’s
bored.”

“Oh huh. So what do you guys talk about? Football, boobs, and bikes?”

Tim rolls his eyes.

“Oh come on Tim! Guy tries to kill you once upon a time and know you’re bosom buddies? Girl
can’t help but be curious.”

“We are not bosom buddies! And we don’t even talk that much. Mostly I just work while he reads.
Sometimes we talk about what I’m working on. That’s it.”

Stephanie wrinkles her nose, “You talk about work? And not even the fun kind of after-school-
special work? God, Tim. You’re helpless. If he dies again its probably your fault for boring him to
death. Too soon?”

“Hey! My work is not boring! Body armor made from carbon triweave with a fluid central layer that
absorbs and redistributes up to %85 of impact shock is very cool!”

“You are such a nerd.”

“That’s High King Nerd to you,” Tim sniffs, “Besides, if it wasn’t for this nerd you would never
have passed chemistry.”

“My apologies your Nerdness,” Stephanie says seriously with her hand over her heart.

Then punches him in the shoulder. Not lightly. Stephanie is never light with her fists, even in play.

“Speaking of chemistry…”
“Yes?”

“If you’re going to be hanging around for a little while, I’m taking an organic chemistry class this coming semester. The professor sent out the syllabus and reading list already. I was able to check out most of them from the Uni library but I don’t understand any of it! Think you could come by one night and help me out?”

“Yeah sure. When’s good for you? I don’t have patrol on Tuesday.”

“Ahhh, that’s not good for me.”

“Tuesdays aren’t good for you? I thought you patrolled Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays?”

“Not all Tuesdays! Just this one. I have a date.”

“A date? Who goes out on a Tuesday?”

“Yeah well, that’s when he’s off patrol too.”

“Are you sure you don’t mean parole? I’ve seen some of your exes,” Tim teases.

“Oh shut up.”

“Does this mean you’re going on a date with someone in the community?” He does fingers quotes around the word community because he knows it annoys her.

“Not exactly.”

“Wait. When you say patrol you mean our kind of patrol right?”

Stephanie bats her eyes at him, face blank.

“Oh no. No, no, no. It’s that cop isn’t it? The one from the other night.”

Stephanie takes another drink of her coffee flavored sugar sludge.

“Really, Steph?”

“His name is Jeremy. And he is very sweet and his favorite restaurant is Waffle House. Besides, you know I can’t resist a man in uniform.”

“Steph!”

“What? Are you jealous or something?”

“Of course not! I just feel bad for him. You’re going to eat that poor guy alive.”

Stephanie’s smile grows to frighteningly large proportions, “I don’t think he’ll complain. And he’ll be damn delicious. Besides, Batman has Gordon. Maybe Batgirl needs one too.”

“You already have a Gordon! Her name is Barbara! And she has access to everything the Commissioner knows so you’re practically getting two for the price of one. You can’t hoard all the Gordons!”

Stephanie opens her mouth to counter when his phone cuts through the conversation.

“Hey, hold on. Sorry, someone’s calling me from the manor.”
Only one person uses the manor line and that person is Alfred. The rest of them have cell phones.

“Hello?”

It’s not Alfred.

“Drake. I insist you return to the manor at once!”

“What’s happening? Is everyone okay?” Tim’s voice is sharp, instantly on edge at the memory of the last time Damian had willingly contacted him.

“Your most recent choice in poor company is throwing a tantrum. I can hear him screaming obscenities all the way in the library.”

“Damian,” Tim mimics bashing his head into the table, “How is that my problem?”

“As you seem to be the only with whom he will speak civilly you are the obvious choice to come deal with him before things get out of hand.”

“Is he in danger of hurting himself or someone else?”

“Tt. You misunderstand me. Todd is disrupting my meditation. If you do not come and shut him up I will be forced to take drastic measures and do it for him. You have twenty-five minutes.”

Tim sneers at his phone and shoves it back in his pocket.

“What’s going on?” Stephanie asks around the rim of her cup.

“Damian is. Guh. I don’t know. He’s said Jason’s pitching some kind of a fit. It’s probably nothing but…”

Stephanie waves him off, “It’s fine. Do what you gotta do.”

“Christ, I can’t leave them alone for one frigging day,” Tim rolls his eyes, “It was good to see you Steph. Good luck on your date, call me later and we’ll work out a study night.”

Tim kicks through the gray slush left on the streets. Twenty-five minutes. It’d take Alfred twenty minutes just to get out here to pick him up, not counting the return trip. A bus would take even longer with all the stops and the nearest station was a ten minute walk from the manor afterward. He debates how seriously he should take the time limit on Damian’s ultimatum. It would serve the little snot right if he took his sweet time getting back. He’s not sure Jason deserves to suffer the fall out from that though.

Tim calls an Uber. Five minutes later a man in a nice clean Subaru Outback is picking him up at the corner. The driver, who looks to be in his late twenties although its difficult to tell under the five o’clock shadow and baseball cap, introduces himself as Will. He perks up a little when Tim gives him the destination but to Tim’s relief doesn’t try to initiate any conversation. Tim gives him a five-star rating.

He runs up the front steps and as soon as the door opens he can hear the ongoing commotion. Bruce
is a deep unintelligible grumble but Jason’s raised voice echoes clearly down the stairs.

“You can’t keep me here!”

He takes the steps two at a time, stops just outside the door so he can lean against the wall of the hallway as he listens.

“Jason, you aren’t strong enough to take care of yourself yet.”

“I took care of myself just fine for years without you. Besides the good doctor gave me the okay. I’m leaving.”

“Dr. Thompkins allowing you to use a wheelchair is hardly a clean bill of health and there are other concerns to consider as well.”

“Other concerns? Care to expand on that?”

“Your mental state for one. You’ve suffered a severe trauma—

Bruce is cut off by a harsh bout of laughter.

“You call getting murdered via crucifixion a trauma? I think you mean collateral damage in your crusade, again. Call it what it is Bruce. And cut the crap. You have never given a shit about my ‘fragile’ mental state before, or anyone else’s for that matter. So let’s hear what this is really about.”

Tim slides closer. He can see Jason through the slice of the cracked door. He’s leaning forward out of a wheelchair, somehow managing from his lower position to look down at the two men standing over him. Bruce’s back is to Tim so he can’t make out the patriarch’s expression but Dick is clearly uncomfortable. His gaze keeps flicking to Bruce when the older man doesn’t immediately respond. Tim takes a shallow breath.

“I have always cared about your well-being Jason.”

Jason snorts at that but Bruce continues as if he didn’t hear him, “But you are right. That’s not the only issue.”

“Bruce,” Dick murmurs softly, a warning. Bruce ignores him as well.

“We also don’t fully understand the circumstances regarding your resurrection. It would be wisest for you to remain at the manor until we know more about your condition.”

Jason recoils like he’s been slapped. Tim winces in sympathy.

“My condition? Like I have a fucking illness. A disease? You think there’s something wrong with me because I didn’t stay dead?”

Bruce levels Jason with a look, “You are putting words in my mouth.”

“Jason you know that’s not how he meant it,” Dick pleads.

“Do I?” Jason fires back.

“I just want to run some tests and have Zatanna and possibly Jason Blood come over. They may be able to give us some insight on what’s happening to you,” Bruce proceeds undaunted.

“No. Fuck no and fuck you. I am not your damn guinea pig. And I am not some case of yours that
needs to be solved. I just want to be left the fuck alone! Why can’t you all just leave me alone?”

Dick moves between him and Bruce, hands up in non-threatening manner, “Alright, everyone’s getting worked up here. Let’s all just take a breath and calm down. We’re family, and that means helping each other work through—

Jason turns on him snarling, “Oh for fuck’s sake, shut up Dick! You’re such a fucking hypocrite with all this touchy-feely-family-togetherness bullshit.”

“What?” Dick gasps, clearly thrown by the accusation.

“Bruce is an ass but at least he doesn’t pretend not to be. You think plastering on a smile really hides all your emotionally stunted douchebaggery?”

Bruce doesn’t react to the insult but Dick gives a full body flinch. Tim files away what that says about Dick, getting riled up when compared to the man whose rules and orders he obeys without hesitation.

“That is not true!”

“Really? Then you aren’t just lying to them,” Jason points towards the door and Tim knows he sees him lurking in the hall beyond, “You’re lying to yourself.”

Dick glares at Jason, his mouth open but no words coming out. Jason leans forward, shoulders in a tight aggressive line. The train has left the station and there isn’t any stopping it till it runs out of track.

“It’s pathetic how clueless you are. Please do go on about how much you missed me. How much losing your little brother tore you up. Little brother? Dick, you were barely there when I was a kid! And even when you were you spent half the time fighting with Bruce and the rest doing your best to ignore me. You act like I’m the only one who got pissy about being replaced? I’m curious about this nostalgic past you think we had. All those fun times we never actually had together.”

Tim keeps his expression closed, doesn’t let his surprise show. What Jason is spewing right now is not the picture Dick had painted of their relationship to him. In those quiet moments when Tim had asked about the Robin before him Dick’s face would go sad and he’d sigh, ‘I really wish I had spent more time with him. I was gone with the Titans a lot and missed out on so much.’ Tim had merely thought it one of those common sentiments expressed when reflecting on the death of a loved one. Hearing Jason’s perspective told him there was more friction and antagonism between the two than Dick had let on.

Dick’s face is ashen when he croaks, “I know I screwed up with you Jason. That’s why I tried to be better after. To be a better brother.”

Jason laughs loud and long.

“Fuck, yeah? Is that why when you found out I was back you immediately came rushing to make amends with your miraculously resurrected little bro? Funny. I don’t recall you ever tracking me down. Or did you? Maybe I was out getting a pack of cigs when you stopped by,” Jason sneers glibly.

Dick’s face hardens at his tone.

“After what you did to Tim, what was I supposed to act like all was forgiven?”
“Oh yeah after what I did to the Replacement,” Jason cocks his head towards Tim bringing everyone’s attention to the eavesdropper.

Tim bites his lip and steps fully inside. No point in hiding now. Jason tosses a shrug his way.

“Sorry, Timmers. Bout that whole trying to kill you thing. Was a little fucked up in the head at the time.” Jay points to his temple and draws an erratic loop-de-loop in the air. “Nothing personal,” he adds.

It’s the most unremorseful apology Tim has ever heard, and yet he finds himself giving a small unoffended nod back. Jason grins and turns back to his target.

“But yes, lets do talk about little Timmy here. When you said you tried to be a better big brother after me, is that what you were referring to? Take him out for ice-cream and walks in the park and all that jazz. Shower him with enough hugs and kisses beforehand and maybe then he won’t mind you when throw him under the bus and strip away the badge? Is that it? You’re only the good big bro when they can still fit in the costume but once they grow out of it…Because I gotta say as an objective third party here, doesn’t look like there’s a whole lotta love lost between you two.”

Dick turns to Tim in anguish. The downturn of his lips is pleading with Tim to intervene, to tell Jason he’s wrong. But Tim doesn’t. He can’t. Dick’s decision hurt more than Jason’s beating had. In many ways its easier to forgive Jason than Dick. Jason had hurt him because he was angry and hurting. Dick had hurt him, why? He carelessly ripped away the most important part of Tim’s life, his identity, in an attempt to win the affection of a spoiled child.

“Even I’ve noticed Red Robin only comes to Gotham for the holidays. If it wasn’t for Alfred he’d never leave San Francisco. Newsflash, its not because he can’t bear to leave his super awesome friends Dick; its because he cant stand to watch you and Demon Brat running around hand-in-hand all the time. And the kicker is you let him distance himself because you know what you did and it makes you feel guilty every time you see him.”


Tim crosses his arms and looks at the floor.

“You only keep people around until they stop making you feel good about yourself.”

“That’s not true.”

Dick is crying now, big fat tears rolling down his face unimpeded by a mask. Tim looks to Bruce, wondering why he hasn’t stopped this yet, hasn’t cut Jason off. Though gauging by the fire in Jason eyes Bruce would have to bodily drag him away to stop him.

“Tell that to Barbara you prick.”

There it is, the death knell. Tim isn’t sure Dick appeared so destroyed even in the debacle of Jason’s second death.

“Oh boo-hoo, you broke up. Big freaking deal. She tracked me down, did you know that? I still don’t know how the fuck she found out who I was. But she did and kept yelling at me till I got my ass to the Clocktower. And you know what Dick? I’ve visited her more times in the past year than you have in four. And for some godforsaken reason she doesn’t hold it against you. You don’t deserve her. You don’t deserve any of us. Except maybe that asshole,” Jason snorts pointing at Bruce.
“I’m done I promise,” he pants and slouches back into his chair. The vicious monologue has drained him. “I’m going to leave now, and if any of you fuckers try to stop me I will roll this fucking chair over your feet and break all your goddamn toes.”

He grips the rims of the wheels with a white knuckled grip and pushes. The chair squeaks forward a few inches. The plaster casts on his hands have been replaced with lighter wrappings but he still doesn’t have the tensile strength required.

“Oh goddamnit!” he shouts and tries again, arms shaking at the effort. He turns to Tim, “Replacement, you get me out of here and I will owe you one favor of your choosing. Gear, intel, or if you wanna lose that V-card in the back pocket of your skinny jeans I can set you up with someone real sweet and clean. Whatever you want.”

“What I want?”

“That’s what I said.”

Tim considers this, “Okay, deal.”

Tim’s not 100% sure why he does it, except maybe that he’s a little impressed by Jason’s ability to read people and their actions with such clarity to cut where it hurts most. In ten minutes he’s reduced Nightwing to a sobbing mess armed only with a few painful truths. Tim steps forward and takes hold of the handles sticking out of the back of the chair.

“Tim,” Bruce intones, “I know you think you’re doing the right thing, but please consider the consequences. I cannot support this. If you leave now I have to assume that I can’t count on you to be a part of this team.”

Tim’s jaw tightens.

“I told you this would happen,” he hisses and wheels Jason towards the elevator down the hall.

Tim doesn’t worry about grabbing anything before they go, all of his work is saved to a cloud and he can get clothes from one of his safehouses. Jason didn’t have anything with him to begin with except the tablet, which Tim notices is tucked under his elbow. When they get to the garage, the civilian garage they are faced with a difficulty Tim hadn’t considered, one he should have after the whole van fiasco earlier. Other than Alfred’s town car there isn’t a handicap friendly option. Stephanie may have had a valid point about their collection of automobiles being slightly ridiculous. For the second time that day Tim calls an Uber.

“Well that was fast. Good thing I didn’t get very far,” Will drawls, leaning out the Subaru’s window with a grin.

It falters a little bit when he sees Jason.

Tim frowns, trying to decipher the driver’s reaction when he speaks up again, “I uh. I don’t have a wheelchair lift or anything.”

“Oh, that’s fine. It will fit in the back though, right?”

“Sure, no problem,” he replies and automatically goes to pop the trunk.

Tim eyes Jason, “Okay. So how are we going to do this? If I get you up, do you think you can stand
on your good leg long enough to pull yourself in?"

Jason looks down at his cast.

“I think so, yeah.”

Tim bends over and hooks his arms under Jason. Will pokes his head around the back of the car.

“Need any help?” He offers hesitantly as if it’s the last thing he actually wants to do.

“No, but thanks. I got it. I’m stronger than I look,” Tim huffs annoyed.

“Yeah show off those big guns of yours Timmers,” Jason snickers.

The snicker chokes off into a pained groan when Tim hauls him upwards, stretching his ribcage. The leg he’s supposed to support his weight on buckles. They almost fall to the ground in a heap but Will dashes forward and between the two of them manage to wrestle Jason into the back seat with minimal damage and groping. Tim accidentally grabs his butt while shifting his hold to maintain balance. Its surprisingly firm after two weeks of bed rest. By the time they get him situated with his busted leg stretched out the side Jason and Tim are breathing heavily.

“You know this is exactly what Bruce meant about not being able to take care of yourself yet,” He can’t help but snap.

“Yeah?” Jason gasps, hand gingerly spread over his sternum, “Well then why the fuck are you helping me Replacement?”

“I want to call in that favor you promised me. In fact, I want to call that in right now,” Tim spits over his shoulder as he buckles in.

“Already? Are you sure you don’t want to put a little more time and thought into it? Remember that offer was for anything and I always make good on my deals.”

“I’m sure.”

“Alright lets hear it then.”

“My name is Tim. Not Timmy, or Timbo, or Timmers. Its Tim. And if you ever call me Replacement again I will consider it a violation of contract and drop you right back on Bruce’s doorstep. Do you understand me?”

A thrill of satisfaction goes down Tim’s spine when he catches Jason’s eyes wide and looking back at him in the rearview mirror.

“Uh. Sure. Okay...Tim.”

Tim sits back and grins feeling triumphant.

Will clears his throat, “So...guys. Where are we going?”
Jason refuses to provide an address, insisting on giving step by step directions as they go even after Tim tries explaining to him that’s not how Uber works. Jason defends himself by stating he doesn’t want his address floating around on the internet forever in some cab services records and Tim apologizes profusely to Will for his friend’s seemingly illegitimate paranoia. Will shrugs off the apology once Tim promises to pay in cash for his troubles.

When they roll into the empty parking lot of an abandoned warehouse the driver looks a little less sure of his decision. Tim doesn’t blame him. It looks suspiciously like a perfect setting for a TV crime series murder scene. He doesn’t say anything as he helps get Jason back into the wheelchair though, for which Tim is again thankful. Jason is looking pale. While he fishes in a sweatpants pocket for his pain pills Tim turns to their new chauffeur.

“Hey, I’m sorry about this but do you mind sticking around for a bit? Just like five minutes. I get the feeling we won’t be here long.”

Will nods and plucks a pack of cigarettes from the glove box. Jason dry swallows two pills and eyes the cigarettes hungrily.

“Hey man, can I bum—

He starts to ask but Tim is already pushing him over the asphalt towards the building.

“Killjoy,” he mutters under as breath and deactivates his security system.

Tim pushes the metal door open with a clang and freezes.

“Is this some kind of joke?”

“No?”

Tim glowers into the barren space, “Jay, you need to be someplace you can recover. A medkit and a cot does not qualify as an appropriate space. Frack, this barely even counts as a proper safehouse!”

“Its got everything I need,” Jason says gesticulating to a hot plate sitting on top of a card table next to a minifridge.

“Is there even a shower here?”

“There’s a bathroom to the left. Figured I’d just wash in the sink. I’m not supposed to get the cast wet anyway.”

“No,” Tim says firmly.

“No what? What do you mean?”

“I mean no. I’m not letting you stay here. Now where do you actually live? Please tell me you have real place or at least a better place than this.”

“Yes, I have a real home. I don’t appreciate the insinuation that I live in a shithole, Tim. But I’m sure as hell not telling you where I live. No fucking way. That is a bat free zone!”

Tim looks down at Jason, “Do you really think I’d tell Bruce where you live?”

“No, but maybe Dick if he starts up all his bleeding heart nonsense and puppy dog eyes.”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” Tim states coldly.
“Huh, thought things felt a little chillier between you two.”

“We had an argument. It’s not important.”

“Sure. But my point stands. Even if you don’t tell them, you know Bruce has to have rigged this thing with some trackers.”

They compromise. Jason still won’t tell Tim his home address but after they dig five different tracking beacons out of the wheelchair with Tim’s pocket knife Jason reluctantly agrees to stay at Tim’s after his compelling argument of: “I’ve got an apartment in New York with a guest bedroom that has its own private bath, the best cable package money can’t buy and every game system in existence.”

Will drops the butt of his cigarette and grinds it into the pavement with his heel when he seems them approach. He’s shoved a pair of sunglasses on in addition to his cap now. The sun is already starting to set in the short winter day.

“Where to next boys?”

“Fancy a trip to New York?”

Will whistles, “As long as you’re paying, sure. I don’t have any plans for the evening, why not.”

They pull into the parking deck at Lex Towers an hour and a half later. Will jokingly hands Tim his number in surprisingly beautiful script on an old gas receipt. Just in case.

By this time they have unloading Jason down to an art form. The exhaustion of the day is starting to set in though and he shakes a little as he pops another pill. The shakes turn to full on tremors when the elevator doors close behind them. Tim can hear Jason forcing deep breaths and realizes he’s not just shaking but sweating as well. Tim glances around at the mod sheet metal walls and swallows. It’s not hard to figure out what has Jason spooked. He dares to drop his hand onto the other’s shoulder and rubs a knot there. When the doors open the body under his hands takes a gasp of relief.

“Alright, we’re almost there. It’s just up here on the right.” He jiggles the key into the door and opens the door with a theatrical bow.

He’s not expecting Jason to take one look and go, “Fuck this. Forget it. I give up.”

“What? What’s wrong?”

Jason gestures.

“You just gestured to everything.”

“Well that’s kind of the point Tim. This is not an adult man’s home.”

“Hey, its not that bad.”

“Not if you’re going for the college dorm revival look. You’re almost as bad as Dick.”
“Whoa. I take offense to that.”

“Do you even know how many empty coffee cups there are in here Tim? Because I can count at least seven from where I am. And what is that?”

Jason points emphatically at the wall covered in news clippings crisscrossed in multi colored string.

“That’s my case wall.”

“It makes it look like a serial killer lives here, Tim.”

Jason wheels further into the apartment, “What the fuck? Is there a white board in your bedroom?”

“Sometimes I have a breakthrough when I’m sleeping! It’s there so I can write it down before I go back to bed and forget,” Tim says in defense of himself.

“Do you even sleep in that bed? If you’d do, I’d like to know how. Do you just make a nest out of what is this—expense reports and suspect profiles?”

Jason rolls out of the doorway into the kitchen and Tim is vaguely offended at the angry expression of Jason’s face. As if he was the one who’s home was being lambasted to the floorboards and not the other way round.

“Alright so it’s a little bit messy. I’m sorry. If you give me a couple hours..."

Jason just ignores him and rolls past him to the kitchen.

“Don’t open that!” Tim shouts desperately when Jason’s hand moves to the fridge door.

Tim closes his eyes and swallows in shame at the sound of disgust Jason makes.

“What is this?”

“Food?”

“This is not food Tim! Hot pockets, red bull, and protein shakes are not food. How are you alive right now?”

“Alfred sends me home with leftovers. And I order a lot of take-out.”

Jason scrubs his hand over his eyes, “Fuck this shit. I am not staying here. Get me out of here, before this place gives me an aneurysm. We’re going to my house.”

Tim grumbles and digs for his phone and the receipt crumpled up next to it.

“Hey Will, it’s Tim. Yes, really. I’m sure you’re getting sick of this but we kind of need a ride back to Gotham. If you pick us up I’ll give you another hundred bucks?”
Wow. The response back from that latest chapter was the most I've ever received. Thank you all so much for taking the time to write in. I really appreciate those of you who felt comfortable enough to offer some constructive critiques. Thanks especially to ForceMage56 for helping me out with fixing that one sticky place to really get across what I meant.

You all know I do my best to reply to every message I receive, I want to warn you that my replies this time will probably be belated. One of my coworkers was tragically killed Sunday and after I post this chapter I will most likely not be on AO3 for the remainder of the week. I hope this doesn't keep you from posting though, I look forward to reading them when I return. I wanted to get this chapter up before getting caught up in obligations.

Want to give one heads-up though: there's one event in this chapter you will probably notice that seems like should be a big deal but is glossed over. It will be referred back to and fleshed out in greater detail in a future chapter, its not an over-sight.

I know these author notes aren't the most light-hearted today so, here:

HAVE SOME FLUFF!

Chapter 10

Tim is pissed. Rather, Tim wants to be pissed. He’s been stuck in a car all day hauling Jason’s ungrateful ass around, and is now out almost two hundred and fifty dollars. It’s not much more than pocket change to Tim, but it’s the principle of the matter. Except, when he looks in the rear-view mirror and sees Jason passed out across the back seat with his head lolling against the window glass, it’s hard to stay that way.

They will have to wake him soon. The city limits are approaching and they need directions. Tim turns around in his seat. Jason has that little line between his brows and a tiny petulant frown. It’s slightly adorable. Reluctantly, Tim reaches back and shakes Jason as gently as possible. He wakes with a surprised snort.

“’ow long ‘ave I been out? Where are we?”

“We’re almost to the Kane Memorial Bridge. You fell asleep pretty much as soon as we hit the turnpike. Sorry about waking you up but Will needs you give us directions.”

Jason’s eyes travel to the window and get lost there watching the night lights flash by.

“Hello? Earth to Jason.”

He scrubs his hands over his face and pushes his hair back.
“Huh, oh. Yeah. Um, once you cross the bridge take Exit 43 towards Robbinsville.”

Tim raises an eyebrow.

Jason rolls his eyes, “Oh fuck you, it’s not what you think.”

“Sure it’s not,” Tim agrees smugly, “Actually I’m not real familiar with the area.”

“Not surprised. Best kept secret in Gotham. It was one of those cottage villages they built for returning GIs after World War II. Used to be the suburbs ’til Gotham swallowed it. I dunno. My mom always wanted to move out there eventually. It’s a little rundown, but it’s one of the only places in Gotham where the houses come with yards.”

There’s a squeak of leather and Tim sees Will’s grip tighten on the steering wheel.

“You okay?” he asks.

Will’s fingers straighten back out.

“Isn’t Robbinsville where the Sprang Bridge Soldiers run?”

“Yeah. Why, you got a problem with them?” Jason interjects from the back, his voice low and growling.


Jason chuckles darkly, “Well then, I think you picked the wrong place to settle down. There’s no place in Gotham that one group or another hasn’t tried to claim, even if its just in name. In four blocks turn left onto Novick.”

“Where do you live?” Tim asks in an attempt to turn the conversation in a lighter direction.

“Close to Grant Park.”

“That’s a nice area. I heard there’s a really good burger joint down there.”

“Burnett’s Diner,” Jason supplies.

“Burnett’s? No, Sal’s man.”

“What!” Jason sounds personally affronted.

“Burnett’s is good and they’ve got great milkshakes but the burgers at Sal’s are the best in the city,” Will argues animatedly.

“Careful there buddy. Those are some serious claims you’re making.”

Will lifts one hand from the steering wheel, “Swear to god. Go to Sal’s and order the Sal special. Then tell me that’s not the best burger you’ve ever had.”

“Alright. I’ll take you up on that. But if I go and its not the best burger I’ve ever had, you’re in for a world of hurt,” Jason warns.

Tim chuckles nervously.

“They make their own pickles,” Will adds.
“Well shit. I can respect that,” Jason concedes, “Hey, third house on the right.”

“The one with all the grass?”

Jason scowls, “Forgive me. I haven’t been by to mow the lawn in a while. Yeah. The house with all the grass, smartass.”

Tim sighs. To think they almost made it back without Jason being uncivil. Of course...he had been asleep for most of the trip. They manhandle Jason out and into the wheelchair for the what Tim prays to whatever god there may be, the last time. Afterwards, Tim pulls Will aside and presses a wad of cash into his hand.

“Thanks man. I know this has been a pain.”

“Your friend is a bit of a handful, huh?”

“He’s... He’s going through a bit of a rough patch,” Tim grimaces. Understatement of the century. Era. Maybe the Holocene.

“It’s alright. Been through my share. I’m sure he’ll do fine though, especially if he’s got you looking after him, right?”

Will’s earnestness leaves Tim spluttering as he climbs back in the car and starts the engine. He leans out the driver’s window before pulling away.

“Hold onto that number, okay? If you guys ever need a ride again don’t hesitate to call.”

Tim fingers the slip of paper in his pocket, “Thanks. Will do.”

He won’t, but its only polite to say so. He waves as the Subaru backs out of the drive and rolls away. They wait until its taillights disappear around a corner before Jason moves to deactivate his security. There’s a bronze plaque to the side of the door with black house numbers mounted on it. He flips up the panel revealing a dead black screen with a hooded hole beneath it.

Tim watches as he fits his thumb into the depression. There’s a tiny click and then a numeric grid lights up on the touch screen. Jason pulls his hand away, a pinprick of blood on the pad of his thumb. He gives Tim a pointed look and Tim turns around while Jason puts in a code. The sound of his fingers on the screen is almost non-existent if you aren’t trained to listen for such things. Tim thinks he hears the ghostly press of flesh on glass eight times. Not a phone number or a social security number. Could be a date. Or a completely random sequence of numbers. Tim really has no way of knowing at this point. He doesn’t know Jason well enough. When Jason clears his throat, Tim takes that as permission to turn around again.

Once they cross the threshold Tim can actually see tension leak from the other man. His shoulders roll and he lets out a soft sigh. When Tim pulls his attention from Jason he understands why. Its homey, like he imagines most American families who don't own sprawling mansions grow up in. Tim figures there are probably only five rooms. Living room to the left, kitchen to the right with doorways in both that lead to a second set of rooms behind. There’s not a lot of furniture either. The few pieces are slightly mismatched as if purchased separately from thrift stores instead of as a set, but they all appear to be well kept and solidly built. In place of art there are displays of swords and knives on the walls. All tastefully mounted to appear as nothing more than the decorative collection of a weapons enthusiast. Tim doesn’t doubt for one second that every single one is razor sharp.

“Wow.”
Jason rolls his head back to look at him, “What were you expecting? Manacles on the walls?”

“More like a shark pit in the floor,” Tim counters with a grin, “This is just so…normal.”

“Well, it's no penthouse,” Jason mutters and rubs the back of his neck, starting to look distinctly uncomfortable.

“No, this is awesome, Jay. This is nice.”

Tim’s throat sticks when he realizes what he said. The abbreviated name rolling off his tongue far too easily. He hopes Jason didn’t notice.

He points at a sword and sheath hanging over the couch and asks, “Is that an uchigatana?” to change subject.

“Yeah. It was a gift from the man I studied kenjutsu under. From the Muromachi period. He was pretty cool. I didn’t kill him.”

“And the cuckoo clock?” Tim asks.

Jason laughs, “I spent some time in the German alps learning hand to hand. Talia said cuckoo clocks were hideous, tacky, tourist fodder. So of course I had to have one.”

Tim is acutely aware Jason doesn’t mention what happened to that instructor. He looks around the living room again. There are other items scattered around, obviously obtained through Jason’s travels including a beautiful arabesque silver tea set that Tim is afraid to ask about.

“I like those shelves,” he tries again, nodding to the floor to ceiling built-ins that line one wall. Because shelves have to be safe for discussion, right? To his surprise Jason looks almost embarrassed, one hand rubbing the back of his neck again.

“I uh, I built those, actually.”

“Really?”

Jason nods, “Yeah. Just seemed to make more sense than buying like six to fit everything.”

Tim wanders over to the shelves and runs his fingers along the spines of the books filling them.

“That’s incredible,” he says out loud.

To his amusement, Jason flushes. Pink crawling up his neck and over his cheeks.

“Seriously Jason, you did a great job. I’m pretty sure if I ever tried to make something like this I’d accidentally tear the wall down. How did you learn how to do this?”


Tim smiles when he catches sight of the yellow and black bound self-help books on a lower shelf. Sure enough, Carpentry for Dummies is among the titles, alongside tomes on plumbing and Feng Shui. Jason is red up to his ears at this point. It's cute, but makes Tim wonder when the last time anyone had complimented him had been. Or told him he’d done well at something other than snapping necks.

Jason stares at his hands in his lap long enough Tim starts to worry then abruptly clears his throat, “I don’t have a guest room for you or anything. Never thought I’d have a guest. I turned the spare into a
gym. But the couch isn’t bad. There’s um, blankets and an extra pillow in the closet. Not that you have to stay here if you don’t want.”

“No worries, the couch is fine,” Tim reassures him. “It’s been a long day and as long as it’s not an imposition I’d rather crash here than catch a cab back to New York again. You need help getting in bed?”

“I… Yeah. Probably.”

It’s a testament to his exhaustion Jason doesn’t fight him on this. Tim pushes him into the room past the living area, curiosity peaking. He stares at the bed for a couple seconds.

“Red silk sheets, eh?”

“Silk is good for your skin,” Jason mumbles.

“Of course,” Tim gives himself a shake and tears his eyes away from the bed.

Suddenly the idea of touching Jason seems far less innocent than the casual touches they’d exchanged throughout the day getting him in and out of the car.

“I’m going to have to touch you,” he rasps, mouth dry.

Jason’s face screws up in confusion.

“Uh, yeah. I realize.”

“Okay. I just wanted to warn you. I’m sorry about grabbing your butt earlier. It was an accident. I’ll try not to do it again, but if I do, I want you to know it’s an accident now too,” Tim curses himself internally at the awkward confession.

“That was you? Oh thank god.”

“What?” Tim yelps.

“I thought it was the other guy.”

Tim can’t help but laugh at the clear relief in Jason’s voice. It eases the anxiety curling in Tim’s gut. They heave on the count of three. Tim keeps one arm locked around the back of Jason’s shoulders and uses the other as an anchor for him to hold onto as he pivots them around. His muscles strain at the effort but he’s able to gently lower Jason down instead of dropping him backwards onto the mattress.

He immediately withdraws his hands, not wanting to let them wander across those planes any longer than necessary. Once he brings Jason’s legs up onto the bed as well, allowing Jason to stretch out flat, the older man closes his eyes and moans. It’s almost pornographic. Tim feels his professional façade slip as his cheeks heat up.

“Are you…are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m just really really tired and it feels really really good to lay down.”

“Guess I should have asked if you wanted to change into some pajamas or something first,” Tim muses.

“Don’t care,” Jason murmurs, “I’m good.”
Tim helps arrange the sheets and turns to go when one striking eye reopens.

“Hey. Tim.”

“Yes?”

“Thanks.”

Tim smiles, “You’re welcome. Good night Jason.”

“Oh, and…do you mind turning on the bathroom light?” Jason asks in a small voice.

Tim stops in his tracks. He schools his face into something nonchalant because he doesn’t want to upset the other. He can only imagine what it must be costing the other man to ask.

“Yeah, sure. No problem.”

Jason Todd is afraid of the dark.

Tim wakes the next morning to something soft smacking him in the face. He bolts upright and almost falls off the couch when he opens his eyes to tawny slit-pupil ones. The cat hovering over him jumps to floor and howls before sashaying into the kitchen. Every few steps it looks over its shoulder at him. Tim thinks it's checking to see if he’s following it. He doesn't. He runs to Jason’s bedroom door and knocks frantically.

“Jason? Jason!”

There’s a muffled curse from the other side of the wood. He takes it as permission enough to pop his head inside. Jason glares at him from an untamed nest of dark curls.

“What the hell Repl—Tim?”

“Do you have any pets?”


“Well then I hate to tell you this, but your super duper DNA scanning security is shit. Because there is a cat in this house and it tried to maul my face off!”

“Oh. Ohhh,” Jason combs hair back out his face, standing it on end and making it look wilder.

“Yeah, sorry. That’s Cat. She comes by sometimes. She’s cool. Cat door is hooked up to the system, it automatically unlocks when I’m home.”

Tim stares at him in bewilderment, “Well, you could have warned me. Is there any other invasive wildlife I should be aware of?”

Jason clears his throat of morning phlegm, “Stop being so dramatic. She just wants treats. There’s some tins in the bottom cabinet left of the sink. Help me get up and I’ll feed her if you’re that damn
scared of cats.”

“I’m not sc—I’m not!” Tim protests, “I’m just not a big animal person. We don’t tend to get along.”

Jason smirks at him infuriatingly. Once the cat is happily chowing down on a can of Friskies, Tim starts hunting for human food.

"You know," he grouses, "After all the shit you gave me, your fridge is looking a little empty."

“Yeah, well. I’m not here very often. Usually I stay in one of my safe houses. Only come here when I need a break for a few days. If I can make a grocery run today I’ll make you an omelet later. For now, there’s oatmeal.”

Tim wrinkles his nose.

“What? What is that for? Oatmeal is seriously nutritious. It’s high in fiber, good for blood pressure, and sticks to your ribs way better than cereal or pop-tarts.”

“It tastes like glue.”

“Then you’ve been making it wrong.”

Jason positions himself in front of the stove and pauses, “Damnit.” From his seated position he has to raise his elbows awkwardly to set the pot on the burner.

“Need any help?”

“No. I’ve got this. You just stay over there. Uh, there should be some butter still in the fridge. And get me some salt and cinnamon in the spice rack. And honey is above the stove. Oh, grab the box of raisins and the bag of chia as well. Berries are better, but as you mentioned, I’m a little low on perishables right now.”

Tim fumbles around the kitchen trying to locate the ingredients Jason lists off and line them on the counter next to him.

“Raisins are alright though, they actually have more anti-oxidants than grapes. And chia gives it a little protein boost.”

“How did you learn all this?” Tim asks, handing Jason the raisins.

“Was I the only one who ever helped Alfred out in the kitchen? You think the meals he makes are just something to put on the table? Geez. No man, it’s not easy feeding a bunch of vigilantes so they don’t cramp up mid-patrol. Everything he makes is designed to keep you dumbasses all big, strong, and energized.”

“Oh.”

Tim has never thought about that before. He really should give Alfred more credit. The oatmeal isn’t bad. He wouldn’t say it’s his favorite breakfast, but it beats any other time he’s had the stuff. Cat watches them as they eat with suspicious yellow eyes, empty tin abandoned on the tile floor.

“So, what’s its name?”

“Doesn’t have one.”

“You didn’t name your pet cat?”
“Not my pet. Cat earns her stay keeping vermin out,” Jason leans back, “Me and cat, we’re a couple of no name slobs. We belong to nobody and nobody belongs to us. We don’t even belong to each other.”

Tim frowns, “I get it I guess, but isn’t that kind of a lonely way to live?”

Jason rolls his eyes, “Lighten up. It’s a line from a movie.”

“Oh. Sorry, I hadn’t heard that before.”


Tim shrugs.

“How are all you rich boys such uncultured philistines? Bunch of walking tragedies. Movie night tonight, we’re gonna fix this.”

Tim tries not to let himself get excited at the fact Jason has de facto invited him to stay till evening. The day passes quickly. Between the grocery store run, getting in touch with Leslie to set up appointments with a physical therapist, lunch, a couple trips to the bathroom that are far easier than Tim expected (he wonders if the handicap bars had been installed for the previous elderly inhabitant of the house or if they were a product of Jason’s sensible forethought) drawing up a driving schedule to get Jason back and forth from those appointments, stopping by his own apartment to grab some extra clothes and his car from the parking garage, Tim is surprisingly busy.

It all goes relatively well until the bath. As soon as he cuts the saran wrap and duct tape off where it’s wound around Jason’s cast covered leg, Tim leaves in a hurry – flustered and desperate to hide it.

When Tim returns, pizza in hand—Jason had declared himself too traumatized to cook after his near drowning, he finds the other man stretched out on the couch with Cat curled up on his chest. He’s absently rubbing Cat behind the ears while watching the news blank faced. Tim takes his time fishing out plates. Jason ignores him. He had been oddly reticent after the incident, never looking Tim in the eye, and speaking to him only when necessary.

“Grab me a beer while you’re at it,” he grumbles, breaking his silence, “Feel free to grab one for yourself.”

Apparently, beer is necessary.

Tim looks at the six packs they’d picked up at the store earlier. One dark, one light. He knows nothing about beer but he’s pretty sure lighter beers typically have lower alcohol content. He grabs one. On second thought, since he’s been such a rebel lately, he grabs another for himself. The bottles clink together as he carries everything into the living room. Jason immediately pops his and downs half the bottle, his eyes glued to the screen.

A newscaster in a red blazer smiles out at them, “And now a heartwarming tale for our viewers
before we go is that of Pooh Bear. No, not the children’s literary character but a ginger tabby cat. Pooh Bear escaped from his owner, Angela McPhee’s, home through a loose window screen. When McPhee followed to catch him the cat darted into traffic where he was struck by a car. Miss McPhee took him to the Central Gotham Emergency Veterinary Center where he was euthanized due to the severity of his injuries. Pooh Bear’s body was held in the veterinary center’s storage until his body could be cremated this coming Monday, but when staff made opening rounds this morning they found the lucky kitty still alive. McPhee took that as a sign that Pooh Bear simply wasn’t ready to leave her side. Looks like this cat really does have nine lives! If you’d like to help Miss McPhee with the cost of Pooh Bear’s current care and boarding donations can be made at www.wgntchannel5.com or call 1-800-732-9468.”

Jason’s fingers twitch towards his phone.

“Don’t bother.”

“Huh?”

“Calling. I guarantee you that by now Damian’s already called and paid for the whole thing.”

“Kid likes animals, hm?” Jason asks from behind his bottle.

“Loves them. And for some unknown reason they seem to love him too, unlike me.”

“I can see that. Animals are easier to like than people. They don’t care what you look like, where you’re from. As long as you feed em and treat em alright they don’t care what else you’ve done. They don’t judge. They also don’t leave their sweating beer bottles on the coffee table without a coaster, ain’t that right Cat?”

Tim snatches his bottle up off the table and takes a swig.

Jason chuckles low and mean at the face he makes, “Can’t handle a brewski, Tim?”

Tim shakes his head, “It’s not what I was expecting. Like it better than champagne actually, it’s not as acidic...but still might take some getting used to.”

“That’s a hefeweizen, they’re pretty fruity. You’d probably like the stout better, especially if you’re a coffee drinker. Stronger, more bitter than that, but smoother too.”

“I’ll keep that in mind next time,” Tim says and Jason switches the TV over to the movie.

He finds that he does like the stout more. Quite a bit more. He even has a second one. He knows he’s tipsy because of the buzzing under his skin and the numbness in his lips. It's not entirely unpleasant. He doesn’t like however, how it causes his mouth to start running without his permission.

“Have you ever thought about why you came back?”

“What?” Jason turns to him, eyes a little glassy while Holly cries out for Cat in the rain.

“Like, maybe you’re like a cat. With nine lives.”

“Do I look like a fucking cat to you Tim?”

“Well, maybe you’re like a were-cat then!”

Jason spits a mouthful of beer back into his bottle. He straightens up. Tim doesn’t think its fair that
he is still so obviously sober.

“A were-cat,” Jason repeats condescendingly.

Tim narrows his eyes. There’s a memory skating over his brain. In the cave, a young voice: Being Robin gives me magic!

“Yes, you’re sucking the life out of me right now,” Jason sighs, “Tim, I can %100 guarantee you I am not a vampire.”

Tim opens his mouth and closes it. There’s something niggling at his mind. Something forgotten since childhood that Jason reminds him of. Immortals who die and come back. If he can just put his finger on…

“Highlander!”

“What?!?” Jason rocks in amusement, causing Cat to give him a low warning growl from her perch atop him.

“You’re a highlander! They can’t die. I mean they die, but you have to cut their heads off to kill them for real. And then you get their life power added onto yours! I know you’ve cut people’s heads off before Jason,” Tim points an admonishing finger at him.

“Christ, Tim. No! I’ve never gotten zapped with mystical lightning juice after decapitating someone. Highlander isn’t even a myth, it’s a TV show about some dude running around in a ponytail, you nerd.”

“Takes one to know one.”

Jason raises one eyebrow, “Excuse me?”

“I didn’t say anything about lightning. Or Adrian Paul. You’ve watched it too! Haven’t you? That means I’m not the only nerd in the room.”

Jason covers his face with his hands, “You are a mess.”

Tim starts giggling uncontrollably.

“What is it now?” Jason growls. Tim struggles for breath, just enough to force out the thought
melting his brain.

“Jason McCleod, of the clan McCleod,” he wheezes then loses it.

But it's okay, because behind his fingers Jason is losing it too. He’s shaking so hard Cat finally jumps off with a angry hiss. They only stop minutes later because Jason’s guffaws turn into whimpers that have him clutching his chest.

“Oh god it hurts.”

His face is still crinkled in mirth though, eyes watering, and Tim thinks it’s probably one of the best things he’s ever seen.
Hey folks, sorry for the switch up. You will notice I decided to add a chapter in between 'The Secret Life’ and 'Behind Blue Eyes.' So new stuff to read, even if the story hasn't moved on. I was really unhappy with the last chapter (not the chapter itself - just the progression). I was anxious to get it moving onto the upcoming action sequences and then felt like I had really rushed things. So I pulled this chapter out of my ass, I hope it doesn't seem as impromptu as it is. I have no idea what kind of PT Jason would actually require for his injuries and this is one of the few times I haven't dug into research for accuracy, so if something seems glaringly wrong let me know. But in my experience they always give you resistance bands. Torn rotator cuff? Resistance band. Cholera? Resistance band.

It's a glimpse into Jason's view of things so far because we have been with Tim for a fair while. It's not as fun and fluffy as 'Secret Life' and 'Blue Eyes' but Jason's not as fluffy a person and I think this chapter helps ground his character a little better, shows how different he is from Tim and that things aren't necessarily going as well as Tim interprets them. Tim's not completely naive as we see in his chat with Dick in 'Blue Eyes,' but this chapter reinforces that reality. Anwyways, I hope you enjoy. It's going to probably be a fair while before another update because some irl things have cropped up --nothing bad, just obligations I need to focus on a little more seriously than I have been lately.

ALSO, huge thanks to Azamiko for letting me run with the shaving scene! And thanks to all of you dedicated readers who tune in and leave comments at every update and new readers who binge-read this! Ya'll are the best motivation.

Chapter 11

A stinging slap snaps his face to the side.

“Frack, Jason! Wake up!”

He opens his eyes. The Replacement—no, Tim—is standing over him. He has Jason’s fist trapped in one hand while the other cradles his jaw. Jason blinks.

“You awake? You with me now?” Tim asks, oddly earnest.

Jason thinks about it for a moment, nods.

“Okay, good,” Tim lets out a sharp breath of relief. “Now let me see your hand. I want to make sure you didn’t bust it up.”

Jason forces his muscles to relax at the command and allows Tim to uncurl his fist. Tim turns his
hand palm down and skillfully pulls back layers of kinesio tape and the gauze squares underneath keeping the punctures clean. Tim runs long slim fingers over his knuckles and the delicate fan of bones leading to his wrist as he looks for any new swelling or discoloration.

“Well on the bright side, looks like the only thing you busted was my face. Though, I’d really appreciate it if you stopped doing that. My nose still hasn’t fully recovered,” Tim smiles wryly.

Tim smiles a lot, Jason notices. Like Dick. But not. Dick’s smiles are too wide, too perfect. Lies. Tim’s are shy little half-tilts. Not lies.

“What happened?” Jason croaks.

The smile falters.

“You were having a nightmare. Started screaming bloody murder. Scared the crap out of Cat. I think she’s hiding under the sofa. Sorry about slapping you, I panicked. Next time I’ll just douse you with a glass of water.”

Jason nods dumbly, vaguely aware he should probably apologize for punching Tim as well. He doesn’t. He doesn’t remember what sent him lashing out either, the dream. He supposes he should be thankful for that, but it leaves him unsettled.

“Wait. What are you doing here?” he asks, hackles rising.

Tim’s lips thin.

“I crashed on the couch. Movie night, remember?”

Jason’s brain struggles to catch up.

“Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. Your exact words were, and I quote ‘Tim you are the poster child for everything wrong with modern youth culture if you haven’t seen this movie,’ end quote.”

That certainly sounds familiar.

“You made stuffed peppers and rice and put me on guacamole duty.”

Bits and pieces of the previous evening start to slot themselves together in Jason’s head.

“Yeah, because you can’t be trusted near the stove. And I still had to take the knife away from you before you hacked your hand in half because you have no idea how to pit an avocado, you dumbfuck.”

Tim narrows his eyes. Jason is quickly learning Tim’s tells. They are subtle things; narrowed eyes when he’s annoyed, thinned lips for concern, biting his lip when he’s nervous, chewing the inside of his cheek while he thinks. Jason catalogs these details away for future use.

“And there’s the surly attitude I was waiting for. All is right in the world again. Alright Sundance. Let’s get you up and in the shower.”

Jason bristles, “What?”

“Well of course you’re Sundance. You’re the volatile, pretty-boy, crack shot. While I’m obviously Butch; the charming, mild mannered, mastermind.”

“But Butch is taller. And older,” he argues.
“Really, that’s your best argument?” Tim eyes him, unimpressed.

Jason shrugs, “I wanna be Paul Newman. He's kickass.”

“Too bad Sundance. Now let’s get you rinsed off,” Tim leans forward only for Jason to jerk back.

“No.”

Tim wrinkles his nose, “Jason, you’re drenched.”

Jason looks down. Tim is right. The shirt he wore to bed is plastered to his skin and when he tries to push his hair back from his face his fingers get stuck in thick damp curls.

“I’ll be fine,” Jason waves Tim off anyways.

The incident from his first day back home is still fresh in his mind. The way Tim could barely bring himself to look at Jason for more than a couple seconds. He can’t really blame the kid. He almost puked himself at the first hard look at his new scars too. Only the fact he really didn’t want to be sitting in a tub of his own sick had him reflexively swallowing the mouthful of bile that had risen up. Still, the affirmation of the grotesque disfigurement of his body had unexpectedly hurt. Christ, the kid had fucking dropped him when his arm brushed over the raised skin and he had practically bolted out of the house afterward.

“Are you sure? I mean, if you want to spend the rest of the day all gross and sticky that’s your call.”

“I’m sure,” Jason snarls, “Just help me get up.”

He shifts himself to the edge of the bed and waits for Tim to help swing his cast bound leg over without wrenching his knee. He’s needing Tim’s help less and less to get in and out of the wheel chair, but mornings are always the worst. His joints are lock up and protest painfully against any movement. He hisses at the pull and strain on stiff muscles as he slithers into the chair.

“Everything okay?”

“’s fine,” Jason pants.

“Yeah sure. That’s why you’re white as a ghost and gritting your teeth.”

“It hurts,” Jason grinds out.

“Where are your pain killers?” Tim looks pointedly at the night stand.

“Gone.”

“Gone? Gone where? You had a third of the bottle left.”

“Flushed ‘em.”

Tim’s eyes widen.

“Down the toilet? Why? Why would you do that? Especially when you obviously still need them?” he squawks.

“Made me nauseous.”

It's not a lie. He had never intended to take them for very long. Only as long as absolutely necessary.
They stick in his throat when he tries to swallow, lodged there with a memory of his mom on the bathroom floor, vomit caked on her chin and little blue tablets spilled out on the tile around her.

Tim sighs in defeat, “Okay. You’re an idiot and you’ll regret it, especially because this is your first day at PT.”

He walks out, leaving Jason alone.

Oh.

He had forgotten about that. Tim had told him. Tim had put one of those dry erase calendars on the fridge with his PT appointments highlighted in red; Tuesdays and Fridays from 1:00 to 3:00. It was right there next to the list Jason had jokingly posted while Tim recovered from his first hangover headlined ‘Things Jason Is Not.’ Were-cat was at the top followed by: Bigfoot, Vampire, Fairy, and Unicorn? The last item appearing the next day in Tim’s messy scrawl.

Jason strips the wet shirt off and rolls into the bathroom. He holds a wash cloth under the tap until it’s saturated and wipes down his neck, shoulders, and what he can reach of his back. He rinses it out under the stream of cold water and hesitates, hand hovering over his skin. It was so strange. When he first came back, he had been so thrown. Sure that the body he woke up in wasn’t his own. It was too big, too high off the ground. Too flawless. He had traced his fingers obsessively over scars that were no longer there. Should have been there. The scars were proof of what he had gone through, who he had been.

The stars across the left of his chest from when Mad Hatter shot him, coming so close to hitting his heart. The one that curled up his calf from where he’d cut himself on a rusty pipe climbing through the rubble to save Batman and Superman from Mongul. The series of criss-crosses on his knuckles from when he put his fist through the wall when he heard Felipe Garzonas wouldn’t be prosecuted. More from even before then. The shiny patch on his elbow when he got pushed off the monkey bars. The crescent moon under his right eye when he’d been living on the streets and a drunk hobo came at him with a broken bottle over a half-eaten slice of pizza. The dark divot where he’d tripped over one of his mom’s needles when he was five. All gone. Washed away by the pit. Left him blank and empty and aching. The number of times he had thought about taking a knife to his skin and carving them back in…

And now, here he is and all he wants is this scar gone. He wants it gone, he wants it gone, he wants it gone.

Hysterically he fantasizes about taking a piece of sandpaper to it, dragging it over the raised flesh till his skin is left bloody and smooth. He scrubs the washcloth over his chest and stomach as quickly as he can instead, eyes closed, lungs frozen. When he’s done he tosses the rag into a far corner of the room and lets out a shuddering breath. He cups his hands under the faucet and splashes his face. Then on second thought, sticks his whole head under. The cold water is soothing against his scalp. He combs his fingers through his hair till it’s soaked through and he has to come up for air. The water runs in rivulets down the back of his neck and chest and wets the waistband of his briefs when he finally pulls back.

He stares at himself in the mirror, keeping his eyes locked on his reflection’s. Refuses to let it wander lower. It's been a while since he looked in a mirror. Not much point to it really when he’s wearing the hood out most of the time except for morning runs and trips to the grocery store. He’s a little surprised at what he finds.

His skin is wan, cheeks sunken and there are heavy bruises under his eyes. He looks like shit. His stubble is bordering too close to beard and his hair keeps falling in his face. He tends to rely on
Barbara to tell him when he’s getting “scruffy.” Sometimes she’ll cut his hair for him, seated cross-legged on a towel in the middle of the Clock Tower. He needs a shave. And a haircut. He could call Barbie. Ask Tim to drive him over. Except...the last time she saw him was in a puddle of blood with his dick out and he’s not sure if he’s ready to face her again, yet.

He eyes the razor sitting innocuously on the side of the sink. He knows it’s a bad idea. He’s spent hours shuffling cards practicing small acts of sleight-of-hand trying to get his dexterity back and for the most part failing. His hands just aren’t there yet. But he doesn’t need to be able to move them quickly or nimbly. He just needs to be able to hold onto the razor firmly. As long as he takes it slow and cautious, he shouldn’t have any problems. He can do this.

Five minutes later he’s hissing curses as blood cuts treks through the thick lather on his face.

“Fucking shit fuck.”

He jumps at a knock on the door and cuts himself again.

“Damn!”

“Jason? Is everything okay?”

Jason’s eyes cut to the door, Tim’s voice on the other side.

“You’ve been in there for a long time. I could hear you cursing all the way in the kitchen.”

He’d forgotten the Repl—Tim was there.

“Because if you need help, its okay. Its nothing to be embarrassed about.”

Jason winces, “It’s fine Tim. Everything’s fine, I…I just…”

The door knob turns and Jason’s breath hitches in his chest. If he wasn’t in the goddamn chair he’d be throwing himself against the door to keep it from swinging open. Tim sticks his head inside.

Jason glares at him, “Privacy! Tim! You don’t just walk into someone’s bathroom!”

“Sorry, but you didn’t sound fine.”

“I could have been taking a shit! Or whacking it for Christ’s sake.”

Tim has the grace to look sheepish, cheeks flushing, but it quickly falls away when he takes Jason in, face bloody and hands shaking.

“Geez, Jason.”

He lets himself the rest of the way into the bathroom and calmly plucks the razor from Jason’s cramping grip. In a move that’s becoming increasingly frequent, Tim leans forward only for Jason to jerk back.

“No. No way. No. I am not letting you anywhere near my face with that.”

Tim rolls his eyes.
“Jason. I hate to tell you this. But if I wanted to kill you, I’ve had plenty of chances to do it before now. If you really don’t want me to, fine. I’ll leave. But you’re going to look like an idiot wheeling around with only half your face shaved.”

Jason growls.

Because.

Fuck if the little shit doesn’t have a point.

But, still.

He’s never let anyone close to him like this. Even if he believes Tim won’t take advantage of the moment to murder or maim him, the thought of steel against his throat in someone’s hands other than his own makes his stomach knot up. Tim stands patiently, waiting for an answer, eyes resolutely focused on Jason’s face. Jason is all too aware of his bare skin. He feels sick. Crosses his arms over his chest to try and hide the scar there. It’s easier to pretend it isn’t there if he can’t see it. He closes his eyes.

“Jason?” Tim asks softly.

Jason squeezes them shut tightly and nods. When he opens them he doesn’t say anything. Doesn’t trust himself to say anything with how tight his throat feels. He tilts his head back, baring the vulnerable skin. Tim nods jerkily and sets to work, his expression serious. The first scrape makes Jason shiver involuntarily but he keeps himself still as stone for the rest. He finds himself unable to look away, eyes locked onto Tim’s the whole time, desperately searching for any indication of an impending slice. The whole proceeding is intense and Jason feels drained by the end while Tim wipes the last bits of foam from his jaw.

“There we go. Look at that. You survived,” Tim states smugly.

Jason rubs his fingertips over his cheeks, jumping over the cuts he’d made in his attempt.

“Anything else? Mani, pedi?” Tim jokes.

Well, he’d already gone this far.

“I could, could use a bit of a trim,” Jason offers hesitantly.

Tim looks at him, tousles his damp hair, “I don’t know. I kind of like it like this.”

Jason scoffs, “Look I know Dickhead went through his mullet phase, but long hair is seriously a hazard in this job. Didn’t anyone ever tell you you should keep it short enough your opponent can’t get a handful?” He notices how Tim’s bangs flop into his eyes, “Obviously not, nevermind.”

Tim’s fingers tighten for a second where they’re still curled into his hair and then he’s letting go.

“Makes sense,” Tim concedes.

Jason’s thankful Tim doesn’t bring up the obvious fact that he doesn’t need to worry about facing off against anyone anytime soon. He’s polite like that.

“Trimmer’s in the medicine cabinet. Second shelf. Setting three on the sides, one on top.”
Jason feels far sharper, more like himself than he has the past few days. Maybe it’s a result of his grooming this morning or the fact it’s the first time he’s been outside since coming home, but the perfidious gnawing anxiety from earlier has dispelled. He forces Tim to stand outside the car, almost making them late while he enjoys his first cigarette in who-knows-the-fuck-how-long in the weak winter sun.

Tim grumbles but Jason cuts him off, “Tim, I caution you very strongly to consider who you are speaking to before you start to lecture me on how ‘those things will kill you.’ It’s been a rough fucking few weeks. Let me enjoy this in peace.”

So they wait til he takes a final drag and stubs the butt out on the chair armrest. It helps. He thinks maybe it shouldn’t. Inhaling smoke. The warm burn in his lungs. He had wondered when he first came back and found himself staring at the wall of cartons behind a gas station counter. Had actually cried in relief, when he found he could light up without being thrown back to a warehouse in the desert. Small mercies he supposes. He really isn’t interested in contemplating out the whys and why-nots of certain triggers. Maybe he couldn’t handle small enclosed spaces, total dark, or dirt under his fingernails without breaking into a cold sweat but at least he can rely on good old nicotine to soothe his nerves.

Not that he’s nervous. This PT thing is just a step towards getting back on the street. This is a good thing he tells himself as Tim pulls them into the medical complex. Its not as bad as having to go to an actual hospital. The offices are arranged almost like a little village and while the color scheme inside follows a distressing trend for soft pastels, it doesn’t smell like antiseptic. They check in at front desk and are quickly directed down a short hall and through a set of light double doors.

“You must be Jason! You can call me Miss Lucille, I’ll be your physical therapist for the next few months. We’ll get to know each other real well.”

Miss Lucille looks like she wouldn’t come up to his chest if he was standing but has a Batman-firm handshake. Jason opens his mouth. He’d rather bypass all the small talk and get down to things: what sessions are going to be like, what exercise he’s allowed to outside of the office, what his long-term recovery plan looks like and what can he do to whittle that down to the shortest possible time. Self-discipline has never been one of Jason’s hurdles, as long as it's in service towards his own goal. Miss Lucille doesn’t give him the chance. She runs him over with all the grace of a steam roller.

“Leslie warned me bout you. Said you’ve got an attitude and a mouth on you. So I’m just gonna warn you now that I’ve raised four boys and three grandbabies and I’ve heard it all. There is nothing you can say or try to pull that’s going to shock me so don’t bother trying. As long as you respect me and follow my rules we’ll get along just fine.”

She beams at him. It sends a shiver down his spine. Tim is snickering, ugly snorts spilling out from behind his hand. Miss Lucille turns to him.

“And who are you sweetheart?”

“Timothy Drake,” Tim says, extending his hand once he’s managed to smother his mirth.

“Well Timothy, aren’t you just cute as can be,” Miss Lucille pinches his cheek.

For real. Pinches his cheek. Like a granny in an old black and white TV idyll. Instead of going pink with embarrassment like Jason expects, Tim looks like a cat who got into the cream. The little shit is eating it up.
“Don’t worry honey, between you and me we’ll get your boyfriend back to hunk from handicap in no time.”

Now it’s Jason’s turn to cackle as Tim’s eyes go wide and he makes a noise like he swallowed his own tongue.

“What? No! No. No no no. We aren’t. He’s not. We aren’t dating,” Tim blabbers apoplectically, waving his hands in the air for added emphasis.

“Sweetheart! How can you say that? I’m wounded!” Jason howls.

Until Miss Lucille raps her knuckles against his skull.

“Stop that. You sound like a hyena,” Miss Lucille chides, “Besides we’ll see who’s laughing after I put you through your warm up. You are such a dear, Timothy - putting up with this rude boy.”

“I really really am,” Tim agrees as Miss Lucille takes control of Jason’s wheelchair and pushes him further into the room.

Jason wonders if he’s going to stay for the whole session, god please no, since he had taken the day off work when Tim’s phone goes off and he excuses himself. Jason gets the feeling he has made a terrible mistake when Tim exits. The doors swish ominously behind him leaving him alone with Miss Lucille. He’s terrified in a way that not even Barbara’s wrath can inspire.

Miss Lucille works with a practiced efficiency that Jason admires but makes it obvious very quickly that Tim has been babying him. Her hands are firm and skilled, but rarely gentle. She manipulates his joints to the point of pain – she makes it very clear he is not to lie to her about where that is – and back again, and puts him through a series of what he would usually consider mild exercises. He’s sweating by the end and ridiculously relieved when Tim returns to pick him up.

“She’s trying to kill me,” he gasps.

Tim’s face raises an eyebrow and glances at Miss Lucille skeptically.

“Child, stop whining. I only ever killed one person and that was my first husband ‘cause he came after me with a knife,” Miss Lucille states matter-of-factly.

Tim pauses in his advance and Jason mouths, ‘Help me,’ over the therapist’s shoulder. Tim doesn’t laugh, but paces seriously to Jason’s side. Jason wonders what the phone call was about or if Tim had just put on his professional face to listen to Miss Lucille as she outlines Jason’s recovery timeline, homework, and loads them down with a variety of resistance bands. Jason’s actually glad Tim is here for this part. He’s exhausted and finding it difficult to pay full attention because goddamn it, Tim was right. He really really wants those painkillers right now.
Behind Blue Eyes

Chapter Notes

So this chapter is coming out quick much to my surprise - Little Kitten has gotten to the VERY playful stage and I can't sit down to type for five minutes before she's chasing my fingers across the keyboard. Next chapter will take a little longer to get out because I really need to work on Empty Vessels, Gravel Roads. When I realized most readers were following over from the Bat fandom I decided I needed to do some re-writes so those less familiar with Supernatural canon aren't completely lost in the next chapter there.

Song is 'Behind Blue Eyes' by The Who, which really is so oddly fitting for the bat boys I couldn't not include it. Oh and for anyone who may be wondering fracking is the F-word of choice from Battlestar Galactica. Thus Tim's vocabulary.

MY SUPER SECRET TOP HEAD CANON REVEALED: JASON IS THE AUTHOR OF THUG KITCHEN.

A lot happens here, I hope it doesn't seem too rushed but at the same time I didn't want to get completely bogged down in feels. I'm excited about getting the action moving again. Til next time!

OH! And I almost completely forgot. There's a very non-graphic masturbation scene. And I'm so so sorry if its terrible. As much as I love riding a dick into the sunset, I don't have a penis. I have no idea how to write about jerking one. I don't even like giving hand-jobs, I am so awkward at them. But 4 out of 5 exes agree I'm the best oral they've ever had ;) That was probably TMI. Sorry sorry sorry

Chapter 12

Tim chews on his lip and crosses the street. He hadn't meant to answer when Dick called during Jason's PT session last week. He only did because he had forgotten to check the caller ID. Dick always texted anyways, and now he isn't sure what to expect. He can see Dick’s car parked a block further. The man himself is waiting for him outside Gotham Grind. He smiles broadly when he sees Tim, but Tim can see the nervous tic at its corner. He starts to go for a hug when Tim gets close, then abruptly pulls back and shoves his hands in his pockets. God, if that doesn’t make Tim feel like the scum of the earth.

“Hey, Tim. Thanks for agreeing to meet. So, uh what do you want? My treat,” Dick says in a rush, pulling his wallet from a coat pocket.

“An Americano would be nice. Thanks,” Tim nods and they duck inside.
Tim claims a pair of armchairs tucked into the back corner while Dick orders at the counter. A few minutes later he’s handing Tim a paper cup. His own is piled high with whip cream and drizzled with caramel. Tim snorts.

“Something wrong?” Dick asks, brows drawn like he’s afraid he’s done something to piss Tim off already.

“No. Not at all.” Tim reassures him. “That’s just exactly the same way Steph likes hers: coffee-flavored sugar,” he says nodding to Dick’s drink.

“Oh,” Dick breathes out a sigh of relief.

“So, you wanted to talk?” Tim prompts.

“Yeah. I uh, I did. You look good, by the way. Have you put on weight?”

Tim raises his eyebrows.

Dick struggles to recover, “I mean in a good way. Healthy weight, like…never mind. Restart. How are things going?”

“Things are going alright. The flex armor prototype is coming along well. We’ll be putting it into testing soon. See where we need to improve the design, smooth out any trouble spots that pop up. Government is already expressing interest as an upgrade for riot gear.”

“Cool, cool. Wasn’t there something else you were working on? Some kind of invisibility spray or something?”

“I did set up a meeting with some Swedish physicists to help fund their work on a light refracting polymer. But that’s a long ways off from actual development.”

“You sound busy.”

“Between work and keeping Jason on track with his PT, yeah it’s pretty busy. And I’ve been helping Steph with her organic chemistry class, so I meet up with her every week too.”

Tim waits for Dick to ask about Jason.

He left him the perfect opening and it’s obvious Dick wants to, but Dick plays with his straw and says, “Babs says you and Steph have been going out together at night a lot too.”

Tim sucks his cheeks between his teeth before responding, “Well, since I’m not really welcome to work with the rest of you right now it seemed like a smart move. We work well together, make a good team.”

“Just a good team?”

“No! I mean, yes! We make a good team, but we’re just teammates. She’s dating some guy named Jeremy now. A police officer actually.”

“An officer? She has good taste then,” Dick grins.

“Obviously. She did date me,” Tim preens.

“Obviously,” Dick laughs. “I think I may have to meet this Jeremy. Do a little GCPD digging,” he adds mischievously.
“Oh god, please do! It would piss her off so much.”

They both cackle.

“Speaking of rekindling old flames… You and Barbara talking again?”

Dick ducks his head, “Yeah.”

“Real life talking, right? Not just flirting over the comms?”

“We went out to dinner last Wednesday.”

“Any plans to do it again?”

Dick smiles, “Yeah. I’m taking her to a technology convention at the Science Museum on Friday.”

“She’ll like that. What are you doing back in town today then? I heard you’d gone back to Bludhaven?”

“I’m here for you.”

Tim blinks.

“You came out all this way to buy me a coffee?”

“Mhm.”

“You didn’t come here to try and secretly pump me for information on Jason?” Tim asks suspiciously.

Dick sighs and hangs his head, “Of course I want to know how Jason is doing. But I’m not here for him. I’m here for you. I’m not going to ask about him unless you want to talk about it.”

Tim’s throat constricts painfully. Dick is here. For him. To see him, to talk with him. He’s not piggybacking this trip on top of one to Barbara or Damian. It shouldn’t make him feel so good. Exultation wars with guilt.

“He’ll be out of the wheelchair soon.” Tim offers.

Dick’s head comes up, “Yeah?”

“Really. His physical therapist, Miss Lucille, is a pistol. She keeps him in line. They’re outfitting him with one of those knee scooters next appointment.”

“That’s great! How’s he doing otherwise?”

Tim chews on his lip a while, debating exactly what to reveal to Dick and how.

“He has good days and bad days,” he answers honestly, “Now that he’s cut back on the painkillers he’s started having nightmares. Bad ones.”

Tim brushes his thumb over his jaw where he knows is a fading yellow bruise.

“Sometimes I’ll catch him just staring into space at nothing. And he gets frustrated when he can’t remember something. He’s having a hard time adjusting to civilian life. Spends a lot of time watching the news and bitching about not being able to go out at night. I don’t think he knows what to do with
himself if he’s not cracking skulls.”

Dick laces his fingers and studies how his knuckles link together.

“It’s not all bad though,” Tim smiles softly, “Hey, did you know he cooks?”

“What? Little Wing?”

“You have no idea!” Tim crows, “And when I say he cooks I don’t mean like he can make spaghetti without burning it. I mean like last night he made salmon with pesto. Home made pesto. And some citrus-y orzo dish with goat cheese.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“That’s not even the best part. He talks to himself while he cooks. It’s hilarious. I’ve got a clip on my phone. Snuck it while he was making breakfast the other morning. You gotta see it.”

Tim digs his phone out and scrolls through his videos. Jason appears on screen balanced on a crutch in front of the stove, wheelchair a few feet away. He’s whisking something in a large glass bowl.

“Yo Tim,” he calls over his shoulder, “You like blueberries in your pancakes?”

“Are these some kind of weird health-nut pancakes again?”

“Weird health—the fuck Tim? Do you mean to say, ‘Jason did you out of the kindness of your heart decide to make me some delightfully nutritious pancakes packed with the high fiber and omega-3 wonders of the flax seed?’ Because yes, I did. You know what, just for that you don’t get a choice anymore. You’re getting goddamn blueberries in your pancakes. Blueberries are fantastic. They’ve got potassium and vitamin C and shit. And reduce your risk of heart disease. Hear that Timmy? They’re good for your heart. So you’re gonna eat your fucking blueberry flax pancakes and like them.”

Dick wipes away tears of laughter, “Oh my god. I would pay for that cookbook. He needs his own show.”

Tim straightens as he tucks the phone away, “That’s actually a really good idea.”

“What? A show? I was joking.”

“No. A cookbook. I bet he’d love doing something like that. And it’d give him something to do at home.”

“You should get Alfred to help. He’d enjoy the chance to see you both as well.”

Tim agrees the wholeheartedly.

What Tim expected to be a short uncomfortable encounter easily stretches into a few hours. More often that not, Tim finds himself recounting amusing things Jason has said or done. How he’s taken it upon himself to educate Tim in classic films, screams at the TV when someone screws up on Hell’s Kitchen, and throws tantrums when Tim puts things from the dishwasher back wrong. He shows Dick pictures of Cat curled up asleep on Jason’s chest and one from when Tim pushed her face through a piece of bread, Jason laughing hysterically in the background. Tim hadn’t escaped that one fully unscathed.

Dick chuckles, but it’s strangely subdued.

“What?” Tim asks.
“Nothing. Just…I can’t remember the last time I saw him smile.”

“He’s not plotting murder all the time you know. I guess it’s easy to forget, but he’s only two years older than I am. You think Damian missed out on being a kid? Jason never got to be a teenager and do all the stupid silly shit teenagers do.”

After a while he realizes Dick is looking at him instead of the pictures.

“What?” he asks again.

“Oh nothing. You spend a lot of time over there.”

Tim pauses, “Well, yeah. I mean, free food.”

“And you spend the nights sometimes too. Pancakes?”

Dick is looking at him with an expression he can’t decipher but he feels his cheeks heat up.

“Sometimes after patrol I’m too tired to head back to my apartment. It’s a shorter commute to WE too.”

“Of course,” Dick smiles, his left cheek dimpling.

They don’t stick around much later after that. Dick keeps shooting small glances at Tim that make him tongue-tied. He walks with Dick back to his car.

“Hey, next time you see Jason can you give him something for me?”

“Sure.”

Tim watches Dick circle back to the trunk and retrieve a guitar.

“I grabbed this last time I was at the manor. I thought, maybe it could help him get some dexterity back.”

“That’s very—that’s very thoughtful Dick. Thank you. I’ll make sure he gets it.”

Tim moves to take the case from Dick and Dick pulls him into a bear hug.

“I’m so sorry, Tim. I didn’t mean to make you feel unwanted. If you ever want to talk again, I promise to make time for you,” he mumbles into Tim’s hair.

Tim swallows, “I know. It’s…it’s okay. I’m sorry for being childish. I’m not used to having to share you.”

“I missed you.”

“Me too.”

They separate. Dick tilts his head back and blinks rapidly.

“Y’know,” he says over the car, “B’s leaving for a while on some kind of business trip next week so I’ll be swinging in to take his place. Want to patrol with me?”

Tim’s heart soars.
It drops just a little when Tim gets back to the house and Jason still hasn’t answered the door on his third knock. He raises his fist one last time when the door swings in. Jason is pale and there are dark circles under his eyes. Not a 'Good Day.'

“Sorry. Was in the gym. Didn’t hear you.”

Tim frowns. There’s an alarm that goes off as soon as someone steps within fifty feet of the property. Jason scrubs his hand over his face and into his hair before wheeling back far enough to let Tim slide in.

“What you got there?” he asks, nodding towards the case.

Tim holds it out in front of him like a gift.

“Is that…is that mine?” Jason asks gruffly, pulling into his lap and unlatching the clasps.

“Dick,” Tim explains.

Jason stiffens, “Oh.”

“We met for coffee.”

“How did that go?” Jason asks, watching him suspiciously from the corner of his eye as he checks the case thoroughly for trackers.

“It went well, actually. He’s trying to make amends.”

Jason rubs his fingers over the glossy whorls of the wooden body.

“He’s been talking with Barbara again. Taking her out on real dates and everything.”

Jason tightens the tuning pegs at the head.

“He asked me to patrol with him next time he’s in Gotham.”

“Well fan-fucking-tastic. Good for you. I guess the guilt trip worked after all,” Jason barks and slams the case shut.

“It’s not just guilt, Jason. It’s love too. He gave me the guitar to give to you. He thought practicing with it might help get some of your dexterity back. He wanted to know how you were doing.”

“And what did you tell him, huh? That I’m as much of a fucking mess as he thinks?”

Tim raises an eyebrow, at this point he’s no stranger to the other’s mood swings. He needs to diffuse the situation and quickly. Before Jason decides to throw the guitar at the wall. Or his face. He pulls his phone out.

“I showed him this,” he says with a practiced nonchalance.

It’s the photo of Jason dangling Cat in front of the camera with her face in bread. Jason snorts and his
lips twitch up at the corners despite himself. Jason’s anger dissipates as fast as it boils up. Disaster averted.

“You’re a little shit, you know that?”

“Yeah, I know. So what’s for dinner?”

“Now I see how it is,” Jason groans dramatically, ”You’re only here for food. I feel used, Tim. Well, I’m fresh out of dignity so I guess you’ll have to settle for Brunswick Stew.”

“Sounds good. Oh hey, I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind if I took some pictures while you made dinner tonight.”

“What for?”

Tim smiles bashfully. He has to play this perfectly to hook him. If he tells Jason it was Dick’s idea, Jason’s likely to reject it on principle.

“Or not, you’ll probably think its stupid.”

“Probably,” Jason agrees readily, “but lets hear it out anyway so I can make fun of you for it.”

Tim squints at him.

“I know you get bored playing house all day. I thought you may enjoy having a project to work on.”

“Such as?” Jason crosses him arms over his chest looking thoroughly unimpressed.

“With how much you love cooking, I thought maybe it’d be fun to make a cookbook.”

“A cookbook,” Jason repeats hesitantly.

*Danger Will Robinson! You’re losing him, time for maximum effort!*

“I mean, you know how helpless I am in the kitchen. I have a hard time remembering all the steps. But if I take pictures and you write the directions down it would be really helpful.”

Jason looks at him appraisingly.

“You know…that’s not a terrible idea.”

Tim bounces on the balls of his feet, fingers crossed behind his back.

“Sure why not. But don’t get in my way, okay? And let me know what recipes you want and stuff. Like I said though I already got the stuff for Brunswick stew tonight. Its supposed to be gross out. Want me to fill a thermos for patrol?”

Tim grins, “Thanks Mom, but I’ll be fine.”

Jason purses his lips skeptically. He half-rises out of the wheel chair to pluck a thermos from one of the upper cabinets and sets it deliberately on the counter with a resolute thud.

“Take it anyway. If you really don’t want it, I’m sure Blondie will be more than happy to have some.”

Tim sticks his tongue out at him.
“Oh hey, another thing. Do you mind if I crash here tonight? After first rounds we’re staking out a
place on Clay Street,” he asks, knowing Clay is only a 15 minute grapple away and Jason isn’t likely
to deny him.

“That’s pretty close by. Anything I should know about going down?”

“Eh, we think there might be some kind of black market organ trade going on.”

“Like waking up in a bath tub full of ice and no kidney thing?”

“Sort of. Batgirl thinks so anyway. It’s her case, I’m just back up.”

“Gross. Yeah, sure. I’ll give you a temporary key code to get in.”

“What is up with you?” Stephanie huffs several hours later.

They are lying flat on a roof top with a night vision scope aimed at the building across the street. It's
not raining but it’s still plenty dismal in the cold heavy mist that has settled over the city.

“What do you mean?”

Stephanie pushes a stray lock of hair back from where it's plastered to her cheek in the damp, “I
mean we’ve been out here all night, soaking wet for what’s probably going to be a no-show. I’m
cold, wet, miserable, and pissed off and you should be too but you’ve had this big idiot smile on your
face all night. So dish.”

Tim shrugs, “Had a good day is all.”

“Things work out with Big Bird then?”

“Oh, yeah. Mhm. We got coffee. It was nice,” Tim replies distractedly as he retrieves his thermos
from their stake-out bag.

“What is that?”

“Nothing. A snack.”

Stephanie eyes it enviously, “What’s in there? It smells fantastic. I want some.”

“Too bad.”

“What? You eat like a bird. You’re probably not even going to finish that whole thing are you!
Don’t be wasteful Red, let me have a sip,” she reaches over with one hand and tries to take the
thermos.

Tim smacks her hand away. She drops the scope and retaliates by throwing her other arm around
him as well, trying to bring him close in a bear hug. Tim rolls away giggling. They wrestle good
naturedly til Tim finally relinquishes his death grip on the thermos and lets Stephanie steal a taste.
“Dayum, that’s good,” she moans. “Did tall, undead, and handsome make this? He cooks for you now? That’s not fair. I want a hot young Alfred.”

“Don’t be greedy. You already have a hot young Gordon who brings you coffee.”

“But he doesn’t pack me patrol snacks,” she pouts.

“Yeah well he probably also doesn’t yell at you for leaving rings on the coffee table or putting the bowls back wrong when you unload the dishwasher. Hood’s more like an extremely grouchy hot young Alfred.”

Stephanie slyly takes another sip, “You two sound very cozy and domestic. So you think he’s hot, hm?”

“What?” Tim looks up in alarm.

“You just said he’s a grouchy hot young Alfred,” she smirks.

“No I didn’t.”

“Yes you did.”

“No, I…oh for Pete’s sake you know what I meant, I was just repeating you.”

“Uh huhhh.”

“Shut up,” Tim hisses and snatches the thermos back.

“Have you ever noticed his lips? They’re plush. Make me wanna wrap my thighs round that face.”

Tim swallows a mouthful of soup and chokes on a carrot. Stephanie laughs evilly as she slaps him on the back. He’s saved from complete embarrassment when she suddenly pulls away and reaches for the abandoned scope.

“What do you see?” He asks breathlessly.

“There’s someone out there.”

“Where?”

Stephanie hands him the scope and points. There’s a shadow of a figure lingering in the closest alley to the left of their target building. Tim narrows the focus. A man. Could be a tall woman, but the stance and build suggest otherwise. The shoulders though curled in look too broad under the jean jacket to be female. They have a baseball cap that hides their face from this angle.

“What are they doing?” Stephanie whispers.

“I don’t know. Just standing there.”

“Do you think they know we’re here?”

“Can’t tell. Maybe, but they aren’t looking in this direction. I think maybe they’re staking out this place too.”

Tim and Steph hunker down cautious in the company of their new companion. They wait another hour and a half in silence until their mysterious friend inexplicably appears to give up waiting and
“What do you say we go meet and greet our fellow stalker? See if he knows anything.” Steph uncurls from the roof and stretches her arms over her head.

“Let’s go.”

Tim’s good mood is officially ruined.

“Christ, Tim! You reek,” Jason covers his nose from his position on the couch, still awake. The guitar is lying on the coffee table as if hastily discarded.

“Thanks. I hadn’t noticed,” Tim drawls, “Can I toss this in the wash while I take a shower?” He hefts the bag with his Red Robin costume stuffed inside.

“Sure. Should probably wash what you’re wearing now too,” Jason wrinkles his nose.

Tim sniffs himself and grimaces. The potent scent of sewage had rubbed off of him and onto the civvies he’d changed into. Without further pleasantries Tim heads to the bathroom and strips, dropping his clothes haphazardly on the floor. He fumbles with the faucet knobs till he gets the water adjusted to as hot as possible without actually scalding the flesh off his bones and steps in. For a minute he just luxuriates in the heat and steam, the water running off his body turning a murky grey. He does a quick 180 and locates the shampoo bottle sitting in one of the corners. He’s rubbing an overly generous portion into his scalp when his fingers slow.

This is Jason’s shampoo. Tim pops the cap again and squeezes it lightly just under his nose, curious. It’s spicy and…Oh. Old Spice. He quickly snaps the lid down and almost throws it back towards its corner. Damnit, Tim. This is exactly the weird kind of shit you started doing when you met Steph. He grabs the plain white bar of soap and starts aggressively scrubbing it over his skin. He is not crushing on Jason fracking Todd. He tightens his grip and the soap shoots out from his hand, skittering along the bottom of the tub. He grinds his teeth and picks it up, futilely trying not to think of locker room jokes about dropping the soap. He almost drops it again when he thinks instead about the last time he’d held the bar in his hands.

He had sat Jason down on the toilet while he got the water ready and set to work wrapping his cast while the tub filled. He had expected Jason to make a crude wisecrack of some kind about his position between the other man’s legs while he tore of strips of duct tape with his teeth but to his relief Jason remained silent. Tim reminded himself this was no different than when he’d had to patch up Kon or Gar or Bart or Dick. Okay, maybe not Dick. He wasn’t blind.

He was however, professional. He had clinically helped Jason remove his briefs. Jason’s back was still giving him problems and he lacked the flexibility to lean forward enough to pull them past his ankles. Tim meant to help him with his shirt as well, but Jason waved him away and pulled it over his head one handed. Tim carefully kept his head turned away as he juggled Jason into the tub. Partly to give the man some privacy, and partly because if the feel of scarred skin over hard muscle was
enough to set Tim’s brain sparking he was sure if he dared to touch and look at the same time his brain would short circuit. So he kept his eyes averted except for when he had to hand Jason something; a washcloth, shampoo, a bar of soap.

Until time came to get back out and Tim couldn’t not look at him to see where to hook his arms to lever the larger heavier man up and out. So much skin. And abs Tim could climb like a ladder. It was the thighs that really did him in though.

Shit. Tim looks down. He’s hard. Like he realized he was while hauling Jason’s wet body flush against him. Unlike in the memory though, this time he doesn’t freak out in shock and horror and lose his grip, sending Jason plummeting back into the tub and causing a small tidal wave to rise up, smack his victim in the face and send him into a coughing fit. This time he jerks himself until he comes with a scowl on his face because he is not fracking attracted to Jason fracking Todd.

He has never been so far from relaxed after masturbating before, he thinks irritably as he towels off and stomps out of the bathroom. He feels itchy under his freshly scrubbed skin and is fully intending to stay in a foul mood when his foot catches on a neatly folded stack of clothes left just outside the doorway. The t-shirt and shorts are both massively too big for him. The shirt keeps sliding off his shoulder and the shorts threaten to slip off his hips. As he rolls the elastic waistband over a few times till it’s snug, he stops and cocks his head to the side. He hears music.

It's hesitant, like the guitarist is pulling chords one at a time from a long forgotten memory. The tune would be hard to recognize, distorted by the stumbling tempo, if not for the accompanying voice.

“No one bites back as hard
On their anger
None of my pain and woe
Can show through.

But my dreams
They aren’t as empty
As my conscience seems to be

I have—Fuck”

Fingers stumble over a discordant note and Jason carefully repeats the last few bars till he nails the transition. Tim clears his throat and allows his feet to tread heavily before he enters the living room to alert Jason to his presence before he starts singing again. Because when he hears that voice dark and rough like fault lines grinding against each other miles below the earth’s crust all he can think of is Stephanie’s remark on wanting to lock her legs round that mouth. Sure enough, when he walks in Jason is already latching the case clasps closed.

“So what happened?”

Tim replies with one word, “Sewers.”

Jason’s mouth pulls to one side, “Sounds like a shit night.”

“And I thought bad puns were Dick’s specialty.”

Jason chuffs with laughter, “Couldn’t resist. It set itself up. Wanna beer?”

Tim nods and pushes wet bangs out of his face before collapsing across the couch. Jason’s wheels squeak on the linoleum in the kitchen where he can’t see him. When he returns Cat is on his lap and he’s got two cold bottles dangling from his hand by their necks. He presses one into Tim’s hands,
cap already popped and a curl of condensed air rising from the lip.

“So sewers, huh. Thought you guys were on a stake-out.”

“Stake-out ended up being a bust. Our guy never showed.”

“So you went on a leisurely jog through the sewers for fun?”

Tim swishes the beer from one cheek to another before swallowing.

“Our guy never showed, but someone else did. We think he was staking out the place too. So we decided to go after him but he just…disappeared. Chased him down an alley way and poof. Only way he could have escaped was through the manhole so that’s where we went. A couple times we thought we heard someone wading around but we never caught up to him, never got an ID.”

“Huh,” Jason’s brow furrows, “Definitely not another vigilante?”

“Didn’t look like it. Usually I would say competitor, partner, or hit-man but none of those seem right either especially for the organ trade. A cop or detective wouldn’t take to the sewers like that and Stephanie would have already known if they were investigating the case. By the way, she says its rude of you not to send enough snacks on patrol for everyone.”

“You gotta be kidding me. I should start charging.”

“Oh, Stephanie never kids about food. She’s like you that way. Actually, you two would really get along.”

“We’ve met. She doesn’t completely annoy me.”

“I keep forgetting that. We should all go out sometime. Grab a pizza or something.”

Jason “hmms,” noncommittally.

“Oh come on, a little socialization would be good for you. You can’t just talk to me and Cat for the rest of your life.”

“Don’t forget Miss Lucille.”

Tim rolls his eyes, “Miss Lucille does not talk, she verbally assaults you into compliance.”

Jason gives a little head wiggle somewhere between a nod and a shake.

“You have to have friends, Jason.”

“No, you don’t. Friends are liabilities,” he counters scornfully.

Tim eyes him skeptically, “Am I supposed to believe you’ve never once had a friend?”

Jason pauses. Tim can see him thinking.

“There was one girl back in school. Rena. She was nice. We were friends, I think.”

Tim stares at him incredulously, “You have to go that far back?”

Jason sneers at him, “Believe it or not, the League’s ninja assassin’s aren’t big on slumber parties and braiding each others hair. Before that I was too busy taking care of my mom and making sure we had
enough food to eat to make friends.”

Tim stares into the bottle in his hands, wishing a vortex would open and swallow him up.

“What was your mom like?” he asks quietly.

Jason sighs.

“I need another beer.”

Tim gets up and retrieves what’s left of the six-pack. Upon his return Cat decides to transfer to him, jumping onto his lap and turning in a circle three times before curling up. Tim goes rigid. He turns his face up to Jason pleadingly.

“What is it doing?” he gestures to Cat.

Cat is flexing her paws, claws threateningly pricking through his shirt into his skin underneath.

Jason snickers at Tim’s predicament, “She’s making biscuits.”

“Making biscuits?”

“Like she’s kneading dough, y’know? Relax. It means she’s happy, not about to eviscerate you.”

“Oh, ok,” Tim accepts warily.

Cat’s claws are unforgiving, leaving stinging patches behind as she digs into him but if Jason says it means she’s happy then he’s more afraid of what might happen if he attempts to move her. He hisses lightly through his teeth at the unpleasant sensation. He’s surprised when after a moment, Jason speaks, thinking that his earlier question had been shrugged off.

“She danced in the kitchen, always had the radio tuned to the Golden Oldies station. She liked old things. Old music, old movies. Used to joke that was why we never moved out of Crime Alley—she couldn’t bear to leave Old City. When we had a little money she would go to flea markets and get little glass bottles at ten cents a piece and line em up in the window sill so when the sun shone through in the mornings the kitchen floor would be all colored like stained glass.” Jason starts picking at the edges of the label on the sweating glass and carefully peeling it off. “She was… She tried, y’know? Even though she didn’t have to. I wasn’t hers but she never treated me like I wasn’t. I think she loved me, even if in the end it wasn’t enough to keep her from killing herself, but I think she’s the only person who ever really has.”

Tim wants to argue. He wants to tell Jason that he’s wrong. Bruce and Alfred, Dick and Barbara, all care about him. How can he not see that when it’s so obvious to Tim? He knows it won’t be accepted though, so he stretches out and snags one of the beers off the table.

“She sounds great,” he says.

The cap cuts into his hands when he twists it off.

“Janet didn’t. Try, I mean. I had nannies, housekeepers, therapists, you name it. All these other people shoved my way so she didn’t have to be there. I don’t think she wanted to have kids. Only had me because it was expected. Maybe because Jack asked. I don’t know. He was alright. When I told him I wanted to do gymnastics he made sure I had all the best coaches and gear. I think he was hoping for one of those all-American boy scouts he could take hiking through the wilderness to a dig in Bolivia or something though. Wasn’t sure what to do when he got me instead. Like you said, he at
least tried though. What about your dad? I don’t think I’ve ever heard you bring him up.”

Jason shrugs, busy peeling the labels off his third beer, “Not anything to bring up. He was hardly ever there. Mom said he wanted to be there, but he couldn’t because he was in jail. She was always apologizing for him like that, swearing he was a good man. But good men don’t leave their families to fend for themselves in Gotham. Honestly, I don’t even remember what he looked like. Fuck, why are we even talking about this shit? Can we change the subject?”

Tim rolls the clammy empty glass back and forth in his hands.

“Bruce is going out of town. Want to come in to work with me next week? There’s some really cool stuff in the labs.”

“Can I build a giant killer robot?”

“No. But you can help me run impact simulations on the new flex armor.”

“I can’t decide if that sounds boring or not.”

“Let me rephrase, want to hit a Wayne Enterprises intern with a baseball bat?”

“I’m in.”
Paradise Lost

Chapter Notes

Damnit guys, I was supposed to get the next chapter of Empty Vessels, Gravel Roads up first. This is your fault entirely.

I want to give a huge thanks to everyone who comments. Because of y'all I realize how much it means to writers to get feed back. In turn over the past month I have been trying to be as awesome as you guys and comment on all of the fics I come across that I appreciate. Its not always easy taking the time to put emotions into thoughts into words. But I've gotten so much out of it- the conversations I've had with other writers has been so enlightening and fruitful. So thank you for inspiring me to do what y'all do every post. This is such a great and encouraging community.

Anyway. For your enjoyment: more of the Batfam ripping into each other. One more chapter to go and then we'll be back in the thick of the action in chapter 15!

Chapter 13

“Triad makes the most sense,” Stephanie persists, “China’s known for having the corner on the organ trade.”

“China’s known for being the greatest exporter of organs on the black market,” Tim amends, “They harvest them from the prisons and sell them to shady doctors and clinics here in the States. Why bring more attention to themselves by killing random citizens here when they already have a steady supply?”

Stephanie rolls her eyes, “I don’t know. Fresher organs? At the grocery store people pay an extra $2 per pound for shrimp from the Gulf Coast instead of Thailand!”

“When did you start eating shrimp?”

“It’d also save them a lot of money in bribes and fuel as opposed to trying to smuggle them into the country.”

“I thought you didn’t like shrimp?”

“Since Jeremy made some shrimp lo mein thing for dinner last week. And it was awesome. God Tim, can we please focus on my case?” She snaps, then turns and pats Jason on the shoulder consolingly, “But I’m sure it isn’t as good as your lo mein.”

Jason shrugs and grabs a slice of pizza from the box on the floor between them, perfectly content to see how much he can eat through before Stephanie and Tim stop bickering long enough to notice.
He’s thinking at least three slices now that Blondie has brought up the new boy toy. Its one part each cute and disgusting how ruffled Tim gets whenever Officer Poole is brought up. He takes a bite. Its still too hot and he chases it with a swig of beer to keep his tongue from burning.

“Hey, hand me that list,” he orders around the lip of his bottle. Tim distractedly shoves the stack of papers his way.

“Of course its not as good,” he hears Tim mutter under his breath before clearing his throat and stating more loudly, “besides if it was Triad we would have heard some chatter coming out of Chinatown, but there’s been zip.”

Jason finds himself smirking at the comment.

“There’s been zip about this coming out of anywhere!” Stephanie yells in frustration, “We’ve got six bodies over five months with their organs missing and no one has heard anything!”

Tim opens his mouth to reply and Jason cuts him off. He’s noticed one of the easiest ways to tick the younger man off especially when he’s already riled up like this. He frequently uses it to his advantage. And entertainment.

“What’s up with the livers?”

Tim cranes to look at the report Jason’s holding in his hand, “What do you mean?”

“Well, in every one of these cases the livers have been removed.”

“Yeah, I know,” Tim says waspishly, “Liver transplants are the second most common transplant after kidneys.”

“Third. If you count corneas,” Jason retorts. Little shit thinks he’s so smart. It gives him a smug sense of satisfaction on the rare occasion he gets to correct Tim.

“One of the reasons kidney and liver transplants are so common is because they can be donated live. People down on their luck will sell one of their kidneys or part of their liver for a big pay out. Market is inundated with those. The higher demand higher profit is for hearts, intestines, lungs, pancreas.”

Jason takes a breath and looks up. Blondie seems to have caught onto his pizza plot and is quickly shoving a slice down her throat. Tim’s full focus is still on him.

“So? Why pay Joe Shmoe $2,000 for his kidney if I can kill him and take it for free then sell it for $5,000 along with all his other organs?” Tim counters.

“That’s my point though,” Jason explains, “Look at these lists of what’s been removed from the victims: Liver, corneas, small intestine. Corneas, liver, heart. Intestines, corneas, liver, lungs. Pancreas, heart, liver. Whoever is doing this isn’t always harvesting the kidneys. Why not? Why take only three or four things from each body when you could harvest everything every time for maximum profit? Why always take the livers?”

“Because they go with a nice Chianti?” Stephanie asks through a mouthful of cheese and pepperoni.

“Bingo, Blondie. You’ve got a sick fuck here. Someone’s giving them a shopping list of things they want, your killer checks them off, takes only what he needs and keeps the liver for himself. They don’t care about the money that’s why they don’t take everything. Probably helps them stay under the radar that way too if they aren’t raking in obscene amounts of cash. This is about the kill. And the livers.”
Stephanie and Tim exchange glances and “Ewww,” at the same time. The blonde glares at her second slice of pizza suspiciously before deciding she’s not actually grossed out enough to lose her appetite.

“It’s a…good hypothesis,” Tim admits grudgingly, “I’m not convinced. But its something we should keep in mind.”

“I still think we should question the Triad. They may not be involved directly, but they would probably know if someone is hedging in on their operation,” Stephanie puts out.

Tim shoots her down, “Maybe as a last resort. I don’t want to get involved with them unless absolutely necessary. We’ll work on figuring out where those organs ended up first and which doctor was responsible for those transplants.”

Jason snags a greasy triangle of love and scoots back out of the impending fray. Blondie’s eyes narrow to slits. He can’t blame her.

“Excuse me? I think you’ve forgotten who’s case this is.”

Tim whips around, “Yeah and you asked for my help. This is me helping!”

“No! This is you taking over like you always do because you don’t trust anyone but yourself to lead a mission.”

God, this is so much better than staying home and watching TV. The way Tim’s face screws up at the accusation is especially amusing.

“That’s not true!”

“I’m Tim Drake!” Stephanie pantomimes, “Look at me! I know how to solve everyone’s case for them because I’m so smart!”

Jason leans back against the couch. He pops another beer and steals the last slice of pizza. Every once in a while he glances at the clock sitting on the night stand next to Stephanie’s bed. It’s thirteen minutes exactly before they break long enough to breathe. Finally Tim glances down at the empty box and wails, “What the hell happened to the pizza? You assholes! I didn’t even get a piece!”

Stephanie grins at him and deliberately takes a big bite off one her crusts. He should intervene before Tim can launch himself at her. Really, he’d be doing the kid a favor. Rolling around fighting on the floor over a scrap of crust is…is something he never wants to see Tim do. Not like he’s had to do for real. And just like that his mood drops. Jason grits his teeth in frustration. He’d been having such a good time. Talking cases, strategies. Almost like he and Bruce used to a lifetime ago. Fuck he hates this. Hates how his mind instantly goes there and he can’t stop it. He’s fine and then one word, one image, and he’s plummeting back into those places that hurt.

“Hey, hey! Alright, knock it off dumbasses. Tim, let’s go. It’s late and we have to work tomorrow.”


“Yes, sure. Let’s go. Do you need some painkillers?” Tim asks.

Jason grunts in reply as Stephanie and Tim come together to help him to his feet and get him propped up on his ankle scooter. He’s stiff from sitting on the floor for the past few hours. Stephanie goes to open the door for them while Tim keeps one hand on his lower back. He thinks about telling Tim
off, he doesn’t really need the support, but it feels kind of nice. Warm on the ache there. He decides not to.

Stephanie waves them into the dorm hall, “Alright ya lunks. Move along now. Its past Grandpa Grumpypants bed time and I’ve got a lab in the morning.”

“Always a pleasure, Blondie,” Jason grins and shoots her a wink.

Tim smacks him lightly on the back of the head, a habit he knows the kid picked up from Miss Lucille.

“Stop flirting. She’s got a boyfriend,” Tim stage whispers.

Stephanie gives him the finger and closes the door. They don’t say anything til they reach the car. Tim is quieter than usual, Jason can see him chewing on his lip while he buckles into the driver’s seat.

“There’s um, there’s some tikka masala left overs in the fridge.” he offers.

Offering Tim food usually seems to brighten him up some.

Tim flicks his eyes toward him, questioning.

“Y’know since you didn’t get to eat any pizza. If you need something to eat you can come in and have it.”

It seems to work. Tim releases his lip and flashes one of his little half smiles.

He’s fallen into a rhythm over the past three weeks. Mondays and Thursdays he accompanies Tim to work in the labs at WE. He has a fancy guest pass on a lanyard and everything. PT with Miss Lucille is on Tuesdays and Fridays. Wednesdays and Saturdays are spent recovering from Miss Lucille. He spends those days with an ear tuned to police radio, keeping track of the flow of power back and forth in Gotham the best he can.

He’ll need to be ready, will need to know the lay of the land when he gets back on the streets. He formulates dozens of different strategies for reinstating himself in the city’s underworld customized for every scenario he can come up with, whether its Penguin, Black Mask, Two-Face, or some other reprobate at the top. All except Joker. You can’t plan for him. Jason wonders about Joker. He hasn’t heard anything on the radio. No one mentioned him while he was staying at the manor. Tim hasn’t brought him up since cutting ties with the other bats. Tim probably knows something. He should ask. Except he’s not sure he wants to know. He knows Batman didn’t kill Joker. Wouldn’t. Not even now he’s murdered you twice over.

Jason flinches at the hiss that slides through the soft wrinkles of his brain. He hears it less now than he once did, though he still wakes with its battery acid taste on the back of his tongue. Maybe it will fade more with every death between him and the pit. It’s a bitter hope. Batman didn’t kill Joker. But did he hunt him down? Did he find him? Did he put him in a body cast again? Did he even try or did he let him go because you have never been his priority, never been more important than the mission, never been his son.
“Stop it!” he screams and grinds the heels of his palms over his ears as if it will block the voice inside his head.

He opens his eyes, breathing heavy. Moves his hands to his hair and tugs. He can’t do this right now. It’s Monday. Monday morning. Tim will be here soon. He should…he should make breakfast. He’s out of eggs. Used up in omelets. Tim inhales omelets. He reaches for the canister of oatmeal, shakes it, puts it back. Not enough for a full bowl. Well then, a smoothie.

He’s got some canned pumpkin and almond milk. He thinks Tim might like that considering the fridge full of protein shakes he’d glimpsed back at his New York digs. He starts pulling ingredients. Pumpkin, rich in vitamin A and beta-carotene. Cinnamon, lowers blood sugar and improves cognitive processing. The Manganese in nutmeg builds strong bones and connective tissue. Except he can’t find the goddamn blender. Where the fuck is his blender? Its not sitting on the counter by the fridge where it should be. Jason starts ripping apart his cabinets til he finds it shoved back behind the mixing bowl under the sink. Also not where it should be.

“Damnit Tim.”

Speaking of the little devil, there’s a knock at the door. Jason zips over and opens the door with a scowl. Tim is standing on the front step with an expectant smile. Jason kind of wants to push him off the stoop. He growls threateningly instead.

“Good morning to you too,” Tim chirps, steaming tumbler in hand.

“If you’re hoping for breakfast you’re out of luck. Because someone ate all my eggs then hid the blender under the goddamn sink and I ran out of time to make anything. You don’t put food or anything that touches food under the sink Tim, that’s where the cleaning supplies are. Do it again you’ll be drinking a Clorox smoothie.”

Tim draws back, sneering hesitantly, “You wouldn’t.”

Jason crosses his arms over his chest.

“Shit, fine. Sorry. You ready? Einar mentioned Friday he thinks they’ve formulated a stable reproducible polymer structure. Thought you might want to check that out. Also, Travis has finally been cleared by medical to get back on the testing floor today after that concussion. Just no more head shots okay? We’re testing the flex armor not the helmet.”

Jason rolls his eyes as he arms the security behind him.

“For the last time, I did not hit him in the head. I hit him in the chest, he tripped over his own feet when the ankle joint locked and hit his head on the floor.”

“That’s not what Karen said,” Tim says casually taking a sip from his thermos before setting it on the car roof to open the door.

“That’s because it's Karen, you know Karen hates me!”

“Yeah, and you antagonize her.”

“Oh come on, the sandwich thing was a joke. Besides, armor is only as good as the helmet. Doesn’t matter how many bullets you can take to the chest plate if someone can end you in one head shot,” Jason grumbles climbing inside.

“It’s called flex armor Jason, helmets aren’t meant to flex. That’s an entirely different project.
Though, if you’d let me take a look at one of your hoods I’d be really interested in seeing what we could do with that as a starting point.”

“In your dreams,” Jason snarls protectively.

Tim’s alright but he’s not trusting that type of information to anyone the other bats have access too. He doesn’t need to give up all his secrets. Tim’s already learned enough.

“One of these days, you’ll let me. I bet I could fit you with all sorts of upgrades.”

Jason scoffs, “It’s cute you think you can improve on my work.”

“Damn right I could. Maybe not in the design and bells and whistles, but I’m better at coding than you. I could make it run faster and harder I guarantee.”

Jason raises a skeptical eyebrow.

“Oh, by the way did you get a chance to look over the leg this weekend?” Tim asks without taking his eyes off the road.

“Yeah. It’s fine. Nothing serious, the design is good. The joint is just catching on a molding flaw that didn’t get cut away. It’s still on the coffee table, I haven’t put it back together yet. I’ll show you after work.”

Tim nods and they keep up the flow of half-hearted arguing. Another rhythm Jason has fallen into with Tim. He’s not sure how he feels about it. He’s not used to talking this much. Abstractly he knows its something he used to do. He remembers Alfred calling him a chatterbox when he was at the manor though he forgets the exact instances. Bruce would reprimand him on patrol as well. That probably had more to do with his language than loquacity. He refused to believe it was possible to more chatty than Golden Boy as Robin. Maybe it was habit from living with his mom, narrating out loud what he was doing to fill the void that should have been held her voice. “

*Hey mom, I’m going to have a glass of water. Do you want a glass of water? I know juice is better but we ran out. You should really have something to drink. Please, try. Try and drink something. You’ll just feel worse if you get dehydrated. Small sips is okay. Want me to turn on the radio? I wont turn it up loud I promise.*

He doesn’t talk much anymore. Doesn’t have anyone to talk to outside of the role of Red Hood. Sometimes it’s alright. When he’s talking with Tim he finds his mind drifts less often to darker crueler places. Other times, Tim’s voice grates and Jason has to claim a headache and excuse himself before he screams at the younger man. He’s getting better at that. Especially in public. Working in the labs at WE is a very different environment than in a dimly lit warehouses by the wharf and scientists are very different than your typical gun runner. For one they scare far more easily.

He’s tried to remain conscious of his tone and body language while interacting with them, constantly readjusting so he appears less of a threat. It’s not entirely successful if the number of people willing to sit with him in the WE cafeteria during lunch is a good gauge. It feels like that one time Bruce enrolled him at Gotham Academy before relenting and allowing him to continue in Public School. He doesn’t belong here just like he didn’t belong there.

At least they aren’t looking down at him here. They’re glancing at him sideways now like he’s something potentially dangerous, even dressed in a button down shirt with a lanyard and a pen in his pocket like a nerd. Tim would probably sit with him, but Tim almost always has lunch meetings to attend. Sometimes if their breaks line up he’ll sit with the Swedish group. They seem less wary of his
presence though he suspects its because they are willing to put up with him to converse with someone in their native language. Jason’s Swedish is rusty but its improving. Einar especially has helped, showing great patience in their halting conversations. On the days neither Tim nor the Swedes are to be found, Jason buries his nose in a book and ignores the furtive looks of the other WE employees.

He’s wondering if he’ll be able to finish the end of *Paradise Lost* today as the clock ticks closer to noon. Tim is hunched over Karen’s desk looking at the data read out from the simulation they’re running. Travis is standing in front of him in a mock up of the armor, minus one leg, with what looks like miniature ping pong balls glued to various points. He’s looking at Jason with apprehension. Jason grins back.

“Okay, okay. We’re good for that one. Jay can you try a downward stroke to the forearm now?” Tim asks distractedly.

Jason hefts the bat up and waits for Travis to extend his arm. The intern flinches but does so. Jason brings the bat down. There’s a crack and a series of lines draw themselves across the screen.

“Good, good. Now do that again as hard as you can.”

Travis’ eyes go round.

Jason raises the bat again, “Relax kid, you’ll be fine. You missed the worst of it. We shot Mark last week, barely a bruise. Besides, I hear the worker’s comp here is—

“What the hell is going on here!”

Jason spins, weapon aloft in automatic response to the voice booming across the room. He’s expecting Batman in full cape and cowl and there’s a second of confusion when he’s faced instead with Bruce in Tom Ford.

“Mr. Drake,” he barks, “I need to see you in my office immediately. And you,” he squints at Jason’s nametag, “Mr. Peterson.”

Tim’s look of horror mirrors his own.

“Now,” Bruce growls so deeply it must shred his larynx.

Tim opens and closes his mouth a few times before falling into line. Jason follows more reluctantly. Wincing at the slight squeak of his scooter’s wheels. They leave Karen and Travis gaping as Bruce parades them back through the main lab like particularly naughty children on their way to the principles office. Coworkers watch in mute shock that Jason is sure will erupt into a flurry of whispered gossip as soon as the door closes behind them.

Once in Bruce’s office he types a four digit code into the security panel on the wall. The windows white out and Jason hears the hiss of a lock activating. He's sure its soundproof as well. No one will hear their screams. Bruce stalks to stand behind his desk. He leans forward just enough to look threatening, the pads of his fingers splayed out on the dark wood of his desk.

“Would either of you care to enlighten me as to what the hell is going on?” His voice is deceptively low and calm.

Jason isn’t ready for this. He hasn’t seen Bruce since the manor. Bruce wasn’t supposed to be back from his trip for a month. Tim had sworn to him. He had showed him the email memo Bruce had sent to all the heads of WE. They had another week before they were supposed to deal with this. Tim
said he would talk to him. Said he had a plan and not to worry. That if he could just show Bruce, if Bruce could see all the good work Jason had accomplished while he was gone he’d have no choice but to agree to let them continue on.

“We were running impact simulations on the armor. We’re almost done. Ahead of schedule actually. Prototype will be available for production in a couple weeks. General Howard is ready to draw up a contract.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about and you know it. Jason, what are you doing here?”

Jason licks his lips. He should be getting angry. He’s always angry at Bruce. Especially when he takes this tone. He tries to summon that up, draw it up so it’s singing hot under his skin. It doesn’t come. He panics. He’s not ready for this. He’s not ready to face Bruce.

Tim answers for him.

“Jason is here to help. I asked him to come in and help me run the simulations. He’s been very helpful in identifying problem areas and improving the design. I can show you the changes, I have the schematics in my office I’ll go get—

Bruce slams his hand down.

“Stop it, Tim.”

He draws a breath.

“You went against my direct wishes. We discussed this and I told you no. So you waited for me to leave and went behind my back. You didn’t just disrespect me, you disrespected this company, and made it obvious you have no respect for the position which you hold.”

“Bruce I think you’re blowing this out of propor—

“No. This is not the Cave, I am not Batman and you’re not Red Robin right now. You don’t get to go against my decision just because you disagree with it. This is my company. My father’s company. My family’s legacy. I have spent my whole life ensuring its success and you have no right to jeopardize that.”

Tim protests, voice cracking, “I hardly think giving Jason a chance is jeopardizing the company.”

“You gave a mentally unstable felon level 8 security access! Did you even consider what he could do with WE access codes? Either for his own purpose or selling them to the highest bidder. Do you want Red Hood on the streets with experimental weapons technology? Did you think about all of the classified contracts we now have to put on hold so we can investigate whether they’ve been compromised because of a security breach? This is going to cost Wayne Enterprises contracts, profits, and reputation if it ever gets out.”

“I never gave Jason access to weapons or classified projects,” Tim argues. It sounds weak to even Jason’s ears.

“No. You just gave him access to a point he could hack into them from there.”

Jason has had enough. Bruce...Bruce isn’t wrong about any of this. Maybe that’s why he can’t get mad. This isn’t a difference of ethics. He has no high moral ground to shout down Bruce’s antiquated principles from. He shouldn’t be here. He should never have let Tim talk him into this. Into thinking it was a good idea. Stupid idealistic idiot. He's not sure if the voice means him or Tim.
“I have every right to fire both of you. Jason, please hand me your badge. Tim, as soon as the flex armor is under contract - three weeks unpaid leave, I suggest you take that time to seriously think about your place in Wayne Enterprises.”

Jason takes the lanyard from round his neck and moves to place it on the desk. Tim grabs his wrist.

“With all due respect, you can’t do that,” Tim states with steel in his voice.

“Excuse me?” Bruce looks at Tim in what Jason thinks is surprise.

It’s hard to surprise Bruce. There’s not a lot of instances he can catalog and use to identify that expression on him.

“Jason isn’t a WE employee. He’s on Drake Industries payroll. He’s at WE as a consulting independent contractor. You can’t fire him,” Tim hisses smugly.

Bruce doesn’t move. Its eerie. The fingers spread across his desk don’t flex, he doesn’t grit his teeth. He’s perfectly still.

“Alright. I can however have him removed and prohibited from Wayne Enterprises premises. Jason —

Jason doesn’t want to hear what Bruce is going to say next. He drops the lanyard and leaves. Tim shouts something and starts chasing him down the halls. God he must look stupid trying to run away on this dumbass little scooter. He just wishes he could take the stairs with dignity. He beats Tim to the elevator and hits the ‘close door’ button before Tim can slide his hand through.

He takes a shuddering breath. Fucking elevators. At least the ones at WE aren’t so bad. They’re made to easily fit a dozen people. Massive enough he doesn’t get sick with the feeling of walls shrinking in on him. He makes it almost all the way to car, moving robotically before Tim catches up to him. He shoots out of one of the heavy metal doors leading into the parking garage to where Jason has his elbow raised. That’s probably good. If Tim drives he won’t have to break the window in and hotwire it.

Tim’s voice is doing that grating thing. Jason closes his eyes and presses his forehead against the cold glass of the passenger side window. Tim talks. In little bursts between long periods of silence.

“He’s overreacting because he hates being caught by surprise. He’s a control freak like that.”

“Give him time. He’ll realize he’s blowing this out of proportion.”

“I’ll show him what you’ve done on the flex armor projects. All the improvements you’ve made. He’ll see.”
“I’ll talk to Dick and Alfred. If I get them on our side, they’ll make him see reason.”

Jason can feel it bubbling up now. Seething. All that anger that was missing in front of Bruce. He clenches his hands into fists. There’s barely any pain, just a pull at the scar tissue there. Jason’s throwing open the door before the car comes to a full stop in the drive.

“Bruce was way out line,” Tim’s voice follows him inside.

Jason whirls around.

“Get out.”

“What?” Tim’s eyes are wide.

“I said get the fuck out.”

“But…I…Why?” he stutters like he honest to God does not understand.

“Because. I don’t want to look at you. I don’t want to hear your voice. I want you to get out of my house and not come back.”

Tim shifts and Jason visualizes bludgeoning him with his knee scooter if he tries to push further inside.

“I’m just trying to help.”

“But…Stop! Stop trying to help. I’m not some fucking charity case. I don’t fucking need your help.”

“Then stop! Stop trying to help. I’m not some fucking charity case. I don’t fucking need your help.”

Tim frowns, “Are you kidding me? After everything I’ve done for—

“You! You’ve done all of this for you, you ass. You don’t give a fuck about me. Half the time you can barely look at me and the other half you’re sneaking glances like you’re afraid I’m gonna slit your throat. So don’t try and spin this like its because you care. You’re just trying to make yourself feel better now that you’ve been dropped from the Bar’s A-list as well. All I asked for was a damn car ride. I didn’t ask for you to come and makeover my life like some kind of pet project, you just shoved your way in. Blondie is right, you’re a control freak just like Bruce. You have to control the lives of everyone around you because you can't get your own shit together,” he shouts pointing at the schedule on the refrigerator.

“How do you think this is going to go? What, do you think you’re going to fucking reform me or something? Do you think Bruce will welcome you back with open arms if you can bring the black sheep back into the fold? If you think for one second that just because we’ve shared some meals and beers, watched some movies, that means we’re friends or that you’ve tamed me, then you have another think coming. As soon as I get back out on the streets I’m going to go right back to putting bullets in those sons of bitches and the Joker is at the top of that list. If any of you try to stop me I will bury you with him. Now get the fuck out of my house before I throw you out. Understand, Replacement?”
Hello everyone! Special two-part chapter for you this post!

Last chapter broke 500+ in kudos and comments, a feat I never expected when I first set out with this. There were more comments last chapter than any before (100+) and it was an awesome time witnessing that inter-reader comment barrier go down as everyone talked with each other. So this post is in celebration of those milestones and a love note to y'all for your ridiculous support.

Special guest appearances this chapter: Dick and Stephanie (You asked for more Steph, you got it you beautiful sons o' bitches).

I laughed myself silly writing this, hope you do as well while reading.

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**Chapter 14**

“What the hell were you thinking?” Tim screams at Bruce, who is shoving papers into his briefcase with single-minded focus. “How could you say those things in front of him like that! You called him a mentally unstable felon to his face!” He slams his hands down on the desk before him.

Bruce doesn’t look up at him, “Easily. It was the truth. Even Jason knew that. You’re the one who seems to be having the problem with it.”

“The truth? I don’t give a rat’s ass about the truth! You’re supposed to be his father—”

“And how am I supposed to do that with you undermining me at every turn?” Bruce snaps, the clasps of the briefcase echoing his frustration.

“What?” Tim falters.

Bruce leans toward him. It's an aggressive posture that Tim recognizes well. He has never been on the receiving end of it before. His eyes are cold hard chips of ice. His voice is so deep Tim feels the wood of the desk vibrate under his palms.

“When I give him space, you tell me I’m being cold and absent. When I’m there, I’m over-bearing and despotic. God forbid I try to discipline, then I’m a monster,” Bruce straightens, towering over Tim. “I wanted him at the manor where he could recover under Alfred’s care and my watch. I wanted to get him help. You have no idea how relieved I am to see his physical recovery is going well. But he needs psychiatric help, Tim. Tell me, have you done that for him?”

Tim shakes his head, ashamed.
“Jason is not easy to deal with. He is not easy for me to…We have always had problems communicating. There are going to be arguments, conflicts, missteps between us. How am I supposed to be a father to him when you spirit him away after one confrontation? He’s been howling against the world for as long as I’ve known him. Jason is strong Tim, one shouting match with me won’t break him. You should give him more credit.”

Tim struggles to come up with a reply. He should have come prepared—with his argument neatly bulleted on cue cards like he had that night on the manor’s doorsteps so many years ago (hidden away in his back pocket just in case). He had been too angry, too upset in the moment and now all of the words that surged to mind in the car ride over were swirling in a muddled mess and he can’t find or hold onto them. Bruce sighs and rolls his shoulders back, working them out of the tense line they had coiled in. He pinches the bridge of his nose and holds it a second before exhaling sharply. He slides the briefcase off the desktop and makes to leave. Tim is standing between him and the door.

“Now if you would please excuse me, I’d rather not be late to dinner with the only son I have left who doesn’t seem to be angry with me.”

Tim moves silently to the side to let him pass.

Tim isn’t sure what to do with himself after that. So he goes with a classic Tim move and throws himself into work. The quicker he can get this stupid flex armor into production, the sooner he can hightail it out of Gotham. Screw Bruce and his unpaid leave. He has enough money that missing the monthly stipend portioned out to him from WE means nothing. Screw Jason too. How dare he accuse Tim of being selfish when he’s so self absorbed he can’t do anything other than wallow in his own deprecation. As soon as the government contract is finalized he’s going back to San Francisco and the Titans.

Until then, Tim will keep his nose to the grindstone. He’s shocked by how much slower things are progressing without Jason in the lab. He didn’t realize quite how much Jason helped coming in just two days a week. Or how much he relied on Jason’s input, trouble shooting all the little problematic details that pop up, especially in the end-stretch. There’s always more to do for the completion of a project than he anticipates. It’s shine and polish but Tim Drake refuses to let anything with his name on the patents leave WE doors at anything less than perfection. He wakes early and stays up late, ordering delivery and sleeping on the cot in his office. Alfred doesn’t come to pick him up and take him back to the manor this time.

He works until he crashes and then some. It’s not healthy, but it’s a good distraction. If he even tries to sleep before one in the morning there’s a 99.7% chance he will end up staring listlessly at the ceiling tiles in the dark wondering what Jason is doing. Is he sleeping? Did he fall asleep on the couch with a book on his chest again? What is he reading now? What if he’s caught up in a nightmare? He definitely does not wonder if Jason is taking a bath. But did he remember to give Cat her flea treatment? Is he keeping up with his exercises? He should call Miss Lucille. She’ll at least be able to tell him if Jason’s okay. Then he thinks about the metaphorical hole she will rip into him for not coming to see her in person. Visiting in person is not an option either. The hole she’ll rip in him then will be far less metaphorical.

He ups his already questionable caffeine intake. As long as he can function up to the standards required for the task at hand he’ll be fine. His daily trip to Gotham Grind is actually good for him. It ensures he gets at least twenty minutes of fresh air a day as he walks to the café and back. It may not be optimal, but it’s a satisfactory amount.
He’s decided to actually sit down on the patio today to enjoy his coffee. Today is a milestone. The general is coming on Friday to finalize the paperwork. All he needs to do before then is finish coding the programs that will be uploaded to the machines at their manufacturing facility for mass production.

Tim watches the comings and goings of the Gothamites around him blandly. Many are toting umbrellas and wearing galoshes. The grip of winter is finally starting to slack. Not enough to warm the streets or anyone on them, but enough to replace snow and sleet with frigid rain. The sky looks clear and sunny though. He wonders if it rained that morning and he missed it. His spacious corner office is made of windows, but the lab is tucked away into the interior of the building, away from prying eyes. There are puddles on the ground. That would seem to suggest that yes, it rained this morning. He finds himself absurdly pleased for deducing such an obvious inane fact. Jason would say ‘No shit Sherlock.’

Tim frowns and swallows a mouthful of coffee. A healthy robust mouthful. Sipping is for the weak. He’s about to take another when the venti cup is pulled out of his grasp. Tim looks up helplessly as his ex-girlfriend and older brother pull seats from the empty tables nearby to sit down across from him. Stephanie’s legs are open wide as she settles onto hers backwards, arms crossed over the top of the back rest.

“What…what are you doing? Here. The both of you.”

Stephanie answers, “Tim. This is an intervention.”

“Excuse me?” He pans to Dick who nods sympathetically.

“You need help,” Dick joins in.

“How did you even know I’d be here?” Tim whines.

“It wasn’t exactly hard, Detective. You’ve been coming here everyday for the past week.”

“Yeah but…”

“And O told us you were here,” Dick points to one of the coffee shop’s security cameras under the awning aimed to cover the patio area.

“I feel violated. I can’t believe this,” Tim drops his head to thump lightly on the table. He rolls it to the side so he can glare up at his self-appointed saviors. “And what exactly did I do to deserve this?”

“You’re in a downward spiral,” Stephanie states sagely.

She looks to Dick who continues where she left off, “Into an angst filled chasm of monotony and isolation.”

“We’re worried.”

“No one has seen you in days.”

“You’ve stood me up for two study sessions in a row and midterms are coming up. You promised you’d help me. So I called Dick.”

“And you haven’t been answering my text messages. I’ve tried to get you to patrol with me three times.”
“Whatever this is—this funk you’re in. It’s not healthy.”

“And neither is your coffee habit,” Dick says taking a sip of Tim’s coffee. He instantly spits it back out, “Oh my god what is this!?”

“Uh. Its coffee?”

“It tastes like gasoline,” Dick cries, reflexively curling his tongue back on itself like he’s trying to lick the taste out of his mouth.

“Well, I guess technically its half coffee and half espresso with a tablespoon of matcha powder. Martina makes it special for me.”

“Oh god, Tim. Dick, its worse than we thought,” Stephanie exclaims in horror.

“Drastic times call for drastic measures,” Dick sighs and stands.

There’s the screech of metal and concrete as Stephanie follows his example, shoving their chairs back.

“Wait…what are you doing?” Tim asks mildly panicked.

Dick starts to circle around behind him. Tim leaps to his feet but they get tangled in the chair legs. His exhaustion compromising his usually cat (bat?) like reflexes. Dick catches him before he hits the pavement but the rescue is accompanied by a damning click.

“Are you fucking kidding?” He jerks at the handcuffs linking his wrists behind his back.

“Language, Tim. Clearly Jason’s been rubbing off on you.”

He whips his head towards the blonde girl begging, “Steph, this is ridiculous!”

The last word gets muffled as she pulls a bag over his head. It smells like oreos and onions. He recognizes it as one of her re-usable grocery totes. They manhandle him down the sidewalk while he twists and writhes, hollering things like, “This is stupid! Let me go you nutcases!”

Stephanie raises her voice to drown him out, “Hey folks, kidnapping in process. Haha, promise like not a real one. Its his birthday! Surprise! Nothing to worry about, absolutely no reason to call the cops. Just having some friendly fun!”

“Haha, yeah. I’m actually a cop. Officer Grayson, you can call my chief at the Bludhaven PD to confirm! But seriously, please don’t. Everything’s completely legal and fine, move along now. He’s just a little grumpy,” Dick adds cheerfully.

“I hate you both,” Tim pouts as he’s shoved into the back seat of a car, “So much.”

The bag slides off his head immediately. The cuffs give him a harder time. He doesn’t have anything on him to pick the lock and as ticked off as he is, the situation doesn’t warrant dislocating his thumb. Instead, he puts all his energy into directing a scathing glare at his abductors in the rearview mirror.

“You love us,” Stephanie winks back, “Almost as much as you love J—

“Steph!” Tim howls.

“What was that?” Dick spares a glance over his shoulder trying to see what the fuss is about.
“Nothing!” Tim yells before Steph can open her big fat mouth again.

He seriously considers opening the car door and jumping from the vehicle. He knows how to roll to keep from hurting himself with the impact. He’d have to time it right though to make sure he doesn’t get run over by the cars in the lane beside them. He starts shuffling towards the door and feeling behind him with his hands. Pulls.

“Childlocks? Really, Dick?”

“Really, me? What the hell Tim? Were you going to throw yourself out of the car?”

Tim slumps back and rolls his eyes. He watches the city flash by and recognizes the dog park on the left and the tattoo parlor with the koi mural on the right. They pass Dick’s favorite pizza place and he knows where they’re headed. They’re going to his brother’s primary Gotham safe house. He has so many memories of that place. Sitting cross-legged on the floor doing homework before going out on patrol. Making sundaes on the kitchen counter when they returned—Dick insisting that Crocky Crunch was a perfectly acceptable sundae topping despite Tim’s reservations. There were some less pleasant ones as well. Dick patching him up after a run-in with Killer Croc. Marathoning episodes of Buffy next to Dick on the couch so he could monitor the older man after a concussion. Crashing on the couch when the idea of returning home or to the manor made his head buzz with anxiety.

They pull to a stop in the alley behind the narrow two-story brick townhouse and hustle Tim up the stairs. The apartment looks the same as it always has. A little run down, mostly bare. The couch has been replaced though. Couches have short life spans for vigilantes. They have a tendency to get bled on. They really should start investing in plastic sofa covers. Stephanie peels off towards the kitchen while Dick propels Tim into the living room with a hand between his shoulder blades and pushes him down onto the couch.

“So are you going to take these off?” He jingles the cuffs chaining his wrists together.

“Yeah, in a bit. Once we get all comfy and make sure you’re not going to rabbit on us,” Dick sprawls out next to Tim, draping an arm over his shoulder.

“Hey Tweedle-Tim and Tweedle-Dick, what kind of pizza do you want?” Stephanie calls out.

“Hawaiian!”

If Jason were here he’d deliver a withering diatribe at Dick for even suggesting such an abomination. There’s a sharp pang to the left behind his ribs. Last time he’d had pizza was with Stephanie and Jason the night before everything went sideways. Not that he’d actually gotten to eat any of it, of course.

“Tim?”

“Um. Uh. White sauce, please.”

The pang leaves a dull ache in its wake. Dick must sense the shift in Tim’s mood to something other than annoyance. He tugs Tim in a little closer. Stephanie joins them a minute later sitting on Tim’s other side and stretching her legs over his lap. Between that and Dick’s arm they’ve effectively trapped him in place. Steph hands Dick a Pabst and sets one on the table in front of Tim. Dick thanks her, clicks his can rim against hers and takes a swallow before realizing. His eyes go round.

“Steph! You’re not twenty-one! Or you, Tim!”

Stephanie shrugs, “Jason buys us beer.”
“That does not make it okay! In fact anything justified with ‘Jason does it,’ usually means the exact opposite!”

“Oh calm down Dick. We’re nineteen not twelve. I caught my RA doing a keg stand last week on the front lawn. Besides, this stuff is like less than %5 alcohol and Tim’s had a rough few weeks. Cut him some slack and get him out of those,” she nods to where Tim’s arms are still behind his back.

Dick looks back and forth between them unhappily, before settling on Tim.

“If I take the cuffs off do you promise to sit there and drink your beer like a…good underage teenager?”

“Are you going to tell me what this is all about? You better have a good reason for pulling me out of work this close to the end of a project. Bruce is ticked off at me already, I don’t need to give him any more reason to be.”

Neither Dick nor Stephanie look the slightest bit guilty.

“Wasn’t lying when I said we were worried about you Tim,” his brother says with a soft smile, "I heard you had a big fight with Bruce. Alfred told me, he didn’t say what it was about. But you shouldn’t cut yourself off from everyone like this. It’s not—

“Let me guess: healthy?” Tim drawls.

“So, we’re enforcing a night off! Get ready for pizza, beer, movies, girl-talk. You’re gonna relax and have fun whether you like it or not and get out of this funk you’ve been festering in. And then you’re gonna help me study for midterms and start patrolling with Dick again. Okay?” Stephanie interjects.

Tim chews on the inside of his cheek, starting to feel a tad guilty for how he’s neglected his friends the past couple weeks.

“Oh alright,” he reluctantly groans.

Dick removes the cuffs. Tim hears him mumble, “I can’t believe I’m doing this. Aiding in the delinquency of a minor,” as he does it.

Tim lets the hypocrisy slide. Compared to vigilantism and kidnapping, under age drinking is barely a tick on the scale of Dick’s illegal activities. Stephanie pushes a cold can into his hands. Tim sucks at it hungrily, much to Dick’s horror. It’s practically soda water compared to the beers stocked in Jason’s fridge. They let him pick what to watch as the guest of honor.

After the second episode of Firefly they break to use the bathroom and divvy up the few remaining slices and beers. Tim drops heavily back into his place on the couch ready to play episode three. He can’t help but smother a laugh at his brother. Dick Grayson, Golden Boy, the Original Boy Wonder—he who surpasses all Robins who followed in both grace and beauty, has one leg swung over the arm of the sofa and the other kicked up on the coffee table with a plate of pizza balanced on his distended stomach and crumbs on his shirt. Dick lolls his head over at the noise Tim makes.

“What?”

“You’re a slob,” Tim snorts, “If only your adoring fans could see you now.”

“The man behind the mask and perfect ass,” Stephanie intones from somewhere on his left.

“Hilarious. But enough about me and my perfect ass, what’s going on with you Tim? Is this about the fight with Bruce?”

The change in conversation is abrupt enough to give Tim whiplash. Tim stiffens despite the fact that he should have been expecting this. They’ve plied him with pizza, TV, and beer, lulling him into a false sense of security. His belly is full, he’s comfortable enough to be slightly sleepy and pleasantly buzzed enough to drop his guard and talk about things he would never if sober. Damn Steph and Dick and their manipulations.

Tim’s stomach drops.

He feels ill with the realization he’s done the exact same thing to Jason multiple occasions. Shit, he was never consciously trying to manipulate the other man. He just wanted to get to know him. Jason, out from under the Kevlar and helmet had been so very different from what he had expected. He couldn’t help himself in taking advantage of the moments where the usually closed-off man had been more open, more vulnerable. Frack, frack, frack.

“No,” Tim immediately answers then shakes his head, “‘Yes. Not really, but sort of.’

Stephanie flips around dropping her head in his lap. He starts absentmindedly pulling his fingers through the hair in her ponytail.

“Did something happen with Jason?” she asks slyly.

Tim takes his bottom lip between his teeth and bites down. Dick squirms into a more upright position.

“Something happened with Jason? Tim, did he—

Tim can hear the implication behind Dick’s words. Did he hurt you?

“No! He didn’t do anything. Not like that. He kicked me out is all. After the thing with Bruce, he flipped out and said he never wanted to see me again.”

“What did you do to piss him off?”

Tim turns to Steph in annoyance, “Wow. Thanks Steph for the glowing assumption that this is all obviously my fault.”

“I didn’t say it was all your fault. I asked what you did to piss him off. From what little I know about him, its not exactly difficult. Maybe he just needs time to cool off. Did you put the blender under the sink again?”

Did he put the blender under the sink again? He had gotten a lengthy lecture on that after last time. Food things do not go next to POISON things, fucking Christ Tim, how have you survived this long?

“He said I was controlling! Which is pretty rich coming from a guy who throws a tantrum just because you accidentally may have put the blender under the sink. Twice. Yeah, I’m the one with control issues,” Tim fumes.

Dick and Steph exchange uncomfortable glances.

“What!” he snaps.

“Tim, you know I love you dearly, but as your former girlfriend and current colleague I regret to
inform you that you can be kind of a control freak. He’s not exactly wrong on that one.”

Dick nods his agreement. Traitor.

“Tell me one way I have been controlling!”

“Do you want that alphabetically or chronologically?” Steph sasses. She holds up a hand and starts popping up fingers, “Setting up his appointments for him, the fridge schedule, the jo—”

“Okay, that’s enough. Point taken. Maybe I do have some control issues, maybe I went a little overboard. Sorry. I’ll work on that,” he bites out a touch sarcastically, “But I was just trying to help. Some gratitude would be nice instead of an accusation that I’ve turned him into a pet project. I mean, come on—he insinuated I was doing this for Bruce!”

“Were you?” Steph asks quietly.

“No!” he yells emphatically, “I wasn’t. I just wanted to help him, I swear. I’ve always wanted to be friends with him, ever since he was Robin. And now that he doesn’t, or didn’t, seem to want to kill me anymore I thought we could be. Friends, I mean.”

“Oh, Tim,” Dick puts a hand on his shoulder,

“He’s funny, and actually kind of sensitive when he’s not being a raging asshole,” Tim covers his face and continues speaking through his hands, “He sings while he flips pancakes and reads to poetry to the cat, and oh my god have you seen his thighs? I want to bite them.”

“Wait, what? What was that last thing you said?”

Steph shushes Dick and makes an encouraging noise to Tim. Tim raises his head, blood rushing past his ears and ignores Dick.

“I just wanted to hang out with him. And its obvious how lonely he is. I wasn’t trying to fix him. I thought I was helping. I took it too far, I know. But he was doing better, really he was! And now everything’s fracked and he hates me again.”

“Did you say ‘frack?’”

“It’s some kind of weird nerd swear word, don’t worry about it,” Steph pats Dick’s knee dismissively before turning her attention back on Tim. “Okay. So basically you guys had a fight and now you’re just sulking around until you can run away to San Fran? That’s kind of pathetic Tim.”

He narrows his eyes at her, “Oh I’m sorry. What do you suggest then?”

“The way I see it you got two options aside from the pathetic path you’re taking now. One: put on your big-boy pants and pull it together while you’re here. By that I mean start eating, sleeping, patrolling, helping me not fail my classes, and for the love of God showering again, so when you go back to San Fran you go with your dignity intact. Or two: You said you wanted to be his friend. So get over yourself and be his friend. Friends don’t fall apart because of one argument. Or five, we’re proof enough of that. Friends also give each other a kick in the pants when needed,” Steph says pointedly.

“So what, you want me to force my friendship on him? Didn’t you just tell me I’m too controlling?” Tim asks in confusion.

Dick clears his throat, “Dear Tim, as someone with experience in the department of wooing angry
Robins into friendship I believe I’m qualified to answer this. You can’t force Jason to do anything he doesn’t want to, including be your friend. All you can do is let him know that you’re there for him if he needs you. And you have to be okay with it if he doesn’t reciprocate. Contrary to popular belief, Damian didn’t just jump into my arms.”

“I don’t think anyone believes that, Dick.”

Dick looks wistful, “One day. One day he will.”

He shakes his head and brings himself back from the edge of daydreaming, “Point is, it's going to take a lot of time and patience. Probably even more with Jason than Damian to convince him you don’t have an ulterior motive. Jason has never taken well to help offered. I know you know he came from the streets but you only saw him as Robin when you were chasing after us. You didn’t see what he was like then out of costume. I don’t think you understand the full implications of that. It took almost a year for Jason to believe he didn’t have to do anything to earn his stay at the manor. Even longer to believe Bruce wasn’t going to throw him out for every little offense. Alfred found him in the pantry once with a backpack crying because he’d broken a plate. You’ve done so much for him these past couple months, I don’t doubt that makes him uncomfortable and suspicious. He’s always been that way.”

Tim chews over this for a moment, “All this insight is very well and good, but how do I put this into practical application?”

Stephanie groans and rolls her eyes, “You call him moron. Call, text, smoke signals, whatever. Just apologize and ask him if he’s okay.”

“Apologize? But I didn’t do anything wrong!”

“Tiiiiimmmmm. You know, this is something you never got when we were dating. But I’m gonna try to hammer it through your thick skull one more time: it doesn’t matter. You don’t need to apologize for what you did or didn’t do necessarily but you should apologize for upsetting him.”

“Ehh,” the idea grates on Tim’s pride.

“She’s right, Tim. Just text him, it’s that easy.”

Tim frowns, “If it’s so easy why don’t you?”

Dick’s smile drops, “Its more complicated than that with me and Jason. There’s a lot of history that… we…”

“He stabbed me, Dick. You don’t have the monopoly on complicated history with the guy.”

“It won’t come to anything. I’ve tried.”

“Then try again. You did for Damian, why not Jason? If you’re gonna be that way, I’m not sure I should take any of your advice. It’s very ‘do as I say not as I do.’ Which is bullcrap.”

Okay, okay guys. How about this?, Stephanie sits up in Tim’s lap and places a hand on each of their chests, “If Tim texts Jason right now, tests the waters, sees how he’s doing…Dick you promise you’ll do the same within the week.”

“That’s a very good idea Steph, I would be willing on those terms,” Tim appraises.

“Why thank you Tim.”
They turn to stare at Dick. His expression is a mix of guilt and like someone just dropped a worm down the back of his shirt.

“I don’t have his number,” Dick tosses out.

“I do,” Tim retorts quickly.

“He won’t like you giving me his number.”

“Then don’t tell him it was me. Tell him you got it through some super-secret Bat method. Geez, its not like you were trained by the World’s Greatest Detective and are dating the World’s Greatest Hacker or anything.”

“Fine. But make it three weeks. If Tim and I try too close together he’ll be suspicious,” Dick counters.

“Alright! Now spit and shake on it!” Steph crows.

Tim sticks his hand out.

Dick recoils, “What? No! That is disgusting!”

“You have to Dick, to seal the deal.”

“It’s the law,” Stephanie backs him up.

Dick eyes Tim’s waiting appendage distastefully. Stephanie decides she’s had enough and promptly hawks one up in Tim’s palm and smashes Dicks hand down on top of it. Dick makes a gagging sound while Tim tightens his fingers so he can’t pull away and shakes exaggeratedly. Dick immediately rubs his hand off on his jeans.

“That is disgusting! I am never doing that again, you nasty little troll twins!”

Steph sticks her tongue out at him.

Tim pulls out his phone and looks at it blankly, “Shit. So. I guess I’m doing this. What do I say?”

Stephanie’s hand shoots up in the air, “Ooh! Ooh! Tell him you want to bite his thighs!”

Tim and Dick shriek simultaneously.

“Oh come on, I’m sure its not the first time he’s heard it. He’d probably be flattered,” Stephanie assures them.


“Guess I’ve got to do everything around here,” She sighs and reaches for the phone. Tim twists away from here clutching it to his chest.

“Steph, I will end you!” Tim slides off the couch, butt hitting the floor hard in his attempt to escape.

“Bring it on Red.”

She launches herself at him. Tim brings his knee into her gut as she descends, and she retaliates by
planting her hand on his face. He tries to swing an elbow into her side but she rolls and hits the table the TV is standing on. It wobbles perilously, spurring Dick to intervene. He wraps an arm around Tim and drags him bodily off Stephanie.

“What in the blazes is going on! Steph! Why are you attacking Tim! Tim, why do you want to bite Jason’s thi—

Oh my god.”

He collapses back onto the couch with a thud.

His jaw opens and closes several times silently before, “Do you…do you…”

“Have a massive throbbing hard on for Jason Todd?” Stephanie finishes for him helpfully, “Why yes, Dick. He most certainly does.”

Her face is radiant, triumphant.

Dick turns to Tim, “Is it…is it true?”

Tim buries his face in his hands, “I hate you all. I hate life. I’m going to drown myself in the sink.”

Tim tries to get up but Dick doesn’t let go of his shirt.

“I didn’t even know you were gay!” Dick whines. His eyes flick to Stephanie, “I mean bi. I mean--I knew you liked him, but not like…like-liked him? Is Jason even gay?”

Tim raises his head from where he’s doing his best to smother himself in the cheap shag carpet, “You don’t know? You’ve known him since he was twelve! How do you not know? Because I have no idea!” he wails.

Dick leans back limply, “Honestly, I’ve never thought about it. He had a crush on Donna. But I don’t remember him ever having a girlfriend. Or a boyfriend.” He steeplest his fingers and presses them to his lips, “This changes everything.”

“What? No! Dick, I already have this harpy meddling in my non-existent love-life I don’t need you to as well. Whatever you are thinking, stop now!”

“His thighs, huh?” Dick asks airily.

Stephanie nods enthusiastically.

“I guess they are impressive. Never noticed before, more of a breast man myself. You guys are basically my brothers, I don’t really think about those things with you. Oh my god. You guys are my little brothers,” his breathing picks up, “I don’t know if I’m okay with this! Steph, should I be okay with this?”

Steph shrugs, “Not gonna lie, I’ve totally masturbated to the idea of the two of them before.”

Dick throws his hands over his ears, “Oh my god! I cannot have that mental picture in my head!”

Tim howls, “Why oh god? I’m your ex, I can’t know that Steph!”
"Dick, out of curiosity, in your mental picture- who's topping?" Steph asks evilly.

"That's it!" Tim lunges at Steph again.

It's not graceful. It's far from professional. It is in no way representative of their respective fighting prowess. It's petty and dirty and wholly satisfying though. Dick is too busy pulling at his hair and rocking himself back and forth to separate them again. Tim's spilled first blood when a shrill series of whistles and beeps interrupts them. R2D2. It's Tim's text message alert. They scramble madly around the floor looking for the phone like it's the golden snitch. When he glimpses it out of the corner of his eye Tim dives under the couch where it had been kicked during the melee. Stephanie grabs his ankles and drags him back but he's already captured it. It tumbles from suddenly numb fingers, Tim's face slack in shock.

Stephanie crawls off his hips where she'd pinned him in concern. "What is it? Tim, are you okay?" She blows the hair out of her face, ponytail destroyed in the tussle.

"Uh. Yeah. No. It's fine. It's a text. From Jason."
Hello everyone! Special guest appearances: Cat, Miss Lucille, Will the Uber Driver.

Jason in this chapter is a wee bit feelsy and angsty, but as one reader said last chapter: "Young 20's are still babies." This is completely true. He's allowed to cry a little without losing his BAMF title.

Next chapter is back to the action! Finally! Expect a few weeks wait while I research how much of what type of explosives it takes to blow up a bridge :D (Is the patriot act still a thing? Do I need to be afraid of my search history?)

Also taking a poll: How do you feel about smut? Pro/Anti/Ambi? I didn't originally have a smut chapter included so it's no skin off my back either way. But I think I could probably slide one in if there's demand. Anyway, it would be a long way off from now but I wanted to started gauging the interest. If you vote in favor of--one of you has to bite the bullet and Beta that chapter because I have never written anything explicit before and do not want to screw it up.

***Sorry for the repost, realized I had accidentally put up the 2nd draft instead of the final - mostly filling in italics, mild grammar edits.

Chapter (14.5 technically but AO3 won't actually let me do that so...) 15

Something harsh drags over the skin of his eyelid, peeling it back. Jason groans and rolls over burying his face in his arms. The prickly touch persists, rasping over the shell of his ear. He ignores it. Till it curls deep inside his ear canal. Jason squawks and flails hitting something furry. He sits up with a hiss, hands sliding in something sharp as he tries to right himself. He throws one up against the searing light and smears sticky dampness across his eyes. He pulls his hands back in shock and blinks until they come into focus through the throbbing in his skull. Bleeding.

He uncurls with a groan that turns into a mad scramble for the smooth porcelain bowl beside him. His stomach heaves until he’s sagging over the rim, thin strands of saliva stretching from his lips to the surface of water swirled with vomit. He stays there for a while before blindly reaching up with his left hand to clumsily pull the flush lever on the side of the tank. Jason pulls back his head just in time to keep from getting splashed with his own sick as the bowl empties in a rush.

He slumps back against the wall and concentrates on breathing for a few minutes before taking everything in. Shards of glass, silvered and clear litter the tile floor. It reeks of alcohol where he must have thrown a bottle of…he squints at a larger bit of glass with a silver and green label attached; tequila. The mirror is smashed as well. He’s covered with stinging slices, hands are the worst. He
drops them limply in his lap. Fuck.

*Look at you. No better than the woman who raised you. Dear dead Mom. How many times did you find her like this?*

Jason laughs, breathless and frantic. He’d like to argue that going on a rage bender once in a blue moon isn’t the same as addiction. That he’d only drunk til he hit the floor because he couldn’t deal the way he normally would—on the streets with his fists. Breaking ribs and jaws until the anger seeped away and left him empty cold and clear. But violence was just another kind of addiction wasn’t it? Its an interesting philosophical question. For another time.

There’s a concerned mewl to his right. Cat is watching him from the doorway, tail lashing back and forth.

“Right. My bad,”

He pulls himself up using the sink and tries to figure out how he can hobble out of the bathroom without cutting his bare foot on the broken glass. His scooter is lying on its side in the bedroom. He shuffles slowly, putting weight on his booted foot gingerly. Its less painful and awkward than anticipated. He could almost be happy at the obvious progress if not for the circumstances. Jason bends over and rights the scooter. It squeaks and wobbles as he rolls into the living area on his way to grab a broom and dustpan from the closet and freezes.

Books have been thrown across the room, one of the knife displays is hanging crookedly off the wall. Its worse in the kitchen. Cabinets ripped open and their contents spilling over the counters. Even the jar of odds and ends from emptied pockets during laundry didn’t escape; coins, shell casings, and old receipts litter the floor. He doesn’t…he doesn’t remember doing this. And he’s not sure how much of it was the alcohol.

*Sloppy. Stupid. That’s what you are. You know better than to ever let your guard down. This is what happens when you give up control. I get to come out to play.*

He swallows and counts his breaths, waiting for it to even out before grabbing what he needs. He returns to the bathroom. Its smaller, a more manageable problem to deal with at the moment. It isn’t easy trying to sweep around the scooter and the broom doesn’t do much for the blood. He mops that up with a towel which he tosses in the tub with a damp splat. Then he has to take a break.

He sits on the toilet while his head pounds and stomach rolls. When he makes to get up and move to the next room he notices the blood smeared on the broom handle. Oh yeah. He should take care of that. He grabs the first aid kit and apathetically douses himself with antiseptic. None of the cuts are too deep, at least not by his standards. There are a couple on the blade of his hand that could probably use stitches, but not badly enough for him to break out the needle and thread. He wraps them in gauze and moves to the living room.

It’s a long agonizing process setting the house to straights. He stops to sip on a glass of water to battle the dehydration. Then has to stop to spit it back up in the kitchen sink when the water sloshes uncomfortably back up his throat. He mourns over the damage to the books, creased covers and bent spines. He kneels in the kitchen and collects the coins and scraps of paper from the floor in a cup. He finds the schedule board in two pieces, one half partially under the stove, the other on the couch. Curses when he sees the familiar red handwriting highlighting today. His one o’clock appointment with Miss Lucille. He glances at the time readout on the oven. Its almost noon. Shit. He groans. Considers not going in today. He doesn’t want to go in. Fuck this. There’s no one to make him. He doesn’t have to go if he doesn’t want to. He’s had a shit day and who gives a fuck if he misses one
lousy appointment.

Except…

Miss Lucille will wring his neck.

And it doesn’t help his case that he can take care of himself if he doesn’t.

That he doesn’t need help.

Doesn’t need Tim.

He can do this on his own.

He just needs a ride.

He considers calling Alfred but hangs up before it can ring once. He can’t let Alfred see him like this. Not with his knuckles split, smelling sour from vomit and booze. He can’t stand the idea of the old man thinking less of him than he already does. And he’s sure Bruce has every car, even Alfred’s, lo-jacked.

He digs through the cup set on the washing machine until he pulls out a wrinkled receipt. It’d been in the back pocket of those ridiculously tight jeans Tim had worn the night he came home reeking of sewage. There’s a name and a number on the back in faded black ink. Jason punches the ten digit number into one of his burner phones. It rings six times before picking up.

“Hello?”

Jason frowns. The voice is gruff and curt. Different than the amicable attitude he remembers. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea. Or he dialed the number in wrong. Its possible what looked like a one was actually a seven.

“Hello?”

“Uh. Hey, is this Will?”

A long pause.

“Can I ask who’s calling?”

The speaker answers tactfully, neither confirming or denying Jason notices. He replies in kind, deciding to leave out names.

“You uh. You gave me and my friend a ride a while back. We were the annoying assholes who took up your whole night.”

“Oh!” the voice changes at once to something warmer “Yeah. Tim and uh, uh—

“Jason.”

Jason winces at finally giving out his name.

“I remember you guys, of course. Gotham to New York and back. What can I do for you Jason?”

“I need a ride. I thought if you weren’t busy you might be interested in making some cash.”
“Sure. When? Right now?”

“I have a doctor’s appointment at one close to city center.”

“Okay. Yeah, shouldn’t be a problem. I was just making myself a sandwich here. I can make it to go.”

“Do you remember the last place you dropped us off?”

Will laughs, “Sorry man. It was late, I was tired, and I drive a lot of people. My memory is pretty good but it isn’t that good.”

He feels a little relief. Though, the man could be lying. He rattles off the address quickly before his paranoia can take hold then takes a quick shower. The warm water relaxes him a little and makes him feel more human. He’s in the middle of re-wrapping his hands when his phone goes off.

“Here.”

Jason finishes and pulls on a coat and cap, then on second thought adds a pair of sunglasses. His eyes are still sensitive. On third thought he retrieves the .22 from his nightstand and slides it into his waistband.

Will’s eyebrows jump up over his sunglasses when Jason climbs in, hauling the scooter in behind him and tossing it in the back seat.

“Rough night?”

Jason snorts. He gives Will the address of the medical plaza and doesn’t say anything else. Will doesn’t try and pry him with casual conversation, which Jason simultaneously appreciates while it also sets him on edge. Isn’t that a thing that cab drivers do? Chat about the weather and sports stats? He feels like he had talked the first time, but he’s not sure. He’d alternately been high on painkillers and sleeping during most of that adventure. They roll up to the front doors and Jason pops the lock.

“How much?”

“Short trip. Twenty is fine.”

Jason pulls a crisp bill from his clip, “Think you can take me back at three?”

“Sure. No problem. Three o’clock.”

That went well. Still alive. Secured transportation. See, he doesn’t need Tim. Then he walks in to Miss Lucille’s room. She’s leaned over one of the rolling nurse stations entering something into the computer. When she hears the door creak open she glances up with a grin

“Hey there Handsome, where’s Babyface?”

Jason grimaces and start stripping his layers off and hanging them on the coat hooks behind the door.

“Child, what did you do to your hands?”
She jumps up and hustles over at a speed that really should not surprise Jason at this point. She grabs one of his arms and scowls at a patch of red showing through the gauze. Miss Lucille raises her head and arches one eyebrow imperiously.

“Sit.”

Jason sits. Miss Lucille unwraps the bandages and shakes her head. Her voice is low and formidable.

“I ain’t even gonna ask. I already know. Raised four boys remember. Darius was always putting his fist through something when he got upset. Walls, windows, his brothers’ faces. What happened, Handsome?”

Jason rolls his eyes.

“Don’t you roll your eyes at me. These should be stitched. Now technically I am not authorized for that kind of thing here. I should be sending you to the hospital, but I reckon you wouldn’t go anyway. So you are gonna keep your ass planted right there and at least let me clean you up proper.”

She pulls a first aid kit from under the nursing station and slams it on the table.

“Stupid ass little boys playing like they’re grown men,” she mutters under her breath, using tweezers to remove slivers of glass Jason hadn’t noticed in his haste.

Once she’s checked all his cuts to her satisfaction she starts swabbing them with a Qtip dipped in Neosporin.

“So you wanna talk about what happened?”

“Not especially.”

The look Miss Lucille sends him is equal parts disbelief and disappointment. It reminds him so much of Alfred, despite coming from a five foot tall black woman, that Jason feels a pang of homesickness. No. Not that. Homesickness implies the manor is home. A pang of something else then. For the first time he can remember Miss Lucille doesn’t challenge him. She keeps her mouth shut and puts him through his paces, although she is obviously unhappy about it. They have to go lighter than usual to keep from aggravating his hands too much but he’s still ends up soaked in sweat and shaking. Miss Lucille calls it early. She waves him to a chair and hands him a glass of water.

“Handsome, let me start by saying I’m proud of you for coming in today. I can tell you don’t want to be here. But you doing good. Real good. One of my best patients. I think you can even start easing off the ankle support. Take it whenever you leave the house but if you want you can start using a cane when you’re at home. You should be proud of yourself for that.”

Jason tries to force down another gulp of water. He feels weak, like he’s all creaking bone and no muscle. He really should have eaten something before he left.

“That said. You ever come here hung-over again and I will kick your tail to the curb. I don’t know what happened and I ain’t gonna force you into talking bout something you clearly don’t want to. But, I can see how heavy its weighing on you. You need to talk to someone bout this, okay? Don’t let it eat you up from the inside. And don’t let it turn you to drink. I lost my baby boy to the bottle. Don’t make me lose you too. Now come here.”

She leans forward and envelopes him in a hug. Jason automatically stiffens. The last time he’d been touched like this he’d died. But there’s no betrayal. No cold slide of a needle or whispered apology. No hurt. It feels good. So good. He wants to stay here forever. Thinks this is what mothers are
supposed to be. A warm safe place you can crawl to and curl up in and rest your head against a steady soothing heartbeat. He wonders about Darius. Wonders if he knows the miracle he has in Miss Lucille or if he takes it for granted. He turns his head into her shoulder so he can muffle the sob that escapes.

“I fucked up. I fucked up and I think I lost my only friend.”

“Oh, Handsome,” she rubs soothing circles into the back of his neck, “It’ll be okay. Ain’t nothing so bad it can’t be fixed. The people who are meant to be in our lives always have a way of coming back into them. Just don’t let your pride get in the way when they do, okay?”

He pulls back and wipes at his face. Nods. Sniffs. Schools his expression back into something smoother though still fragile and fatigued.

She gives him a pat on the back and a wide smile, “See you Friday, Handsome. If you run into Babyface you tell him to get his ass over here. I got some words for him too.”

Will is waiting in the parking lot, hands cupped as he tries to light a cigarette. Jason fishes his own pack out of a coat pocket.

“Mind if I?” he asks, tapping one out.

Will wordlessly passes him the lighter and stretches back. He waits til Jason is occupied with lighting his own to speak, glowing end of the cigarette bobbing with each word.

“You look like shit.”

“Thanks,” Jason mumbles.

“No really. You looked like you were on a bit of a bender when I picked you up. Now you look like you’re about to fall over. You eaten anything today kid?”

Actually. No.

“Don’t call me kid,” he growls. Jesus fucking Christ this guy can’t be more than a year or two older than Dick. Its insulting.

“Sorry. So you ever make it to Sal’s?”

“What?”

“The burger place near Grant Park. Best burgers in Gotham.”

“Oh. Yeah. House made pickles.”

Will grins and flicks his ash, “Yeahhh. That’s the one.”

“No.”

“What do you say about making a stop there before heading home? Been craving it for a few days now, I’m overdue. Looks like you could use some protein too.”
Jason wrinkles his brow, “Uh thanks. But, I’m fine.”

He is instantly and suddenly betrayed by his own body as his stomach growls unhappily.

Will looks pointedly at his navel, “You sure about that?”

Jason groans and takes a drag. Closes his eyes. Assesses. He can feel his stomach gnawing at itself and pulls his coat tighter across his torso. He could just wait to get home and make himself something. That’s the smarter safer option. Then again, does he really want to be by himself? More time to sit alone and contemplate all the things he should have done differently. Replay Bruce’s rejection and his fight with Tim over and over again. He should have poured out every bottle of liquor in the house when he was cleaning earlier. He does have the .22 though, a comforting weight in case the offer is anything other than it seems.

“Actually, a burger sounds really fucking good right now.”

Will flashes a grin and grinds his cigarette end out under his heel.

“Alright.”

Jason hates being wrong. He absolutely hates it. Except for rare moments such as these.

He moans long and low in rapture, “Oh my god.”

Will laughs, his eyes crinkling at the corners. They look different than Jason expected, sunglasses hooked on the collar of his shirt. Dishwater gray and tired.

“I told you, best burger in all Gotham.”

“Fuck, yeah,” Jason sighs blissfully through a mouthful. So so much better than Barrett’s.

“No better cure for a hangover than good greasy diner food and a little hair of the dog.”

Up until this moment Jason had been coiled in anticipation. Waiting for something to go wrong. For Will to try and slide a knife between his ribs or veer the passenger side into a concrete barrier. God, how screwed up was he that that’s where his mind first went to? He’d kept an eagle eye on the kitchen window, trying to keep track of the people and meals coming in and out. Ordered a bottle of beer with a crimp cap. Took small cautious sips and waited, no hint of tingling or dizziness, before drinking in earnest. How strange it must be to be a civilian. Going out for burger and not wondering if you’re going to be poisoned.

The food helps. Settles his stomach and restores some of his strength. He polishes off the last bite and licks his fingers. Will watches, expression somewhere between amusement and repulsion. He’s only halfway through the burger in his own hands.

“Kid, did you even stop to breathe?”

“Stop calling me kid,” Jason mumbles and leans back, lacing his fingers across a full belly, “You aren’t that much older than me.”
“I’m older than I look,” Will snorts.

Jason squints, and maybe yeah his first observation was off. There’s a hint of silver at Will’s temples. Even so, Jason can’t imagine he’s far past thirty.

“Still,” Jason mutters, “So you do this for all your clients? Wine and dine ’em.”

Will swallows. “Nah. Just the ones who look like they’re having a particularly shitty day when I also happen to be hungry. Not a bad business model though. Good incentive for repeat customers.”

“Speaking of. How does this driving thing work? Like do you have a schedule or something?”

“Not really. That’s the beauty of it. You work when you feel like it, as often as you feel like it. I like it because it gives me the freedom to travel. You don’t have to worry about having to peg down a new job first if you decide you want a change of scenery or up and move to the next city. I’ve been hopping back and forth between the coasts for the past couple years now and somehow there’s always someplace new to see.”

“Sounds nice. What brings you to Gotham then? Just passing through or…”

“Nah. I’m planning on sticking around here for a bit.”

“What for? This place is a shithole,” Jason scoffs. “Gotham, I mean,” he adds hastily after the owner, presumably Sal, shoots him a dirty look.

“My son is here,” Will explains simply.

Jason pulls on his beer, “Good on you. It’s more than my dad ever did for me.”

Will winces. Damnit. Stop throwing your angsty shit at everyone.

“Anyways, I ask because I was wondering if you’d be able to this again on Friday and maybe next Tuesday?”

“Shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Awesome.”

“So where’s your friend? He doing okay?”

“What’s it to you?” Jason growls automatically.

Will raises the one hand that’s not holding his bun, “Nothing, just trying to make conversation.”

Jason glares at him suspiciously, taking in Will’s body language. His posture is easy, relaxed, open. He’s not drumming the fingers of his free hand on the bar in a sign of displaced agitation or locking his ankles. His eyes meet Jason’s but not with the unblinking focus of someone overcompensating either. Miss Lucille’s words about finding someone to talk to echo in his head.

“Fine I assume. We got into a fight.”

“Oh, sorry to hear that,” Will says. He sounds sincere. “Ya’ll seemed pretty close.”

“Not really,” Jason concedes, “but he was the closest thing I had to a friend.” He swallows the final half inch of beer in the bottle. Its lukewarm by now but it gives him a reason to stop talking.

“Can I stop you?”

“No, but you don’t have to answer either.”

“Fair point. A couple months back I was…in this accident. And Tim, he helped me out. Helped me get back on my feet. For a while it was okay. It was nice having someone to talk to. Someone who actually listened you know?”

Will nods, encouraging, cheeks full.

“But then he just stuck around. He’s there for dinner. Crashes on the couch. Drags me out to hang with his friends. Sets up my doctor’s appointments for me. Writes my goddamn schedule on the fridge. Shoves hobbies at me. Gets me a job.”

Will swallows, “None of that really sounds bad enough to warrant a falling out, you know?”

Jason hangs his head, “I know. But. I’ve been on my own practically since I was twelve when my mom died. And suddenly there’s this kid who’s younger than I am organizing my life for me. And he’s there all the time. It’s exhausting.”

“Did you tell him you needed some space?”

“I kicked him out. Same thing, right?”

“Seems a little harsh.”

Jason stares at the bar. He studies the wood grain under a patina of years of grime and lacquer.

“He’s better off now anyhow.”

Will frowns and wipes his hands on a napkin, “How so?”

Jason almost laughs. It dies in his throat before it reaches his lips, “I’m not a good person, Will. He knows it. His family knows it. I never will be. I’m not going to be his little sociology experiment. The sooner he gets it through his head the better.”

“So what bothers you more? The idea that he’s trying to ‘fix’ you or the idea he might genuinely want to be friends and you’re scared of letting him down?”

Jason eyes Will sharply.

“You sure you’re just a fucking driver?”

Will tosses his head back and laughs, letting the blatant antagonism roll right off, “For now, yeah. I wasn’t always a driver. I’ve been a lot of things over the years. Met a lot of people, talked with a lot of them. I’ve gotten good at reading in between the lines.”

The cryptic answer doesn’t put Jason at ease. If anything it just ratchets him up more.

“There’s also the possibility he’s doing all of this out of spite towards his family. They don’t like me very much.”

Will sobers up, “Doubtful. From what I saw of him, he didn’t seem that type.”
Jason sighs, “No he isn’t. I wish he was. Then I wouldn’t feel quite this shitty.”

Will pushes his plate away and swivels in his stool so he can face Jason directly, “Jason. I’m gonna give you some advice based on personal experience. I know where you’re coming from.”

He can’t help himself. He knows its rude but Jason snorts derisively. Civilians. Will’s expression tightens in a way that lets Jason know he heard that but is ignoring it.

“Years ago. I left someone who was very dear to me. I was struggling with drugs and alcohol. In and out of prison. I wasn’t in a good place and I told myself they were better off without me. So I left.”

He pauses and Jason unconsciously finds himself leaning forward.

“What happened?”

“They died.”

Jason rocks back in his seat a couple inches.

“I’ll never know if it would have been better for them if I had stayed or not. If it would have made any difference. If maybe they wouldn’t have died,” Will shrugs, “But. I do know now that when I left I wasn’t really doing it for them. I was being selfish. I was running away. And now I will always regret that I didn’t spend every moment I could with them before I lost them. That’s partially why I’m here in Gotham. I don’t want to make the same mistake again with my son.”

Will waves the waiter over for the check.

“I guess what I’m saying is, only you know what’s right for you. If cutting Tim out of your life is what you need to do, do it. But you can’t know what’s best for him. And good friends are hard to come by.”

Jason shakes his head and stands, “You’re like a goddamn Dr. Phil. You could charge by the hour.”

Will chuckles and dares to squeeze Jason’s shoulder. He shrugs it off instinctively.

“Your son is lucky,” he says, voice inexplicably hoarse.

“Hm?” Will asks as he fishes his keys out of a pocket.

“Your son. He’s lucky to have you as a dad. That he has a dad who cares like you do.”

Will pauses and Jason flounders a bit. Usually he’s good at reading people: their stance, expression, tone. It’s a useful skill that’s saved his life many times whether predicting an opponents next move, differentiating truth from lie, or friend from foe. But he can’t figure out the look on Will’s face.

“I’m not sure he’d agree, but thank you.”

Jason ducks his head as he climbs in the car, trying to hide the heat he feels crawling up his neck. He misses whatever look Will might give him after that, keeps his gaze firmly out the windows. The sky has gone grey, leaving the city looking bleak. He wonders idly if its going to snow once more before Spring. They don’t speak again until they pull into Jason’s drive. He shoves some bills in Will’s hand to cover the drive and extra for the meal. As he’s easing up the drive, leaning heavier on his scooter than he has in a couple weeks, Will leans out the window to grab his attention.

“Hey! What we were talking about earlier—take your time to figure out what it is you really want. But don’t wait too long or you’ll find the choice has been made for you.”
Jason takes his advice, he takes time to gather himself. He replaces the mirror and broken dishes. He reads Chaucer to Cat, because Chaucer is meant to be read out loud. He cooks meals for one. He sits down and budgets out exactly how much money he has left. He decides which safe houses he can keep the electric and water turned on for and which he will have to clear out. He toys with the idea of creating a new alias. The Red Hood had been a strategic choice, selected to hurt Bruce the most working up to that final failed confrontation with the Joker. Somehow, things had shifted since then. Protecting Gotham was his top priority now. Twisting the knife a little deeper in Bruce’s gut at every face-off was a side bonus.

Did he want a new name and mask to reflect that? He wasn’t sure. Not yet. But he draws up new designs to pass the time. He looks at the armored greave laying on the coffee table and adds that in. He’d been hesitant to be too armored when he was first putting together the Red Hood. Added protection comes at the expense of speed and maneuverability. This flex armor though…He thinks of what he could do in one of those suits. The leg protection appeals to him especially while he has his bum leg stretched out in front of him. Protect the legs and you retain the ability to escape.

Phantom pain flares up in his ankle and knee. He can’t be immobilized and helpless like that again. He squeezes his eyes shut and draws ragged breaths. He distracts himself by thinking of the ways he could get his hands on one. The idea of stealing the suit from WE fills him a savage satisfaction at how much that would undoubtedly piss Bruce off, but the idea of proving him right leaves a bitter taste in Jason’s mouth. He wonders how long it will be before a suit appears on the black market after they start real production. If he wanted to get one that way he’d have to budget for it and probably cut another safe house. New tech isn’t cheap.

Best plan would be to liberate one while a shipment of suits is in transit. Tricky when the client ordering and transporting them is the military, but not as difficult as one would think. Jason had stolen a helicopter once with nothing more than a pair of coveralls and a clipboard. He had had a perfect set of ID badges of course but never ended up breaking them out. Look like you belong and people will treat you as if you do. Apparently Jason looked liked he belonged in a hangar full of armed men more than he ever did at a Wayne fundraising event.

Miss Lucille switches out the scooter for a cane the next week and the week after she takes off the boot. Wiggling his toes again feels like a goddamn miracle. The best part is when he’s cleared to drive. He takes a joyride out of the city that very day. He drives with the windows down despite the icy air, drinks in the feeling of freedom. The rush of cold wind through his hair is the closest thing he’s felt to flying over rooftops in months. He will take what he can. Miss Lucille doesn’t bring up his break down or Tim but he notices the flash of disappointment every time he comes for an appointment and Babyface doesn’t follow him in. Will, similarly doesn’t bring up the episode but that may be because he doesn’t see the man again once he can drive himself. The man’s words roll around in his head though on a continuous loop.

Take your time to figure out what it is you really want, get your bearings. But don’t wait too long or you might find the choice has been made for you.

So, as much as he is loathe to, he thinks about Tim. Life would be easier without him. Tim is a complication. Jason isn’t used to taking other’s feelings into consideration beyond how to use them to his advantage. If Tim isn’t there he doesn’t have to worry about hurting him on purpose or by accident. Doesn’t have to worry about disappointing the optimistic little shithead either. Which he will. Probably when Jason takes up where he left off keeping Gotham’s unsavories in check.
It would be easier to put his machinations in place for breaking back into the game without Tim looking over his shoulder. His utility and grocery bills are significantly lower without feeding the younger vigilante and letting him use his shower and washer as well…

Then again, having an in with one of the Bats would be a tactical advantage. He wouldn’t get injured as often if he had someone to team up with and watch his back on occasion. Not to mention he kind of…misses the little shit. Nights spent listening to police scanners aren’t as much fun as movie nights. He feels a bit idiotic when he catches himself commentating as he cooks and there’s no one there to laugh at his over-the-top vulgarity. He doesn’t sleep as well either. Its harder with the knowledge there will be no one there to wake him up from his nightmares. It could be nice, no—useful, to have a friend.

*Friends are liabilities.* Talia had told him that once. *Friends are merely potential enemies with greater means to hurt you for they know your weaknesses. Just because someone shows kindness does not mean they won’t slide a knife between your ribs when it suits them. Remember that and you’ll live longer.*

He wishes she had told him that sooner. He had found that out the hard way. He takes two and a half weeks to finally make his decision. Once he does he starts jotting short notes on every scrap of paper he can find. Drafts on napkins, junk mail envelopes, and even squares of toilet paper. He agonizes over the phrasing. Analyzes his words until he’s sure he has something that can’t be misinterpreted in any way. Something that comes off as neither pleading nor demanding. Something that can let them both save face.

He settles on:

*I still have the suit’s leg. All fixed now. Do you want to pick it up or have me drop it off with you?*

He tosses the phone onto the coffee table as soon as the text sends. He wants it out of reach and mind so he isn’t tempted to check it obsessively. He is not expecting an immediate answer. Tim likes to plan, as much as himself if not more. He’ll take his time constructing his own carefully parsed response. But he will respond. Eventually. After all, he can’t leave the suit’s leg with Jason indefinitely can he? He wouldn’t be so petty to construct a new one just to avoid Jason, right?

The fucker makes him wait a full twenty-four hours before responding. It seems extensive considering the message he gets back in return.

*K. Fri @ 1900 convenient? Will pick up b4 patrol.*

Jason scowls distastefully.

“Fucking atrocious, Tim,” he says out loud.

*Sure,* he sends back.

He waits too long. He’s listening idly to the police chatter Thursday night when someone blows up Kane Memorial Bridge.
Hey y’all! Not gonna lie, drunk af right now. Because I am an adult and that means I self-medicate with alcohol. Gotta love it when your significant other tells you that even though they were initially attracted to you because of how “independent and not-needy” you are, it is no longer attractive and instead is giving them severe anxiety. :/ I know I’m getting TMI, just...I’m drunk and tired and...Sorry. That said, while I may be inebriated posting, this was all soberly written. And edited. Seriously this is my most edited chapter yet. I think its gone through 6 drafts now?

Speaking of. Do y’all think I am improving as a writer? Or do you feel like I’m writing at the same quality level as when I posted chapter one? I’ve really been trying to improve. Mostly just by reading more and writing more, but I’ve also been reading a lot of articles and there’s a really sweet series of TEDtalks for writing (Check out: https://www.ted.com/topics/writing). Personally I got the most out of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Elif Shafak, and Andrew Stanton’s talks. Where do you think I can improve even more?

PS:
bunnyloverXIV I took note of what you said with Chapter 14 and it being difficult to tell who was talking when Dick/Steph/Tim started to overlap. I hope I’ve avoided that in the comm link chats here where there’s 2+ speakers (except when its on purpose).

And Azamiko I couldn’t help but include a passing reference to a head canon you mentioned - I hope you notice and like.

And now to some good ole pulp action…

Yes. I’m sure its not %100 percent realistic. But come on. Comic level action here. You can suspend your disbelief for movies and graphic novels = you can suspend your disbelief for me.

Oh um. Next chapter won't be out for a while. Not going to have any free time to do any writing/editing - my sister is getting married in 2 weeks and I have maid of honor duties and a lot of wedding prep to help with.
“Are you sure this is necessary? It’s just a drive-by pick-up. I’ll be there like five minutes tops.”

“Exactly,” Stephanie’s voice floats to him from deep inside his walk-in closet, “You have five minutes to make an impression and you want it to be a good one.”

Tim gives a long-suffering sigh from where he’s sprawled backwards on his bed, which is no longer blanketed in case notes. Steph appears dangling a shirt from each hand.

“How ’bout this one?” She raises a short sleeve navy button-up with a monochrome geometric pattern woven in.

“Little cold out for short sleeves don’t you think?”

“Then wear your navy jacket over it. It’s called layering Tim.”

Tim rolls his eyes, “I know what it’s called. I’ve been dressing myself for the camera since I was six.”

“And yet you were probably going to waltz over to Jason’s tomorrow wearing that ratty old hoodie with the coffee stains all over it.”

Tim pops his head up to look at her, “Which is what I’ve always worn in front of him.”

“But things are different now,” Steph’s lips turn down judgmentally, “You want him to look at you and see a fine piece of ass not a teenager who just slouched his way out of third period.”

“Whoa,” Tim rises up on one elbow, “The plan is just to be his friend Steph, full stop.”

“Maybe that’s your plan. I have a longer end game in mind. Besides, you can’t be his friend and dress well? Consider it part of the Restoring-Drake’s-Dignity-Initiative.” She holds the blue shirt at arm’s length to see it better, “Y’don’t wanna know, I really like this shirt. I wanna buy one for Jeremy. Where did you get it? Target? H&M?”

“Billy Reid. It’s a two-hundred dollar shirt.”

Stephanie makes a choking noise.

“Of course, they gave it to me for free. A thank-you for wearing one of their suits to the Wayne Foundation fundraiser last spring. One of the press photos blew up on Picstagram or something. Funny thing about being rich and famous is—people like to give you stuff for free.”

“What about this one?” she asks raising the shirt in her other hand.

“Burberry, and you don’t want to know.”

Steph makes a disgusted face, “Y’know, sometimes I really hate you.”

Tim shrugs. He’s preparing a witty retort when the alarm of his front door goes off. The specific series of chimes is Dick’s ID sequence. Tim pushes himself up and lopes to the door curiously. He checks the video feed in the foyer to make sure it is in fact the real Dick Grayson before opening the door.

“What are you doing here?” Tim inquires, not unkindly.
Dick pulls the remains of what was once a blue bow tie from his neck and pushes inside, “Picking you up.”

Tim closes the door and follows him into the living room, “Uh. What for? We’re not patrolling together til tomorrow night. Steph and I are having a study date,” he gestures at the open textbooks and highlighted notes spread over the coffee table of the otherwise neat apartment.

“Looks nice in here, did you rearrange the furniture or something?”

Tim’s face heats up. Cleaning up the apartment had been the second step in the Restoring-Drake’s-Dignity-Initiative, (the first had been a shower). He’s proud to say the only two coffee cups sitting out are the ones Steph brought earlier this afternoon. He’d swept all the work paraphernalia excluding the white board to the office area in the main room. Two freshly organized fireproof and print-locked file cabinets stand on either side of his desk; one for WE and Drake Industries work, and one for his after-hours activities. He’d even mounted a drop-down map of New York to hide the case wall when needed.

The overall result was an aesthetic far more evocative of a stylish young bachelor than a serial killer. On the upside of things, he no longer burns in embarrassment at the memory of Jason’s scorn…On the downside, he really wishes he had an excuse to show it off to Jason. Maybe he should text Jason again and ask him to drop the greave off here instead of picking it up?

“Hi Dick! What’s up?” Stephanie chirps, emerging from the hall with another shirt in hand. A Shipley and Halmos sweater, $340.

“Hey Steph, mind if I borrow Tim for the rest of the evening?”

Steph scowls, “Yeah, kind of. He’s helping me study.”

Dick’s brow wrinkles, “For fashion design?”

“For organic chemistry,” She huffs. “We were taking a break to pick out what Tim’s gonna wear tomorrow.”

“And Babs and I were at the theater. I would have called but since I was already here in town I figured it would be just as easy to drop by,” Dick flashes him a smile.

Tim and Steph cross their arms over their chests. Oh god, they really are troll twins he thinks and immediately drops his hands back down at his sides.

“What’s going on Dick?” he asks earnestly.

“Remember that arms dealer I tracked to Gotham from Bludhaven?”

Tim frowns, “Lanik? Yes. I know Bruce was going to collaborate with Gordon about setting up a raid next week.”

Dick raises his eyebrows.

“I, uh. I checked into the Cave computer. To stay up to date it is all,” Tim defends himself.

“You mean you hacked in,” Dick says with a mischievous curl to his lips.

“Hey, I can’t help you and Steph with your cases effectively if I don’t know what’s tangled up in Bruce’s!” he explains.
“And we thank you for that. But yes, that’s the one. Time-table has moved up. Selina dropped B a line saying she saw them closing up shop. Either they got wind of the raid somehow or are getting ready to ship out—but we got to go. Now.”

Tim cocks his head to the side, “I don’t see what this has to do with me.”

“B said all hands on deck. That means you too Tim. Babs is already on her way back to the Clock Tower. Steph gets a free pass because of exams.”

Stephanie opens her mouth to protest and Dick points a finger at her, “School first, vigilantism second.” He turns back to Tim, “So grab your suit and let’s go.”

Tim stiffens.

He plants his feet and shakes his head, “Bruce made it clear I’m not welcome to work with him anymore. If he wants my help he should ask for it himself.”

Dick’s fingers twitch against his thighs testily, “Yes, he should. Do you think I really want to be the middleman here? Of course not, but you know what? This isn’t about you or Bruce. This is about keeping people safe and a whole bunch of guns off the street so you’re going to do it anyway. Now go grab your suit.”

It’s been a while since Dick has directed his authoritative ‘big brother’ voice at Tim and it catches him off guard. Tim stares back at him blank faced. He thinks about pushing back, telling Dick that Bruce is more than capable of handling it on his own. Except…Bruce asking Dick to bring him in on a case with them is a sign that he feels he can still rely on Tim. He’s reaching out. Maybe he’s reaching out across the Grand Canyon with his pinkie finger, but he’s still reaching out. And Dick is right. Innocent lives at stake and all that.

Tim sighs. He gets his suit.

“Sooooo,” Dick attempts at conversing in the prolonged silence of the ride back to Gotham.

Tim’s not trying to be an asshole, really. His mind is just preoccupied with the fact this will be his first time working with Bruce again in months. It’s daunting. At least they’ll be in masks. Bruce is nothing if not professional under the cowl. Outside of the cowl is a different story and Tim will deal with that when it happens. He just needs to stay cool during the interim. Be cool, Tim. Be cool. The bump as the car rolls over the seam where the Kane bridge meets land again startles him back to the moment.

“Sorry, what?”

“I asked if you and Steph had made any headway on the body snatcher case.”

“Organs,” Tim corrects automatically, “The unsub is stealing organs not cadavers.”

“Whatever. Make any breakthroughs?”

“No,” Tim sighs, “We’ve hit a dead end. Trying to track the organs was a bust. One or two might be linked to surgeries at Gotham Mercy but most of the deaths don’t correspond properly with hospital records. Unless we dig up some new clues I’m afraid we’re just waiting for the next body to drop.
And we’re overdue for one of those as well.”

Dick angles his mouth towards Tim without taking his eyes off the road, “What about Triad? Steph mentioned she thought they might know something.”

Tim snorts.

“Oh, that. Well, they did confirm that someone is edging in on their trade…but according to them its some kind of hungry ghost so they refuse to have anything to do with it.”

“Ah.”

Dick merges them onto the westbound beltway to skirt them around the edge of the city back towards the manor.

“Soooo,” he tries again after a long pause, “Picking out an outfit to see Jason tomorrow, hm?”

“No,” Tim cuts him off.

“I’m just trying to be supportive here, stay in the loop.”

“We are not talking about this,” Tim persists.

“But if you wanted to talk about it, it’s cool. I mean, I’m here if you—

“Hey boys, what’s your ETA?” O’s mechanized voice breaks in over the car speakers.

“Eleven minutes,” Dick answers. His voice is almost as relieved as Tim feels at the fortuitous interruption of that particular conversation.

“Might want to speed it up. Your friend Lanik is about to go on the move Wing. Looks like they’re wrapping up loading those VZ.58s we saw on the feed Wednesday. Four cargo vans each with an escort SUV. These guys are not playing around. B wants to move out ASAP.”

“Do we really want to engage in a pursuit?” Tim asks, statistics flying through his head.

One in five high-speed pursuits end in significant property damage, one in seven in injury, and one in thirty-five in fatalities; usually the suspect or innocent bystanders. There’s a reason the GCPD has strict regulations for police pursuit. Personally, Tim loves a good chase. He may not be able to keep up with Dick’s acrobatics flying over rooftops but no one can beat him behind a wheel. So while the idea of swooping in on Redbird sends his adrenaline pumping, he’s hesitant to actually let things take to the streets.

Dick echoes his concern, “Did it look like they were spooked? If they’re skipping town I’d rather tag them with a tracker and wait to see where they land.”

Bruce’s voice growls over the line, “They weren’t in a rush to load the vans this leads me to believe they’re unaware of our surveillance and are getting ready for an exchange. In that case it’s imperative we secure those guns before they can be handed off.”

“There’s been some chatter coming from the north side docks to support the idea something going down there tonight,” O adds.

That’s in Jason’s old territory. Tim can’t help but wonder if Jason would have ever let things get this far on his watch.
“Alright, how are we doing this?” Dick asks.

“GCPD policy allows only four squad cars to any pursuit so its important we maximize our ground presence. Nightwing, you’ll take point in the Batmobile. Red Robin and Robin will back you up on cycles. I’ll track the suspects and provide air support from the plane.”

Tim nods, forgetting they can’t see him. Bruce rarely lets anyone else behind the wheel of the Batmobile, but the only piece of tech more expensive than the Batmobile is the plane. It will be far easier to track the caravan from above than piecing together traffic camera footage.

“And we have alerted the GCPD and ATC right?” Tim asks.

“Thanks Red, I never would have thought to do that!” O’s sarcasm is palpable over the radio waves, “Yes. GCPD has been made aware that a possible chase may occur. Commissioner said his priority is keeping the streets clear of civilians. They’re prepared to provide roadblock assistance but no more than three squad cars. ATC is temporarily grounding all flights except emergency craft. So everything looks good—Except for the fact that Lanik and his men are leaving now!”

“Nightwing, I’m heading out. Notify me when you depart,” Bruce responds tersely.

They’re two minutes out from the manor when the plane goes streaking by overhead. Tim watches it climb in the mirrors til it gains enough altitude to be invisible from below. His anxiety over his impending confrontation with Bruce seems wasted now. It’s all rather anticlimactic. When they pull in to the Cave the Batmobile is already sitting at the entrance, engine idling. Robin is there too, perched on the Robincycle with a black look.

“Drake are you ever not late?” he sneers.

“Hey! Don’t look at me!” Tim retorts, affronted. “He’s the one who was driving,” he says pointing at Dick.

Damian tuts, “If he hadn’t gone to retrieve you in the first place it wouldn’t be an issue.”

“Again, not my fault. Coming here wasn’t exactly my first choice either,” Tim jibes back while shucking out of his civvies.

Usually he’d fold them and put them up in a locker before leaving but they don’t have time tonight. He and Dick leave their clothes in a pile on the garage floor for Alfred to pick up later. Tim does a quick gear check; he gives all the pouches on his bandolier a once-over and makes sure his grapple gun is loose in its holster for easy access. He slips a comm in his ear and shoves a helmet on before picking out a bike. The current Redbird is in the garage at Dick’s safe house so he’s forced to take the penultimate model.

A map of Gotham flashes on screen when he starts it. A blinking orange dot that must be the caravan B is relaying back to them from the plane is crawling north through the network of illuminated lines. Tim opens up the throttle and grins under his helmet where no one can see. He relishes the chance to really push the engine while they’re on straight empty roads before they wind into the tangle of turns and potholes of the city. Of course, that’s its own exhilarating challenge. He lets the others catch up to him when they hit the city limits. The Batmobile is moving to pass him when a thought flashes through Tim’s mind.

“Hey Wing, we don’t want them to realize they’re being followed til we have them in low-pop area we can cut them off in. The Batmobile is a bit conspicuous, maybe you should let Robin and I take the lead for now?”
He phrases it as a question; mental fingers crossed and is rewarded when Bruce grunts his approval, “Good strategy Red Robin.”

It shouldn’t affect him like it does. Tim’s mad at Bruce for reasons goddamnit. One compliment is not going to erase what he did or what he said to Jason. Tim swallows down the flush of gratification that threatens him. In the rearview mirror he watches the Batmobile slack off and disappear. The corresponding blue blip on his map turns onto a road paralleling their course.

While Gotham never truly sleeps, it’s late enough there aren’t many others out on the streets and Tim and Damian are easily able to maneuver around them, closing the gap between them and their prey. They finally come into sight when Tim turns right off Harrison onto the street that turns into Crime Alley further east. Follow it all the way east and it goes straight to the docks.

Maybe he should ask Bruce’s permission before he starts giving orders but the older man had backed him up earlier and Tim is feeling bold now in his element.

“Alright. Wing, get ready. We want to get through the red light district before cutting them off. There’s too many people there. But if we wait till about six blocks past it drops off again.”

Bruce’s voice confirms, “There’s a one way street called Perry. Turn left there Nightwing. That will be the best place to cut them off, it dead ends two blocks north under the railroad tracks.”

“Noted,” Dick chirps back and Tim watches his blip gain speed on the map, moving ahead of them.

The buildings around them start to crumble as they dive deeper into skid row. The people here are hollow-eyed and most are quick to get out of their way. They weave easily enough around the shambling drunks and junkies who don’t. Curses and middle fingers are thrown in their direction. It’s obvious the Bats aren’t well-loved here. Tim wonders what Jason had done to earn their respect. Was it something as simple as his accent? That they could tell he was one of them? Or did they appreciate his harsher brand of justice in this place where only the tough survive?

They zip past a dark side street with an empty overgrown lot on the corner and a bricked up building beyond that. There’s nothing special about it except a scattering of wilted flowers piled up against a wall. A wall that once had a body nailed to it. Tim’s front wheel wiggles and he resists the reflex to white-knuckle the handlebars. He forces his grip to stay comfortably slack and comes out of the fishtail before it really begins. Had the denizens of Crime Alley actually mourned the loss of Red Hood?

“They’ve spotted us! They’re changing course!” Damian yips over the comms.

Tim looks forward just in time to see the taillights of the last van disappear around a sharp turn left.

“They turned north on Stokes and are doubling back,” Bruce expounds.

Dick curses over the comm and Tim swears he can here the squeal of the Batmobile’s tires over the line as he tries to adjust for a new trajectory.

“I think I can narrow down their potential routes,” O offers helpfully, “If they continue down that road they’ll follow the railroad tracks back into the west side but it’s risky with all of the traffic stops there. More likely they’re heading towards the highway junction in a mile. From there they can get on the beltway or take I-95 over the Kane Memorial Bridge.”

“Contact the GCPD and have them lower the hurricane evac gates on the highway entrance ramps,” Bruce orders.
There’s the double click that signifies a private line opening up.


Tim sneers but doesn’t otherwise respond. He’s not sure if its an improvement that Damian has taken to insulting him in private instead of over the group comm now. Focus Tim. He narrows his concentration on the bobbing line of taillights that have come back into view.

“They’re taking the ramp onto the highway,” he alerts the others, “Trying to make a run for it.”

Centrifugal force pulls on Tim’s body as he accelerates up the sweep of the ramp, leaning into the turn.

“Guys, we have a problem,” Oracle interjects, “If they take the bridge instead of the beltway and cross over they’ll be out of GCPD jurisdiction.”

“But they won’t be out of Bat jurisdiction.”

Tim can feel Oracle roll her eyes at Dick, “The GCPD is prepped and ready. Even if I call the NYPD right now there’s no way they’ll be able to mobilize in time to work with us. It’s going to get very messy if they make it over.”

“They don’t make it over. We’ll cut them off at the bridge,” Bruce pronounces.

“Can GCPD get a road block set up there?”

O growls, “There’s a couple patrol units nearby but I’m not sure if they can get something set up in time. At your speed definitely not before the beltway and you’ll be at the bridge in less than three.”

She hasn’t even finished talking when Tim sees a pair of red and blue lights flashing ahead of them. So does the caravan. The drivers of the last two vehicles manage to peel off in a shriek of brakes and head left down the beltway at the last second. Bruce barks at Dick to follow them. Tim can see the lights of the bridge rising up in front of him.

Two GCPD squad cars are moving to block the lanes leading to the bridge while a third is parked on the shoulder. He can see two officers attempting to set up a spike strip. The lead SUV plows through in a sacrificial move, dragging the strip with it and ramming one of the squad cars out of the road to clear it for the rest of the convoy. He hears the pop of the Batmobile guns targeting and shooting out the tires of the second vehicle in line. That leaves four more barreling onto the bridge.

Tim deftly skirts through the debris field bearing down harder on the gas. He has to duck when spurts of gunfire kick up the asphalt around him. He zigs and zags, keeping his pattern of zigs and zags carefully irregular to prevent them from getting a lock on him. His bike jumps up at the same seam he and Dick rode over in the opposite direction less than an hour before.

Tim scans the span ahead of him. The GCPD did their job well at keeping civilians off the roads; there are only two unidentified pairs of taillights visible along its whole length that he can see. One set is small and soon disappears over the midway arc, they should be safely to the other side before getting caught up in the chase. Tim’s more worried about the nearer set of taillights in the right hand lane they are fast approaching. As he gets closer he can see they belong to a truck not quite old enough to earn antique vehicle plates. Tim swears under his breath when the truck doesn’t slow to pull off to the side. Either the driver is oblivious to what’s taking place around him, which Tim doubts with the cracks of gunfire erupting around them, or they’ve frozen up in shock at getting stuck in the middle of a car chase.
That’s the problem with chase scenes in action movies, Tim thinks. The focus is always on the hero and villain as they dodge through the sea of prop cars around them. The audience’s attention is directed to marveling over how skillfully the characters navigate impossible slips and gaps and not the obstacles themselves. In real life though, those prop cars aren’t scenery and they sure as hell don’t have trained stuntmen at the wheel ready to compensate for suddenly being cut off or pitching their vehicle into a showy controlled spin. In real life when a side-swiping armed motorcade and the roar of a descending jet converge, their drivers spook. They brake too hard and swerve desperately out of danger only to over correct and send them right back into it.

Tim watches as the truck loses control and slams into the side of the third vehicle, a van. The truck cab pushes the van off the paved lane, over the curb of the walking path and straight into the support tower of the first pier. Tim’s already braking and dismounting, ready to start wiping up the mess here when he’s sent flipping in a rippling wave of heat and sound.

There are voices (several) screaming in his ear. One much louder than the rest.

“Red Robin! Get up!” There are hands at his chin wrestling with the strap of his helmet. He smacks them away and fumbles with the clip, dragging it off with a groan. Damian is glaring down at him. His eyes are hidden behind the lenses of his mask but his eyebrows have that angry slant to them they always have when directed at Tim. Tim tries to get to his feet but Damian shoves him down again firmly.

“You idiot, are you trying to get yourself killed?”

The world is lit in a flickering red orange glow and crackling around him. He can’t make sense of it. Stop, focus. Breathe. What does he see?

Damian is crouched next to him partially in shade. They’re sheltered behind a police cruiser. Two officers are similarly hunkered down with them at the front of the vehicle. Tim can see his bike over Damian’s shoulder thirty feet away on its side. He reconstructs. The explosion knocked him back over his bike. Robin and the cruiser must have been far enough behind him to not get caught in the blast. They pulled over and Damian dragged him to safety. Damian. Dragged. Him. To. Safety.

Damnit.

Now he’s going to owe the little monster.

Tim peeks over the trunk of the car. Both van and truck have been annihilated. There’s nothing left but empty burning husks. Re-orange flame, high brisance, shock based ignition. PETN, that means Semtex. The steel geometry of the support tower is scorched and warped. Men are exiting one of the SUV’s. That leaves one SUV and one van unaccounted for, assumed still in motion.

What does he hear?

The crepitating inferno. A strange horrific groaning he think may be the bridge itself. Pops that are either the shearing of bolt heads or the shots issued from the pistols the officers are aiming over the hood. An answering crack of rapid fire most definitely from the gunmen. Ah, there are the VZ.58s. The sound of voices screaming in his ear. He should probably do something about that. It takes him a moment to sort through the overlapping layers of speech.
“Red Robin, Robin. Come in, do you read?”

“Holy shit, what was that?”

“What’s going on? What happened, O? B?”

“Robin! Red Robin, report!”

“Red Robin was thrown from his bike in the blast, I’ve recovered him.”

“What blast? Oh my god, is everyone okay? Is Red okay?”

“Nightwing! Calm down. Concentrate on your own mission. Be aware the vans are potentially carrying explosives, modify your apprehension actions accordingly. I will continue pursuit of the remaining vehicles.”

“Screw you B! I’ll decide wh—

“Red, here,” he croaks, “M’fine. We’re fine. Wing, be careful. Pretty sure they’re carrying Semtex.”

“Shit, okay.”

Tim arches backwards to see over the car and does a recount. He sees five gunmen. Great. Five gunmen armed with automatic rifles against him, Damian, and two cops. The odds aren’t terrible but his bo staff and Damian’s katana won’t be much use unless they can close the gap. They have a finite number of batarangs and Tim is hesitant to launch a line into the teetering structure of the pylon. He has smoke pellets but while a smokescreen may mask his and Damian’s advance it won’t shield them from their foes firing blindly into the cloud and killing them anyway. What they need is a distraction, something to draw the hostiles’ attention away long enough for him and Damian to slip into close quarters…

He starts scooting towards the closest policeman and goes to tug his sleeve when there’s a grinding screech. The ground beneath them tilts, cracks fingering across the asphalt. The gunmen stumble and pause, looking up. It’s the perfect opportunity to take them unawares except Tim’s gaze is also locked in the same direction. The damaged support tower is leaning back, pulling the main suspension cable taut from its graceful parabola. There are a few seconds of perfect stillness while everyone waits and watches. Then another round of gunfire opens up and the spell is broken. Tim grabs the shoulder of the officer and does a double take when the man turns. He’s young with wisps of light brown hair sticking out from under his cap. The name on his jacket reads 'Poole.'

“Jeremy!” Tim cries in disbelief.

Officer Poole looks back at him with wide shocked eyes. Steph is right. It is kind of like staring into pools of melted chocolate. Tim shakes his head, now is not the time.

“How do you—

“Mutual friend. How are you doing?”

Jeremy’s expression is incredulous, “What?”

“Yeah, sorry. I’m bad at this. I uh, I just want to let you know: you’re going to get through this okay?” Tim tries to smile reassuringly. Its pretty clear from Jeremy’s confused countenance he fails pretty spectacularly.
“Uh, thanks. I think. Okay.”

Tim pats him and moves past him to the officer leaning in the car yelling into his radio. If Poole is here that must make the other one…

“Officer Saltz!” he yells.

Saltz turns his way and gives him a thumbs up, “Good to see you Red!”

“I have an idea! We need a distraction to draw their fire. I’m going to need your flare gun and siren. If you could use your radio to—

Saltz isn’t looking at him. He’s ogling something going on beyond on the other side of the cruiser.

“What the hell? I thought he was dead!” Saltz tosses a hitchhiker thumb over his shoulder.

Tim’s mouth falls open. He hadn’t heard the approaching engine over the gunfire and actual fire. A black motorcycle jets over the (widening, Tim notes in alarm) rift in the asphalt separating them from the city directly into their adversaries running the closest man down. The rider jumps free, letting the bike skid into a second combatant. Tim would recognize that stupid helmet anywhere.

Damnit.

“Well he will be for sure, because I’m going to kill him!” Tim snarls.

Change of plans. He signals to Robin and extends his bo staff. He uses the staff to vault over the squad car and rocket feet first into nearest gunman’s chest. He’s already twirling it as he lands to catch the man under his chin and it’s lights out. Damian is locked in battle with one man who has resorted to using his rifle to block Damian’s swings while two others circle Jason. Tim lashes out low and thwacks his staff solidly into the shin of the man on Jason’s left, his weak side. Tim can see the gunmetal gray of the flex armor weave tucked into his boot in an attempt to protect his ankle.

He shoves the end of his staff into the man’s gut doubling him over and is about to rip it upwards to dislodge the firearm from his grip when something tears through his thigh leaving white-hot pain in its wake. It crumples beneath him. Jason turns, pistol leveled at his head and Tim has exactly enough to time to think, ’Well shit,’ when the gun goes off. His head snaps over his shoulder and he sees the man trapped beneath Jason’s bike slump sideways, blood leaking from between his eyes. The rifle tumbles from his now slack grip. Tim’s mind spits and fizzes in dismay but Jason’s shoving his hand in front of his face before he can react.

“You gonna sit there all day or what?” his distorted voice calls out from the hood.

Tim tries to stand and the world lurches. At first he thinks the graze must have been worse than he thought, adrenaline dulling the pain, but Jason is sent staggering too. Tim’s bones vibrate when a low grating hum moves through him and the road bucks violently. Tim grabs Jason’s hand and instinctively looks up as he levers himself into a stand. Over Jason’s shoulder the steel beams give and the tower starts to fall. He can barely hear Jason over the shriek of tortured metal scraping his eardrums.

“We have to fucking go! The bridge is coming down!”

To emphasize his point there’s a series of pops as the vertical cables connecting the main suspension line to deck at the bridge’s apex are pulled past their breaking point. Great chunks of roadway start dropping into the river below.
“Wait!” Tim points to the wounded and unconscious thugs around them and Saltz and Poole beyond, “We have to get them to safety!”

“Are you fucking crazy?”

“We can’t leave them here to die!” Tim argues.

The tower is collapsing and pulling them down with it; the gap between them and the bit of bridge anchored safely to land is too far to jump. They’re trapped on an island that’s falling apart around them. Leaving anyone behind is a death sentence. There’s a sound like nothing Tim’s ever heard before though he’ll hear it in his nightmares for years to come. The asphalt pitches sharply and they flatten themselves against it to keep from tumbling over. Jason pulls him sideways in a mad crab-walk type shuffle to avoid the empty SUV, squad car, and his own beloved bike as they slide towards the guardrail. A limp body rolls with them. Tim stretches out an arm to reach for the person but it’s not enough. They slip under the guardrail and over the side.

“No!” Tim cries, feeling sick.

Jason’s helmet jerks up and to the side then back, belying his frustration.

“You want to save these assholes, fine,” he gestures at a gunman scrabbling weakly at the pavement with his fingers. There are bloody holes where his kneecaps used to be. “But I’m not putting my life on the line for that scum. I’ll grab the boys in blue.”

Then he’s gone, surging up the steep incline on powerful thighs to where Jeremy is holding onto the opposite guard rail with Saltz clutched to him. Tim looks at the man at his feet. Tear tracks cut through the soot on his face. Tim sighs and squats down to wrap one arm around the arms dealer and reaches for the holster of his grappling gun with the other. He gasps at the ripple of pain and looks down. All that remains of his grapple are the shards glinting deep in the bloody meat of his thigh. He watches helplessly as Hood and Robin grapple with their charges in tow to the stable section of bridge safely. Robin’s mask pops back to look down at him over the edge when he doesn’t follow.

“Red Robin, what are you dawdling for!” pops statically in his comm.

“My grapple is busted,” he replies, trying to stay upright while the deck shudders beneath him.

“Robin, stay here! I’ll get Red,” Jason breaks in.

O must have patched him into their comm network at some point. He hopes she gave him an earful like he’s going to just as soon as he’s back on solid ground. There’s no way all this jumping around hasn’t screwed up his ankle. They haven’t even taken the screws out yet. Miss Lucille is going to flay Jason alive.

Red Hood swings down from his line and lands ten feet away. Tim struggles to close the distance, but the angle and his leg are making it difficult to do so while hauling the injured gunmen with him. Jason, unhindered, moves quickly. He kicks the man out of Tim’s arms. Tim squawks in protest and Jason lunges forward the last few feet grabbing Tim around the forearm just as the main suspension cable snaps and the deck gives one last god-awful toss. The cable whips overhead like a striking cobra, freeing the rest of the smaller vertical supports and they streak out in an angry hissing frenzy. One snakes around their line and the contact jolts him and Jason violently. The grapple gun is wrenched out of Jason’s grasp and they free-fall.

His breath is forced out in a rush, back colliding with something solid. He’s pinned between Jason and tarmac. Their feet dangle over thin air and a piece of exposed rebar is digging into his side. Jason
is straining to hold onto another piece of rebar, shouting from the effort of holding his own weight and Tim’s single-handedly.

“Hang on guys, B is bringing the plane back around. He’ll be there in two minutes, buses in four!” O sounds desperate.

“We don’t have two minutes,” Jason grits out.

Tim kicks out a little and twists trying to get into a position where he can grab the rebar at his side.

“What are you doing?” Jason cries, “Stop wriggling or I’ll drop you!”

Tim ignores him, concentrating. If he can get a good grip, he can hold his own weight and take the strain off Jason.

“Robin, do you have a clear line of sight to us?” Jason asks.

“Yes.”

Tim’s fingers close on the metal bar. He slides his body out from under Jason’s.

“Is there anyone up there who can help you?”

“No. They are either injured, in shock, or in restraints.”

Jason curses, “Okay, okay. Then I need you to listen to me. Secure yourself as best you can without losing your line of sight, alright?”

“Alright.”

“Good. Now, before something shifts extract Red first. The Red Robin armor, at least when I had it, is strongest at the chest and shoulder plates. Aim for the right, shoulder. Left is too close to the heart.”

Tim’s ears perk up at that, “Wait, what? Hood what are you think—Robin don’t!”

“Take the shot Robin!” Jason yells over him.

Pain blossoms in Tim’s right shoulder. A scream tears from his throat as he’s ripped up and away. The Kane Memorial Bridge gives its final death cry and topples into the river below, and Jason with it.
Hey everyone! Thank you so much for all of the well-wishes. The Wedding was beautiful, the maid of honor delivered a /killer/ toast *cough cough* and everyone rode off into the sunset.

It's good to be back. I don't have a lot to say this time, crazy I know. You guys are probably relieved since I'm usually such a wind-bag. I do want to say though that everyone should give a huge round of applause to the AMAZING OldMythologies. OM has offered their services as a beta and its really been great working with them to bring you this chapter. It wasn't a fun or easy one to write.

I love you all: faithful friends from the beginning and brand new binge-readers alike. So without further ado...

Chapter 17

He can’t look away from the swirling waters below. White foam forms as it rushes around the debris in new paths. Rationally he knows it’s too far, too dark for him to see anything, but his eyes stay glued to the roiling ink-black river, hunting for a flash of red. He’s hauled back by his cape.

“Hold this, I need to cut the line,” Robin mutters tersely.

Tim looks down in mild confusion at the triangle bandage Robin has deftly folded into a ring and is trying to push into his hands. Tim takes it numbly. The boy pulls a knife from his utility belt. The shape reminds him of another knife. One from footage recorded by Batman’s cowl during his first run-in with the Red Hood. He remembers how it cut through Batman’s grapple cord before it could pull tight around an ankle.

Robin kinks the cord close to the end of the barb embedded in his shoulder and slices cleanly through it. Tim grunts at the slight tug and accompanying pain. Most knives aren’t able to do that. Shiva has a knife like that. League of Shadows assassins do too. Tim knows Jason came back to Gotham with League training. He mentioned Talia once. He supposes it makes sense Damian would have something similar. The smack of Robin’s glove across his face stings.

“Snap out of it!” Damian hisses, then pleads, “Do not make me do this on my own again.”

Tim looks up at him sharply. He thinks back to the night of the exhibit opening. Damian had been the one manning the comms the whole night, Dick absent. Damian must have been forced into taking control while Dick was caught up in his own grief. Hell if he doesn’t want to leave the kid to it
again. He’s still struggling to accept the past five minutes happened but when it sinks in he wants to be able to curl up on the asphalt and scream and let the pain and anguish rip itself out of his chest. He doesn’t want to pretend like his heart isn’t getting spaghettified into the black hole of loss just to make it easier on some eleven year old gremlin who isn’t capable of understanding the feeling. He doesn’t want to but... Tim swallows and nods.

“Okay. Sorry. I, sorry.”

He scans the area. There are a lot of bodies under the flashing lights of the police cruisers. One officer is sitting on the ground, back leaned against the wheel of the car that had been rammed. There’s blood running down her face and her eyes are glassy, seemingly blind to the body laid out in front of her while another officer performs CPR. Her partner perhaps?

He skips over the seven zip tied and cuffed gunmen between them and the second cruiser. He finds he no longer cares much about their status but two definitely aren’t moving. Another goes still as he watches. He wonders abstractly if Jason or the police are responsible for those kills. An officer with a blonde ponytail is slumped in the driver’s seat of the far squad car. She’s speaking into the radio with one hand while keeping the other pressed to her thigh. Gunshot wound. To the left he sees Jeremy hunched over Saltz on the asphalt.

Tim struggles to stand. Damian pushes him back, trying to cut away the suit around his shoulder. He snatches the bandage back from Tim and slides it over the metal spike protruding from his skin.

“It can wait,” he tells Robin, “We should triage the others.”

Robin tuts and starts winding a strip bandage over the donut roll, securing it in place.

“You are bleeding profusely and are no good to me passed out.”

Tim huffs and submits, grimacing when Robin finally ties it off. He places a hand on the boy’s shoulder and uses it push off when he stands.

“Thanks. The officer at the radio took a shot to the leg, if she’s not in danger of bleeding out then check on the woman with the head wound. Hopefully its just a concussion. I’m going to check on Poole and Saltz.”

Robin nods seriously and turns to attend to the wounded. He considers tacking on a reassurance that Batman will be there soon, but determines the boy would just scoff at him for it. Besides, he can already hear the roar of the plane’s approaching engines. Tim hobbles towards the men he’d been with on the bridge. Jeremy’s hands are pressed to Saltz’s gut.

He breaks onto the comms disrupting the frantic chatter.

“Hey O,” he says wearily, “Do me a favor and call BG. Let her know her boyfriend is going to need her tonight, please?”

“Okay. Why? Oh god is he there?”

“Yeah, he was with us on the bridge. His partner’s hurt. I’m going to go talk to him now.”

“Red, is everyone else okay?” breaks a new voice, Dick’s, “It took me a while to wrap up here but I’m headed your way now. Please tell me you’re all okay. O won’t give me a rundown.”

“Sorry Wing, I’m a little busy trying to coordinate with Emergency Services.”

“Robin and I are okay. We’re administering first aid to others.”
“Oh, thank god for that. I thought I heard Hood tell Robin to shoot you!” Dicks chuckles nervously.

Tim laughs high and thready, “Yeah. He uh, he did. Shot me with his grappling gun. I’m going to need some help getting it out, but I’m good for now.”

“Wait—what? He shot you?”

“I have to go, Wing.”

“Where’s Hood!? I swear to god when I get there I’m gonna wring his neck. Of all the dangerous stupid things—”

Tim sinks to his knees next to Poole with a groan and crawls his fingers across one of his bandoliers to unclasp a pouch. He pulls out a military-grade antibacterial dressing pad with adhesive. He presses gently against Poole’s side to get his attention.

“I need you to lift your hands for just a second and help me pull up his shirt, okay? This will help slow the bleeding but I have to get it on there first. On the count of three: one, two, three.”

They move in a surprisingly well-coordinated effort despite how badly Jeremy’s hands are shaking. Tim keeps his voice low and soothing—the way he does when Jason’s eyes flicker and his breathing speeds up. Did. Fuck—not thinking about that right now.

“There we go. Alright, good. You can put your hands back now if you want to but that should keep it good and sealed.”

Jeremy nods and grabs one of Saltz’s hands instead. His face is drenched in sweat, there’s a bead of it hanging from his nose. Tim doesn’t tell him it will be okay. Shots to the stomach or intestines don’t bleed as much as the liver would, but there’s a high risk of infection when those organs start spilling into the thoracic cavity. Tim’s shoulders sag, full of regret for all the snide comments he’s made to Steph about her new beau.

He doesn’t know why he does that. He doesn’t have a claim to Stephanie anymore. He doesn’t even wish they were still dating, but there’s a small part of him that will always flare up with jealousy at the idea of someone getting to know her as well as he does; the way she laughs at over-the-top gore effects in old B-rated horror films, her impossible elaborate drink orders, the constant litany of private jokes. The fact Jeremy is a civilian makes it worse. Until now Tim has thought of him derisively as a boy only playing at hero, someone not worthy of Steph (but no one will ever be quite worthy of Steph). All of that is washed away watching Jeremy fight to save his partner’s life.

“Are you okay?” Tim asks.

Jeremy’s head jerks first up and then to the side as if he changed his mind halfway through the motion.

“I mean are you hurt anywhere?”

“No. I don’t think so. I’m…okay,” he stutters then lifts his gaze to Tim’s, “I’m sorry about your friend. He saved us. I didn’t think we were gonna make it, but he took Abram and then came back for me and he saved us.”

Tim’s throat clicks and he stands. He turns and falls back a step. Dick is still yelling in his earpiece demanding to know where Jason is. He doesn’t answer, frozen at the sight of Batman descending the boarding ramp of the plane.
“Hood’s gone, Wing.”

Batman’s stride falters.

“What do you mean gone? Like he left?” Dick asks.

Tim locks eyes with the cowl. There’s the barest hint of a tremor in Batman’s, “Red Robin, report.”

Tim’s mouth opens and closes. Keep it together, Tim. No, wait; don’t be Tim. Be Red Robin. Do your job now. Fall apart later.

Red Robin opens his mouth.

“After the explosion, Robin pulled me to safety. We took cover with officers Poole and Saltz behind their patrol car. Five gunmen exited the SUV on the bridge armed with VZ-58’s and opened fire on us. I was talking with Officer Saltz on executing a plan to draw fire away from the car allowing Robin and I to engage when Hood intervened. We were able to incapacitate the gunmen except for one Hood used lethal force on. When the central span of the bridge collapsed we began to evac. Robin used his grappling gun to remove the subdued gunmen to safety while Ja—” his voice cracks, “Hood saved Saltz and Poole. I tried to help but my grappling gun had been broken in the earlier engagement. Hood ordered Robin to stay on the bridge anchor and came back to retrieve me, but… but the main suspension cable snapped on the return and his line got tangled. Red Hood ordered Robin to extract me forcibly with his grapple. Robin did so. Then the bridge collapsed before we could ext—”

Red Robin disappears in a wisp on the breeze. Tim looks at his shoulder and the barb buried there. The mechanism that allows it to be retracted, pulling the hooks back into the head for release and refire are designed for landing in hard non-organic materials, not flesh. They’re going to have to cut it out of him. They were never going to be able to reuse it to get Jason. Fuck. He must have known. Jason must have known. Tim’s legs go out. Batman catches him before his knees smack into the pavement.

“Red Robin, once Nightwing arrives take the Batmobile back to the cave and meet A in the medlab.”

Tim shakes his head and gets his feet back under him.

“No. I’m fine. I can use the scanners on the plane, look for heat signatures. Shouldn’t be difficult to set it to isolate temperature readings between 97 and 99 degrees Fahrenheit. Hood runs cold though, so maybe 95 to 99 to take that into account. I’ll have to formulate an algorithm to compensate for how quickly it will drop over time based on the current water temperature.”

“Red Robin,” Batman tries to cut in.

“Unless he’s trapped under debris. Shit, if he is the heat scanner may not work. It’d have to be calibrated. If he isn’t buried then I need to find the speed of the river and extrapolate how far he could have traveled since the collapse to give us a search area.”

“Red Robin,” Batman settles his hand heavily on the back of Tim’s neck and squeezes, “We will find him.”

Tim throws off the hand, “No. You don’t understand. We have to find him now. If we wait too long, his body could get washed out into the bay and…and…”

Then it would be damn near impossible to find him. Tim thinks about Jason’s body lying on the bottom of the ocean floor. Would he be able to revive there? The alternative to ‘no’ is worse. He
imagines Jason waking up in the cold and dark just to choke on salt water and die again and again in an endless cycle. Tim’s breathing speeds up. No. Stop. Be Red Robin, focus. Tim forces himself to breathe in for a four count and exhale for a four count but he’s still feeling light-headed.

Batman grips his arm and lowers his voice, “You need medical attention.”

“I have to find him B. He saved me. He saved Jeremy and Saltz. I can’t leave him to…Let me—let me save him now,” Tim begs.

“I would,” Batman answers sympathetically, “If you weren’t injured. But you are and you’ll be a distraction and a hindrance. Nightwing and I will search for him. I promise you we will not return without him.”

Tim stares into the blank lenses of the cowl. He nods and licks his lips. Then he pulls Batman close and does something he has never done in his life. He threatens Batman.

“You better not,” he whispers.

His gait is unsteady when he pushes away and stumbles into the headlights of the approaching fleet of ambulances and fire trucks and there in the back, bringing up the rear is the Batmobile. Dick launches himself out before it comes to a full stop and races to Tim.


“Didn’t you hear my report over the comm?”

Dick shakes his head, “Too many people on the comms. Robin was giving Oracle the status of the wounded to pass onto the responders. Overlap. I didn’t catch it all.”

Tim drops his gaze to his boots. When he doesn’t say anything Dick grabs him, palms on either side of his face and forces Tim to look at him.


“Hood didn’t make it, Wing. He was still on the bridge when it collapsed.”

Dick brings one curled fist to his mouth, “No. No, not again. This can’t be happening. Fuck, not again.”

Shit. Tim can’t deal with this right now. Batman needs Dick to help in the search. Tim needs Dick to be functioning if they’re going to recover Jason.

“Wing!” Tim grabs Dick’s fist and pulls it down. “Stop it! You can’t fall apart like last time. B benched me, I’m going back to the manor. You need to make sure B brings him back. Everything will be fine. He’ll revive,” he states with a confidence he doesn’t feel, “But we can’t let him be scared and alone when he does. You understand me?” He waits for Dick to nod. “Okay, now go talk to B. He’ll brief you.”

Dick moves to hug him but notices the wrapped shoulder and wraps his hands around the nape of Tim’s neck instead.

“I’m so glad you’re okay,” he breathes into Tim’s ear without the comm, “I’m so sorry, Tim. I’m so sorry. I’ll bring him back to you. To us.”
Tim sniffs and Dick pulls away. He watches Dick slide through the crowd of emergency responders and collapses into the open door of the Batmobile. Tim takes a deep breath and sighs. He goes to program the autopilot to take him to the manor when his fingers collide with someone else’s. He didn’t even notice Robin slipping into the passenger seat. Tim tiredly glances at him and buckles in. Damian is streaked with soot and blood. He can’t see any tears in the suit so he assumes it’s someone else’s. Tim leans back and closes his eyes.

The constant flash of lights and flickering of flames has left him with a skull-pounding headache. He tries his best to let the sounds of the city blur into white noise and distance himself from the throbbing ache in his shoulder and the prickling in his thigh. He recites pi back as far as he can remember then starts a Fibonacci sequence. Keeping track of the mounting numbers in the hope that it will distract him from playing the scene of Jason falling over and over in his head. He’s so deeply occupied in not thinking, he misses the change in the feel and sound of the terrain as they leave the city. It’s a shock when they stop moving completely. The jolt of Damian slamming the car door behind him prompts Tim to follow suit, albeit more stiffly. He almost face plants but Alfred is there waiting for him and he catches himself on the butler, gasping when it jostles his shoulder. The Englishman looks askance at the steel rod poking out of the swathe of bandages.

“Good heavens Master Tim, I admit that’s not a sight I expected to see.”

Tim grimaces, “You can thank Damian for that.”

“It was Todd’s idea,” Damian counters sullenly and Tim has to keep himself from snarling at the boy.

Yes, it was Jason’s idea but Damian had been the one to carry it out. Maybe the Robin had even enjoyed it a little, an excuse to hurt him without getting in trouble for it. He’d taken aim and impaled Tim without any hesitancy whatsoever. Something about that lack of hesitancy chafes Tim. There were two people on that bridge Damian could have saved and he hadn’t wasted one second in debating who to save first. Or at all. Had Damian also realized that he could only use the grapple once before he shot? Did he know when he was saving Tim that he was leaving Jason to die? Tim watches the boy suspiciously from the corner of his eye.

Damian doesn’t help Alfred and Tim hobble up to the med bay, he can’t exactly support Tim’s other side without exacerbating the wound there but he hovers a few feet away, spotting them and ready to dash in if it looks like they’ll trip. Almost as if he cares. Or is feeling guilty, which seems much more likely. Tim chews at the inside of his cheek at the thought. They make it without incident and Alfred wastes no time cutting the suit off Tim and slipping in an IV. He pulls the lamp closer and squints at the injury as he starts unraveling the bandages.

“This will take some delicate work to remove, Master Tim. More than I’m comfortable doing on my own. I think I’ll have to give Leslie a call.”

Tim watches the butler exit to use the phone and is surprised to find Damian still standing in the corner of the room. Honestly he thought the youngest Robin would have disappeared to shower by now or situated himself in front of the computer console. Instead he’s just watching Tim awkwardly now that Alfred is no longer there as a buffer. Tim stares back, waiting for him to make a deprecating comment. He doesn’t. When he notices Tim’ attention on him he starts examining the ceiling and cabinets at the injury as he starts unraveling the bandages.

“This will take some delicate work to remove, Master Tim. More than I’m comfortable doing on my own. I think I’ll have to give Leslie a call.”

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“What are you doing here Damian? Shouldn’t you be monitoring the feeds or something?”

Damian tuts and turns his head to the side, not deigning to speak to Tim directly as one would an equal.
“I am fulfilling father’s duty in the care and maintenance of the team’s well being in his absence. That is all.”

Tim rolls his eyes.

“Is that why you saved me tonight? For the ‘care and maintenance’ of the team? I didn’t think I was member of the team anymore,” Tim states casually.

Damian flushes. It’s not the cute rosy blush that rises up Jason’s neck and cheeks when he’s embarrassed. It’s dark and blotchy and the reminder of what Tim has potentially lost makes him irrationally angry.

“Whether you are or are not is not my concern. Tt. Nonetheless father would be upset if you were to be harmed seriously.”

Tim considers that. He eases himself off the gurney he’s been sitting on and limps in front of Damian. Damian had saved his life. Twice. He should be thanking him. Should.

“Jason knew both of us weren’t getting off that bridge. You couldn’t use the grapple more the once and both of us would be too heavy for you hold onto. Why choose me? You didn’t think Bruce would be upset losing Jason?”

The mask glued to the boy’s face stretches as his eyes widen. Any other time Tim would no doubt be feeling some satisfaction at stunning the youngest Wayne.

“I…It was a calculated risk.”

“Bullshit.”

“If you die, you won’t come back. He will.”

Tim explodes, “We don’t know that! We don’t know how this works! We have no way of knowing whether he’ll come back or when it will be the last time! Maybe he doesn’t get to come back a third time!”

“There’s at least the chance he will come back,” Damian argues.

“So? You hate me! You could have extracted him first and apologized for not being able to save us both. No one would have blamed you. It was the perfect opportunity to get rid of the competition for good. Why didn’t you?”

Damian rears his head back so he can glare up at Tim.

“Because as obnoxious and inconvenient as you are, you are a good person! If forced to choose between you or Todd again I would make the same choice because of that!” he screams.

Tim rocks back, chest tight, and slaps his open palm hard across Damian’s face. He ignores Alfred’s cry of dismay from the doorway.

“Don’t. Don’t talk like you know anything about him. He’s not as evil or criminal as you think and I’m sure as hell not as good. Don’t you ever act like he’s more disposable than the rest of us,” Tim hisses.

It takes Alfred physically pulling him away to realize he’s clawed his hand into the front of Damian’s uniform.
“Master Timothy! What do you think you’re doing!” the butler admonishes him, horrified.

Tim lets go of Damian and sits back down on the gurney glaring, “Nothing, Alfred. Just clearing something up.”

“Master Damian, I think it’d be best if you cleaned up now and took a rest. It’s been a long evening and tempers are running high.”

Once Damian disappears with a non-existent pitter-patter of little assassin feet Alfred turns his full attention on him, “Now, Master Timothy, what was that awful display? I expect better of you.”

Tim deflates and bites his lip, “I’m sorry Alfred, really. I don’t know what got into me. I’m just…worried. Has there been any word?”

The elderly butler’s expression softens, “If you mean have Masters Bruce and Richard recovered Master Jason’s body yet, then no. But Miss Gordon is aiding them in their search. I have the utmost faith in their abilities Master Tim, so should you.”

Tim slumps and lets out a reluctant, “Yeah, you’re right.”

“I spoke with Dr. Thompkins. She is on her way as we speak. In the meantime I’d like to start removing the shrapnel from that thigh.”

“Alfred…How do you do it?” Tim asks as the man retrieves a tray of needle nose implements and antiseptic swabs, “How do you deal with this? All of us running off and getting hurt, not knowing if we’re coming home. When Steph and I were dating and I knew she was running around at night, I thought I was going to go out of my mind. Still do sometimes. And then when she…when Black Mask…I was so angry. I was mad at Bruce for not saving her, I was mad at her for putting herself in danger, I was mad at myself for not keeping her out of it. But it hurt too, physically. It felt like my ribs were so tight they’d bruise my heart.”

“Are you feeling that way again?” Alfred asks tactfully.

Tim nods, “I’m mad at him for putting himself on the line for me. I’m mad at Damian for saving me instead of him. I’m mad at Bruce because…because it’s Bruce and if he could have just not been such a raging asshole maybe none of this would have happened.”

Alfred arches an eyebrow.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that last bit,” Tim apologizes, “But I’m scared he’s not going to come back this time and I don’t know how to deal with that.”

The jack-of-all-trades butler turned nurse extraordinaire sits down in front of him and places his hand on his knee.

“It’s never easy, knowing the ones we love are in peril. I’m not sure there is a way to deal with it Master Timothy. I will never be unmoved when I have to stitch one of you up in this room, but after all the years I’ve served Master Bruce in his endeavors I have merely come to accept it over time. I find to keep myself from envisioning all the ways things could go wrong, it helps instead to preoccupy myself in all the ways I can help. I devote my attention to what I can do to keep you all safe and happy when it is within my ability. And a warm cuppa doesn’t hurt either,” the old man adds with a twinkle in his British eye.

Tim’s quiet chuff of laughter catches in his throat when the butler goes for a particularly deep shard. They share a contemplative silence interrupted only by Tim’s occasional grunts and the clink of
grapple detritus being dropped into a metal dish.

“Alfred, would you help me with something? For Jason. When they bring him back,” he explains.

“Of course, young sir.”

“Is the walk-in freezer still set to two degrees Celsius?”

Alfred nods and exchanges his pliers for swabs.

“Good. I’d like to make sure we have things prepared so if—when he wakes up it won’t be a bad
experience. Last time he woke up on a slab in the morgue, I think it would be nice to get a cot or
something soft to lay him on. And he complains about being cold a lot so we should have some
blankets at the ready. And…”

Tim fades off. He’s unsure how much Jason would appreciate Tim revealing, but it’s Alfred.

“We should rig up some lights to stay on in there. He doesn’t like pitch black.”

“Understood, Master Timothy. Are there any further arrangements you think necessary?”

Tim chew his lip a bit, “Uh. We should set up rotational shifts to sit with him until he wakes up. I
know that’s not a good long-term plan. But for at least the first three days. That’s how long it took
him to revive last time. After that I can set up a motion sensor that will deliver us all an alert if it goes
off. I need to see if there’s a locking mechanism on the door and remove it so he won’t be trapped if
someone’s not nearby to let him out. Maybe make a sign, like a big note on the door to let him know
where he is and what’s going on.”

“It seems you have given Master Jason’s well-being quite a bit of thought, Master Timothy,” Alfred
muses gently.

“I…” Tim doesn’t really have a response to that. He sits quietly while Alfred finishes swabbing the
cuts and wraps everything in gauze. There’s a buzz and a yellow light flashes overhead. Alfred sits
up.

“Someone is at the front door, I believe that Dr. Thompkins has arrived. Take heart Master Tim, I
suspect that by the time she is done working on you, you will find it’s a full house once again,”
Alfred’s optimistic words are slightly diminished by his following statement, “Upon which you will
immediately apologize to Master Damian.”

Tim falls back flat on the gurney and groans.

Dr. Thompkins decides the procedure of removing the grapple from Tim’s shoulder will be too much
for localized anesthetic and despite Tim’s wish that he’d really rather her not, puts him under for
surgery. When he wakes, blinking groggily up at the fluorescent lights, only Alfred and Dr.
Thompkins are there. Alfred responds to his slurred query with a shake of his head. Tim has not
awoken to a full house.
Alfred tries to take him up to his room under the pretense he can rest more comfortably there. Tim refuses. He wants to stay in the cave so he can monitor the feeds and help Bruce and Dick. Once again Tim’s wants are vetoed and Alfred threatens sedation if he attempts to go anywhere near the cave console. Tim surrenders, but only on the condition that they let him stay in the med bay so he can see them bring Jason in with his own eyes. He tries to stay awake but it’s hard; Alfred won’t let him have any coffee and he can’t play many of the games on his phone with his right arm bound to his chest to keep him from moving his shoulder.

When he gets bored of flipping through the pile of science journals Alfred has left him he calls Steph. She’s at the hospital with Jeremy sitting in a waiting room with Officer Saltz’s family. Tim learns his first name is Abram and his wife’s name is Maureen. They have three children. Their eldest is away at school, a college freshman at NYU. The twins (a double surprise!) are ten. Stephanie has been teaching them a game she and Tim used to play to keep them distracted; a mix of Uno and poker using gummie bears as chips.

“I’m so sorry Tim,” she says, “I wish I could be there.”

“I know,” he replies.

He hangs up and feels worse than before he called. He picks up the latest issue of WIRED and reads disinterestedly until his head nods towards his chest and he falls asleep. He wakes at the sound of the door when Alfred comes to check in on him and tell him supper is ready; the magazine crumpled up in the blanket somewhere. Tim tells him he isn’t hungry. After thirty seconds under Alfred’s oppressively mild disappointment Tim can’t take anymore and takes the elevator upstairs, still a little too wobbly on painkillers to attempt the steps.

Dinner is awkward. He and Damian do their best to pretend the other doesn’t exist. He conspicuously does not apologize to Damian. He will apologize when, and only when, everyone is back at the manor. Technically that had been the terms put forth by Alfred and he wasn’t going to do so a minute before those conditions were met. Tim almost jumps out of his seat in the middle of passing the gravy boat left-handed when his phone goes off. He spills a little on the tablecloth close to Damian’s elbow earning him a glare in his hurry to answer. It’s Steph, letting him know that Abram Saltz passed away and she’s going to be staying with Jeremy for a few days but that she’ll come out for a couple hours to see him tomorrow. Tim excuses himself from the table and removes to his room because there is a lock on that door that can’t be overridden without Tim allowing it. He locks himself in and sinks to floor with his back against the door.

This is his fault. Tim had tried to save everyone and now one of the few good men in Gotham was gone, sacrificed on Red Robin’s morals. Jason would still be here too if he hadn’t been so determined to drag the wounded thug with him. They would have made it back to safety before the cable snapped and snagged Jason’s grapple out of his hands. Three children have lost their father today and it’s his fault. Jason wouldn’t have hesitated. He would have dropped the gunmen immediately, made the call to exchange certain lives for others. Kill the scumbags so the good cop can go home to his family.

Tim clenches his hands in his hair and bites his lip until it bleeds. Fuck. He knows Bruce would defend his choices, his actions. Bruce would have insightful words ready for him on personal accountability and justice and rising above the easy way out. He would have a thousand rationalities and platitudes and proverbs to justify the Bat’s code. But for the life of him, Tim can’t remember a single one of them right now. He wants to, god he wants to, but he can’t.

*I find it helps instead to preoccupy myself in all the ways I can help.*

The words spark something inside him and he jumps up. He sweeps the piles of papers from his desk
(the Restoring-Drake’s-Dignity-Initiative hadn’t made it to the manor yet) and sends them to the floor. He accidentally knocks off the Darth Vader mug with them and it breaks on the floor. Annoyed, he kicks the pieces aside and cracks his knuckles. He checks his accounts then the Saltz’s with a little bit of digging and makes a call.

“Hey Michael, I’m so sorry to be calling you at...eight o’clock on a Friday night. I know it’s after hours, way after hours, but I was wondering if I could set up a transfer?”

Oh to be a Drake-Wayne. It ends up being pretty easy to set up the anonymous donation that covers what’s left of the mortgage on the Saltz’s house and funeral costs. It doesn’t feel like its enough, so then he gets to work setting up college funds for the twins and their brother. He can’t give them back their father, but he can make sure they don’t lose the roof over their head or their education and opportunity for a better life. He sends an email to his secretary to send his accounts manager a fruit basket in thanks for interrupting his evening.

He’s in the middle of the atrociously slow process of typing out another email with his single available hand to the head of the Wayne Foundation requesting they make drafting up the new Abram Saltz Memorial Scholarship for outstanding cadets at Gotham Police Academy a priority when his phone lets out a shrill series of beeps and whistles from his favorite droid. Tim throws himself on the floor digging his phone out from the pile of displaced papers he’d tossed it into. It’s Dick.

“Hello?” he answers breathlessly.

“We found him.”

Tim’s heart leaps, “And, is he...?”

“I’m sorry Red, he isn’t breathing. But we’re bringing him your way now.”

Tim ends the call. They found him, he isn’t breathing. The simultaneous relief and dread and hope and terror is the worst kind of agony. He leans back against the bed. He doesn’t want to get up until his shoulders stop shaking but he has to. He needs to go tell the others, needs to see if Alfred had time to make all the preparations they discussed. Once he’s up though he’s filled with a kind of manic energy and almost falls down the stairs in his haste. He runs through the dining room, now empty, and into the kitchen. Alfred is standing in front of the sink doing dishes.

“They’re on their way back, Alfred!” he shouts as he skids around the corner and down the corridor to the great hall popping through a small service door to the event kitchen.

Alfred, of course, has gone above and beyond when he checks the freezer. The butler has even left sets of cold weather gear for Bruce, Dick, Tim, and himself outside ready for them when they come for their shift. Satisfied, Tim descends into the cave and through the tunnels to the hangar, barely feeling the over-exertion burning in his thigh and shoulder. Alfred was smarter in his journey, taking a golf cart, arriving shortly after Tim and significantly less winded.

The wait feels painfully long even though it’s only seven minutes later that the hangar roof peels back and the plane lowers onto the pad. Tim’s blood is pounding in his ears and his chest feels like it’s being crushed in a vise while the ramp lowers. He sees the stomp of boots first, then knees, then finally the Batman, as he walks down with Jason cradled against his armored chest. For half a second Tim is awed, Dick and him together could barely heft Jason onto a gurney. Batman is carrying him like he’s nothing.
But then the moment passes and Tim’s focus switches to the man in his arms. Jason’s helmet is gone and his clothes are dark with damp and mud. Tim shifts on his toes, trying to get a better view but Jason’s face is pressed into Batman’s shoulder and all he can see is a wet mess of dark curls. One gray skinned hand dangles, water dripping from the fingertips onto the concrete floor. And now that he is here, Tim doesn’t know what to do. This is all so horribly different than last time, back when he could look at the blue skin and black stitching with morbid curiosity. Before he knew Jason. Before he knew what his laugh sounded like, his favorite kind of beer, or the music he swayed around to in the kitchen. Tim looks hopelessly to Alfred. Alfred is looking at Batman.

“Master Bruce, if you’d like to set him in the cart I’ll take him back to med bay to clean up,” Alfred offers.

Bruce shakes his head, “Thank you Alfred, but I’d rather carry him if it’s all the same.”

Tim can’t blame him. They make an odd procession back to the main cavern; Alfred first in the cart, then Bruce marching stoically, Tim and Dick bringing up the rear unsure. Alfred makes them all wait outside the med bay while he cleans the body. Dick and Bruce take the opportunity to hit the showers and clean themselves and Tim follows them, reminded that he hasn’t really washed himself of the ash and grime from Thursday night yet. He thinks about throwing common decency out the window and cornering Dick in a stall to ask him the where and how, but…

All that really matters is that Jason is back and he doesn’t care about the where and how. So he gives the two men their space and scrubs and changes into a fresh pair of sweats as quickly as he can. He beats Bruce and Dick back to the bay but there’s another figure there now. Short in stature, standing with his back to Tim. Damian. Tim edges cautiously around him. Damian hears him, he can tell by the minute cock back of his ear, but he doesn’t turn. Doesn’t acknowledge Tim’s presence at all. Tim is okay with that. Eventually Bruce and Dick rejoin and take up the silent vigil again. Even later, Alfred finally opens the door and waves Bruce inside.

Tim tries not to look at Bruce’s face when he comes back out carrying Jason. Before, he had the cowl, but now it’s all Bruce not Batman and Bruce Wayne looks as broken as Tim feels. Tim wonders if they’re all going to go to the freezer together but Alfred stays to put the med bay back in order and Dick puts his hand on Damian’s shoulder and leads him away and it’s just Tim and Bruce left.

Tim takes one of Jason’s cold hands and looks at Bruce. They walk in the elevator and down the long corridor and turn into the event kitchen. Bruce sets Jason down on the cot in the middle of the freezer and Tim picks a blanket from a basket of them outside to drape over him. It’s his own plaid fleece blanket. Bruce pulls on his ski jacket then hands Tim a smaller one. They zip up and sit on the couple of folding chairs Alfred left. Tim inches his a little closer so he can pick Jason’s hand up again. Bruce leans forward and rests his elbow on Tim’s leg then spreads his massive hand over Tim and Jason’s. And maybe everything is still all fucked up between him and Bruce, and maybe things won’t ever be okay, but at least this they can do right together.
Chapter Notes

I think it's pretty obvious I don't take chapter titles seriously.

Not the best chapter content-wise, but here's all the feel-better fluff you've been waiting for after the last couple. I'm not completely cruel.

Chapter 18

He’s…here, again.

Floating. In the quiet. But if he’s here then that means…

Oh.

He sighs. Except he doesn’t. Because he has no body here. No mouth, no lungs, no lips. Or air to push through them.

He wonders if he’ll get to stay this time.

Does he want to?

Yes.

He’s tired. He’s so tired. He just wants to rest. Here where it’s quiet and there are no monsters, no nightmares.

There was someone who tried to do that for him, get rid of his nightmares.
He remembers.

There was someone who watched over him and chased them away with a gentle hand on his shoulder. His face. A soothing voice. And…and they made him laugh too. He liked that. He thinks he might miss that here, where there’s no joy or fear.

Not enough to want to leave though.

There’s a faint squeeze against his conscience. Polite but firm. He shies away but it doesn’t relent and he feels a pull. He’s almost used to it at this point, reluctantly lets it drag him along. Now that he’s not fighting it, he’s more aware of the approaching transition. Hovers for a moment at the barrier like looking through fogged glass at the blurred shadows knowing when he passes through they’ll fall into distinct shapes, weights, sensations. He digs his proverbial heels in at the last second, resisting, before he’s pushed back into life.

He gasps and his lungs burn at the icy air. Damn it. Why does it always have to be so cold? Cold wet earth. Cold steel box. He shivers and debates opening his eyes, scared of what he’ll find when he does. Scared that there will just be more darkness waiting beyond his lids. That he’ll be trapped, exposed, forgotten. Alone, again.

He makes a small noise he would usually be embarrassed of and tries to curl in on himself. Something shuffles nearby and he’d flinch away if he could but the cold is deep inside him, turning his muscles stiff and movements sluggish.

“Jason? Are you…back with us? Open your eyes Jay-lad.”

He was primed once, trained to obey that voice at the drop of a pin. He squeezes his eyes shut even tighter. Oh god, what if it’s not real? What if it’s a trick? He can’t…fuck. He just can’t.

“It’s okay. You’re safe, Jason. You’re at the manor. You can open them. You’re safe.”

Safe. Jason almost snorts at the word. But then something takes hold of one of his hands and warmth twines between his fingers. He instinctively draws it closer to him and tries to wrap himself in it like a blanket. The feel of downy fleece brushes against his skin and he realizes he may actually be wrapped in a blanket. That’s different. That’s…nice. The scent is familiar as well, a mix of coffee and aftershave, and he relaxes into it.

“Jason, come on. Let me know you’re with me.”

He opens his eyes to slits and a line of light seeps into his skull.

“Br’sss?”

His tongue is clumsy and dull. Hesitantly he flutters his eyelids but his vision is blurry. He can’t focus on any details but he gets an impression of metal walls, wire shelving and labeled crates he
can’t hope to read. Is he in a freezer? But that doesn’t make any sense. Why would he be in a freezer? Why would he be in a freezer with Bruce? His gaze tracks back to where the voice came from.

“‘s cold.”

“Yes. Yes, it is. Let’s get you up and get you someplace warm.”

That…sounds like a good idea. Before he can try to move on his own there are arms sliding under his knees and back and he thinks he must be a small shrunken thing in this delusion because he can’t remember the last time someone carried him like this. Can’t remember the last time someone could carry him like this. Maybe he traveled back in time and he’s thirteen again after getting hit by Freeze on patrol. That seems the most likely scenario and he eases into it, letting Bruce pull him against his chest.

Except, once they’re upstairs and Bruce is holding him upright so Alfred can thread his legs into flannel pajama bottoms fresh out of the dryer for you Master Jason he doesn’t have to tilt his head back to look into the man’s eyes. He isn’t given long to follow that thread of thought before he’s being put to bed and Alfred is sliding hot water bottles in between the blankets around him.

The first thing he’s cognizant of is the steady heat emanating from all down his right side. He hums and would soon fall back into that soft hazy place except for the tickle above his ear. He twitches away from it and reaches up to brush it away but his arm never makes it. There’s a weight over his shoulders and chest, too heavy to be a blanket.

He almost lashes out, but the last thing he remembers is Alfred tucking him in and it follows in incontrovertible logic that he must therefore be safe and well-looked after. He blinks languidly, forcing his eyes open to sate his curiosity. The weight is a set of arms wrapped protectively around him. The warmth from the body he’s nestled back against. There’s a heartbeat thumping regularly beneath his ear, a hair too fast to belong to someone sleeping. He cranes his head back and addresses the stubble-dusted chin.

“What y’ doin?” he mumbles thickly.

“Holding you.”

“Why?”

“Because when you’re unconscious is the only time you’ll let me,” Bruce rumbles.

Jason thinks about that for a moment. He’d take more time to think on it and how screwed up that is but something more important demands to be addressed before he can forget it in his cozy lethargy.

“Tim?” he asks.

“Is fine,” Bruce reassures him, “His shoulder will put him out of commission for a few weeks but he’s fine. Thanks to you. You…you did…good, Jason.”

The words sound strained. Too stilted for him to fully believe. Jason wrinkles his nose and rolls his
head, struggling to get a glimpse of the man’s eyes to see the truth. The angle is too extreme.

“But. I killed those men. Aren’t y’mad at me?”

Bruce sighs into his hair, “We can talk about that later. For now…let’s just…Let me hold you a little longer. Is that okay?”

Jason closes his eyes and sinks back against the older man in assent.

“Tell anyone an’ I’ll pop a cap in yer ass old man,” he murmurs into the fabric of Bruce’s shirt. He feels Bruce’s chest flex in a grudging huff of amusement.

“I won’t tell,” Bruce promises and runs a hand through Jason’s curls, “Now go back to sleep.”

Jason nods wearily. He dozes peacefully for thirty minutes or so before lurching awake again and vomiting silt and saltwater all over Bruce.

Bruce’s panic-stricken call for Alfred is one of the most hilarious things he’s ever seen. He’d enjoy it more if he wasn’t so busy doubled over, spewing brine on himself. It ceases to be funny at all five minutes later when he’s shivering off to the side while Alfred strips the soiled sheets off the bed. Bruce helps him shuffle into the bathroom and turn on the shower then escapes as politely as he can. Jason pulls off his sweat-damp clothes and steps under the hot spray of water. Once the sick washes off he pulls down the bamboo stool mounted into the shower wall and sits before his knees go out.

His head is pounding and he feels shaky. Methodically he checks his body, running his hands up and down his legs and across his abdomen. He lets out a relieved breath when he traces the junction at his chest. There are no new scars. Some brilliant bruising like a pink and purple galaxy swirls up his stomach to his side and back, yes. But no new scars. His right shoulder feels wrenched and his ankle is a swollen angry mess but nothing appears severe enough to warrant any alarm. There’s an impressive knot on the back of his head when he gingerly feels out his skull.

He’d happily stay until the water runs cold but that’s not likely to happen in the manor and he’s desperate to brush his teeth and rinse the disturbingly fishy taste from his mouth. He leans forward and fumbles with the knobs turning the shower off. When he sticks his head out of the frosted glass there’s a walker with a towel draped over it. A pair of sweats and a t-shirt are waiting on the counter. He eyes the walker distastefully. He’s got a busted ankle, he’s not ninety, damn it. Despite his grumbling it proves quite useful as he navigates to the sink, dresses, then heads to the bedroom. Alfred is waiting for him there and helps him crawl back beneath clean new covers.

“I feel awful, Alf,” he whines.

“As I understand you did your best to drink the bay dry. I’d be surprised if you weren’t feeling a bit ill after that,” Alfred says wryly and slips a thermometer under his tongue.

He waits for the beep and raises and eyebrow, “Indeed you appear to be running a slight fever. I’m sure that’s not pleasant with the bruising from the fall either. How is your head feeling? It took a bit of a hit but lucky for you you’ve got a hard head in more than one way and it didn’t crack your skull.”

“Its pounding like a motherfu—I mean, somethin’ fierce,” Jason admits and angles his head down so Alfred can part his hair to take a look at the contusion. The butler presses lightly and Jason’s hiss turns into a gag.

“If you feel the need to empty your stomach again,” Alfred points to a large plastic bowl he’s set by
the left pillow.

Jason snags the bowl and drags it a few inches closer to him. Just in case.

“A wise decision,” he mocks gently and hands Jason a couple different pills, “For the fever and the pain.”

To his surprise (and pleasure), Alfred doesn’t leave. He sits in the armchair that Tim had so often occupied last time Jason was here, but instead of a glossy science magazine he pulls a small worn book from his jacket pocket. Jason eyes it with interest.

“I am rather in-between duties at the moment. Will it bother you if I read here for a while?” Alfred asks, tactfully holding the book so Jason can see the cover.

*Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats.* The little tome had been Jason’s first introduction to poetry. Living in the manor never could fully erase the memories of nights spent cowering in storm drains trying to keep his ragged breaths quiet, praying the heavy tread of footsteps would pass him by unnoticed. The butler seemed to have a sixth sense for nightmares, magically appearing those nights Jason spent knees tucked tightly to his chest, shivering, eyes darting to the darkest shadows in the room. There was almost a ritual. Alfred would never ask what kept Jason up, instead he would feign some excuse for being awake so late himself and merely ask if Jason minded the company. Then he’d pull out the book of feline poesy and start reading in his lyrical English accent.

The ridiculous words and droll verses always managed to make Jason smile. It’s no different now. He shrugs indifferently, trying to dull the fond nostalgia in his crooked grin. The twitch of a mustache lets him know the old butler is on to his deception.

Alfred clears his throat and begins reading aloud:

> "*The Naming of Cats is a difficult matter,*  
> *It isn’t just one of your holiday games;*  
> *You may think at first I’m mad as a hatter*  
> *When I tell you, a cat must have THREE DIFFERENT NAMES.*"

Jason closes his eyes and mouths along to words he used to know by heart.

> "*First of all, there’s the name that the family use daily,*  
> *Such as Peter, Augustus, Alonzo or James,*  
> *Such as Victor or Jonathan, George, or Bill Bailey—*  
> *All of them sensible everyday names.*"

He trips over the recitation, frustrated by the gaps in his memory.

> "*There are fancier names if you think they sound sweeter,*  
> *Some for the gentlemen, some for the dames:*  
> *Such as Plato, Admetus, Electra, Demeter—*  
> *But all of them sensible everyday names.*"

He wonders if Cat is upset at not having a name, what she would call herself if she could.

> "*But I tell you, a cat needs a names that’s particular,*  
> *A name that’s peculiar, and more dignified,*  
> *Else how can he keep up his tail perpendicular,*  
> *Or spread out his whisker or cherish his pride?*"
Jason drifts, carried by the lilting current of Alfred’s cadence.

He wakes sometime later to the dinner warning bell and an empty room. He jumps a good three inches to the right when he realizes he is not, in fact, as alone as he thought.

“Holy fucking shit balls!” Jason presses a hand to his chest, “The hell are you doing here!?”

Damian is crouched on top of a book shelf, one foot dangling to knock against the spines of the novels sitting on the shelves below. There’s a book in his hands as if he’d been in the middle of flipping through it. Jason can’t make out the title from his vantage point but he recognizes it instantly, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. It’s one of three paperbacks that predate Jason’s life at the manor, battered old editions picked up at a library book sale for a dollar fifty apiece—a rare treat he had only afforded by giving up cigarettes for that month. The pages are yellow and brittle, the cover torn. Jason feels himself tense defensively but Damian is gentle when he turns it over on his knee.

“Pennyworth wanted to know if you felt well enough to come down and dine with us or if you preferred to have something brought up to you.”

“Oh. Uh,” Jason rubs the back of his neck.

The truth is he’s feeling alright. Not great. His joints ache and his skin feels paper-thin and stretched tight from dehydration, ironic considering he’s fairly sure he drowned this time, but it’s nowhere near enough to keep him confined to bed. The prospect of going downstairs and sitting with bats on all sides however, makes his skin crawl in anxiety. They’d pretend not to be watching him out of the corner of their eyes but he’d feel their surreptitious glances when he wasn’t looking. Too much too soon. He doesn’t think he can deal with that right now. He sure as hell doesn’t want to.

“Tell Alf thanks, but I’ll eat up here tonight.”

Damian nods and puts the book to the side before hopping soundlessly to the floor and disappearing down the hall. Jason stares through the empty doorway after him, perplexed. The brat has never shown any interest in interacting with him before. It’s possible Alfred sent him, but the butler has never ordered him Jason’s way before. During his last convalescence at the manor he had seen the kid maybe three times in passing and had never spoken to him. He’s dumbfounded when Damian returns several minutes later with a covered dish on a tray.

“What are you doing?” he blurts out.

Damian looks at him as if he’s the child. A stupid one.

“You said you preferred not to dine downstairs. So I have brought dinner up to you. Or perhaps you would rather go hungry?” Damian pivots as if he is about to return downstairs.

“No! No, I mean…why are you doing this? Isn’t this beneath you or something?” Jason gestures to the tray.

“Indeed it is. You are more discerning than I gave you credit for, Todd.”
Jason pops an eyebrow at that and watches Damian set the tray within his reach. He pulls it onto his lap and lifts the lid a fraction off the dish. Sweet Saint Cecilia over the coals, it’s pot roast. He starts salivating instantly. It takes effort to rip his attention away from the braised beef and vegetables towards the boy.

“So. What’s up kiddo?”

Damian scowls fiercely and balls his hands into fists, “Do not call me that! I am here because it is customary when one has wronged another to make amends.”

“Amends? Amends for what?” he asks, genuinely confused.

“It has been brought to my attention that by electing to save Drake in the manner I did, that I am responsible in part for your death.”

“What?” Jason drops the lid with a clatter, “Damian, no! You’re not responsible at all. Why would you even think that?”

Damian’s jaw tightens, grinding his teeth, and his eyes glitter darkly. He’s never reminded Jason of Bruce more.

“If I was stronger I could have held you both. If I had been more focused I could have found an alternative way…I should have been able to save you but I—I wasn’t good enough.”

Damian doesn’t drop his gaze during the delivery of his confession, instead he squares his shoulders and meets it head on like a challenge. Jason respects that. But…shit. There’s no need for the kid to drown himself in guilt over him.

“Damian, look…you did what I told you to. None of what happened is your fault. You can’t think of it that way,” he insists.

“Drake does.”

Now that catches Jason’s notice.

“What’s that supposed to mean,” he asks sharply.

Damian finally breaks eye contact to look down at his socked feet.

“Damian, what did Tim say to you?”

The boy crosses his arms over his chest and mumbles, “Drake accused me of choosing to save his life at the cost of yours.”

Shit.

“Well,” after a moment of deliberation Jason can’t help but ask, “did you?”

“Yes.”

Jason leans back against the headboard, “Wow. You sure don’t pull any punches, kid.”

Damian’s brow wrinkles, “What do you mean? Why would I—I haven’t even hit you?”

Jason flicks at his fork and chuckles, “It’s a saying kid. Don’t worry about it.”
Damian looks skeptical.

“It means you don’t sugar-coat things. Which I appreciate. Seriously though, don’t worry about it. You did what I asked you to, what I would have done in your place. You made the right call. Don’t let anyone make you feel otherwise,” Jason reassures him, “And if it ever happens again—if it ever comes down to me or Tim, or Batgirl…fuck, even Dick-head or the big guy, you pick them okay?”

Damian nods gravely, “And I expect you to do the same.”

Jason pauses, shocked by that. He studies Bruce’s son closely. His posture and expression are earnest. The kid is serious. Jason frowns. He wonders if Bruce knows that under all the pompous superiority his youngest also thinks of himself as the least worthy of the bats. He feels a sort of sick kinship with the kid over that, the blood on their hands. It’s different for him though. He’s an adult. He chose this path. But Damian…Talia sure screwed him up, raising a child as an assassin. Acid crackles on the back of his tongue. If he had known, he would have tried to shake some sense into her, maybe taken the kid away instead of letting her lead him around dangling revenge like a carrot in front of his face for so long. Instead of—

He has to shake his head to clear it. Damian is waiting for his reply, eyes narrowed, scrutinizing him. Jason can’t say yes. There’s no way he’ll agree to putting any of the other’s lives before a child’s. Even for a cantankerous little shit like Damian. He can’t say no either without offending the young hero and belittling his integrity. Jason picks up his fork and grunts instead.

“Alright, well. You’ve made your amends. We’re good. Forget whatever ‘Drake’ said, he was wrong,” Jason grumbles stabbing into a piece of potato.

“He frequently is,” Damian sniffs haughtily.

Jason laughs crudely at that, mouth open and full of food.

He swallows and calls out, “Hey, shortstop!” when Damian turns to exit.

The preteen pauses and looks over his shoulder.

“Go ahead, take the book If you want,” he just his chin at the copy of Huckleberry Finn still lying atop the shelf where Damian left it earlier, “Just bring it back when you’re done.”

“Don’t call me that,” Damian growls, but he backs up a few steps and picks up the dog-eared paperback with unexpected carefulness.

Jason’s mouth tugs up at the corner. He shoves another bite of potato in his mouth and his eyes roll up in the back of his head.

“God bless, Alfred.”

He tucks in forcing himself to go slow after the gastrointestinal pyrotechnics earlier. As he eats he finds himself glancing towards the door every couple minutes, as if he’s expecting someone else to come in. Which is ridiculous. Why would he be expecting anyone else? He chews a bit more aggressively in annoyance. When he swallows and the sound of his own mastication goes silent he can hear the indistinct murmur of voices floating up the hall from the downstairs. His ears prick forward but he can’t distinguish what they’re saying. Still he listens, trying to separate the different threads of speech, trying to identify that one among the others. He can’t though, they’re too distant.

Jason pushes the tray away from him, looking at the last few bites of carrots and onions, inexplicably no longer hungry. He considers taking the tray down to the kitchen. To be polite. Absolutely not to
see if might run into a certain ex-Robin on the way. He’s not sure what to say if he did though. Or what he’d say if he ran into Dick or Bruce instead. And he’s very sure Alfred would give him a scolding for attempting stairs before they’ve checked out his ankle. Jason sighs and puts the dinner tray on the nightstand and turns out the light. He glares distastefully at the barf-bowl and mentally vows not to use it. Even the idea of vomiting up Alfred’s pot roast is sacrilege. He pulls a pillow to his chest instead and curls up around it trying very hard to fall asleep before the familiar hollowness that he refuses to call loneliness can take hold.

Hushed voices around him. Two. A conversation. Jason steadies his breathing. Tries not to give away the fact he’s waking.

“Oh my god, Tim was right. Look, look! He pouts in his sleep!”

Was that a giggle?

“It’s so cute!”

"Adorable!"

Okay, what the flying fuck? He is not adorable. Jason’s eyes snap open. They immediately focus on the two women chatting nearby.

“Blondie? Barbie?”

“Hey there hot stuff, good to see ya back from the dead!” Stephanie pulls him into a vigorous bear-hug that has him squeaking in an undignified manner before Barbara squeezes her elbow in a wordless reprimand. “Oh, sorry bout the ribs big guy,” she apologizes and releases him, sliding onto the mattress next to him so her arm brushes his. The lack of regard for personal space would probably set him off if it was anyone else except Blondie. Bruce didn’t count earlier. It doesn’t count when you’ve been mostly dead for the day, he rationalizes.

“What are you doing here?” he wheezes

Barbara’s face droops a little at the question, “We came to see you, Jason. Tim said you woke up yesterday.”

Jason’s brows draw together. Tim had called them? He hadn’t even seen Tim yet. Didn’t know Tim had known he was up. Had he come by while Jason was sleeping? Maybe he’s still upset about Jason kicking him out and that’s why he hasn’t come by. Or maybe he’s mad about the men he killed on the bridge. Jason’s not sure. He doesn’t like not knowing. If he doesn’t know he can’t try and fix it. Not that he’s going to compromise on the killing front, he has zero regrets saving Tim over those worthless low-lifes… So… Hopefully it’s the other thing then.

“Yeah! It’s what friends do,” Stephanie adds in, “They visit each other when they’re sick. Or y’know, freshly arisen in your case, Grumpypants.”

Friends? It had taken him weeks just to decide he would like to keep Tim as a
friend. Blondie had just declared it so casually as if it was already decided, as if he had no choice in
the matter. She was his friend. It was an odd thought. Hell, this meant didn’t have just a friend. But
friends, plural. His chest actually gets a little tight at the thought and he can feel his face heating up
uncomfortably. Talia would be so disappointed in him. Before he can embarrass himself Stephanie is
moving again, twisting around to reach something and coming back with a plate stacked high with
golden gridded circles dripping with syrup.

“I made you waffles!” She exclaims happily.

“Are you sure I’m back in the land of the living?” He asks, "Two pretty girls are feeding me waffles. Pretty sure that means I’ve died and gone to heaven."

Jason casts his gaze about the room theatrically.

“What are you looking for Jason?” Barbara asks, taking the bait.

“Well, I’ve already got the blond and the red head. I’m looking for the brunette so we can get this
wet dream going,” he says casually taking a big bite out of the top waffle.

Barbara glares at him over the tops of her glasses. Stephanie takes a completely different track.

“I can call Tim in if you’d like,” she waggles her eyebrows at him.

It’s a joke. He knows it’s a joke. Just like he’s been joking with them. Except that he chokes a bit on
his waffle at the mental picture that pops to mind. All three of them tangled up together in front of
him. For him. He clears his throat of fluffy breakfast goodness and decides it’s time to steer the
conversation in a different direction.

“These are damn delicious Blondie, how’d you make em?”

Stephanie beams at the praise then conspiratorially leans in and whispers, “A lot of cinnamon and a
little beer.”

Jason hums in approval.

“I’m glad you like them, they are my thank-you to you,” she says with a smile even though her voice
is serious.

Jason stares at her blankly, “For…?”

“For saving my best friend and my boyfriend, you dumbass! That makes you a big damn hero don’t
you know!”

Barbara laughs off to the side and nods in agreement.

“Boyfriend?”

Stephanie nods, “That cop you saved from the bridge. That was Jeremy.”

Jason’s eyes widen. He tries to recall what the kid looked like, but he’d been a bit distracted by his
worry over Tim at the time. Cop. Singular. He knows he made two trips though before coming back
for Red Robin…What had happened to the other one? He opens his mouth to ask and is interrupted
by a polite knock on the doorframe. Alfred is standing there looking amused.

“I wouldn’t interrupt what looks to be a very merry get-together but Miss Gordon, Miss Brown, if
you would like to join me in the drawing room for a moment, Master Jason has a special guest here
to see him.”

Stephanie and Barbara eye each other and shrug. The fact they don’t know who it is either piques his interest. Stephanie rolls off the bed and stretches her arms, lacing them together and cracking her knuckles.

“Well, it was good seeing you Jase. You should come over some time for dinner, meet Jeremy.”

He realizes the offer is more of this ‘friend’ stuff, just like when Tim had told him he should come out for dinner with Steph and him. Getting introduced to the boyfriend though, and a civilian one at that, is too much he thinks.

“Wouldn’t want to be a third wheel,” Jason shakes his head.

“Then bring Tim with you and it’ll be a double date,” she winks at him, “He’s gotta meet him too at some point.”

Barbara kisses his forehead and brings their faces together, “I am so glad you’re alive,” she breathes then pulls back to threaten him, “and if you ever do anything that stupid, get yourself killed, and worry me like that again I am going to hunt you down and lock you up in the clock tower for the rest of your life.”

“Same,” Stephanie adds over Barbara’s shoulder like a second head. “No more dying.” She shakes an admonishing finger at him then grabs the handles of Barbara’s chair, “Alright; Autobots, roll out!”

Alfred follows them and Jason waits to see who his ‘special guest’ is. He knows who he hopes it is but…he’s pretty sure they don’t need Alfred’s introduction anyway. The person who walks through definitely isn’t the third Robin, but disappointment doesn’t even have a chance to rear its head.

“Miss Luc!” he yelps.

“Hey there Handsome!” she bursts in with a bag in one arm, a foil covered pie plate in the other and a broad smile. She drops the items on the nightstand next to the half-finished plate of waffles and envelops him in a hug. Jason thinks he’s been hugged more in one day than he has in the past ten years.

“What are you doing here?” he asks incredulously, voice tight around the knot in his throat.

“Well when you didn’t show up for your Monday appointment I called Babyface since you had him listed as your emergency contact to make sure you were okay. He said you’d been sick and passed out on some stairs. Poor honey! You look like you been through the ringer. How you feeling?”

“Better now you’re here,” he flashes her a roguish grin earning him a light smack on the cheek.

“Don’t you start, Handsome, you know I’m a married woman,” she scolds in good humor and drags a chair and her bag to the foot of the bed, “Now let me look at that ankle.”

She tosses back the covers and ignores his shiver against the cool rush of air over his toes. She runs her hands over the ankle, feeling the swelling and the joint, inspecting the bruising. Jason grits his teeth when she experimentally rolls it around in her palms.

“Well, you’re a really lucky boy Handsome. I don’t think you re-broke it, but I’d like to get some x-rays taken anyway. I’m going to put you back in the air-cast for a few days and you’ll be back on crutches for a while. But over all, you’re really lucky.”
Jason scoffs lightly in his throat. He should know better by now than to do such a thing in front of Miss. Lucille. She narrows her eyes and zeroes in on him.

“Now what’s that for? You don’t think you lucky? Son. It’s a miracle you didn’t get hurt worse. You’ve been put up in this big fine house with a butler and whole bunch of other people taking care of you. Don’t even pretend like it’s not true! I saw those two pretty girls leaving your room just now.”

Jason grimaces and tangles one hand in his hair. He pulls until it hurts and hopes the slight burn will ground him. How does he explain that it’s not what it looks like? How does he explain that he doesn’t want to be here. That just because they’re feeding him and keeping him here doesn’t mean they want him here, that they care. It’s pity. Manipulation. A way to assuage the guilt.

Liar.

Blondie called him a friend, brought him waffles. Barbara has been the been the older sister in his ear since his return. Alfred reading him to sleep like when he was boy…How can he be so ungrateful towards them to accuse them like that?

You’re such an ungrateful bastard you’ll end up pushing them away too. Just like you did to Tim. You don’t deserve them. And they’re going to realize that and throw you away one day.

He doesn’t realize he’s squeezed his eyes closed and started breathing in quick shallow pants until Miss Lucille’s hands stroke gently at his wrist trying to get him to ease the grip on his hair.

“Easy Handsome, it’s okay. Breathe with me, okay? In…Out…In...” she repeats the command until he’s dragging in deeper productive gulps of air.

He opens his eyes and meets hers.

“You alright there Handsome? Nothing but a little old panic attack. You’re fine honey. You’re doing just fine. Didn’t mean to upset you.”

“You didn’t. I just…I’m not used to this,” he rasps shaking his head.

“Not used to what sweetheart?”

“All of this attention. All these people. Everyone being so…nice,” he laughs pathetically, “I don’t deserve it and I don’t really know how to deal with it. God, I’m fucked up aren’t I?”

“No.”

“No?” he angles his head to side and asks wryly.

“No,” Miss. Lucille states confidently, “Because I don’t bake my grandmomma’s special sweet potato pie for fuck-ups. Now eat.”
Tim sits in the hall, the elbow of his good arm propped up on one knee, his forehead pressed to the other. He listens to Miss Lucille’s voice drop low and comforting in counter-tone to Jason’s strangled gasps and squeezes his eyes closed. He’s glad Miss Lucille is here. He is. Really. He just…wishes he could be the one in there. He thinks about what it would feel like to run his hand up and down Jason’s back tenderly, to push his hair back and kiss his forehead. To be the one who gets to comfort Jason. To touch and feel the reassuring proof that beneath that perfectly scarred skin, Jason is alive once again.

“Penny for your thoughts?”

Tim turns to his left and watches Dick gracefully slide down the wall to sit next to him. He bumps his head softly back against the wall and sighs.

“I thought it would stop hurting when he came back, you know? But, here he is and…I can’t—can’t touch him or hold him or…” Tim fades off.
“Yeah,” Dick replies sympathetically, “I know what you mean.”

Tim rolls his head along the wood paneling to look at his brother.

“Yeah right. When was the last time Dick Grayson’s affections were unrequited?” he grouses skeptically.

Dick opens his mouth, closes it.

“Okay, maybe not unrequited exactly—but I do know what it’s like to see the person you love and not be able to be with them the way you want to. How do you think I felt when Babs was engaged to Bard?” Dick tilts his head towards Tim, “I was referring to Jason, though. Last time I tried to hug him he threw a book at my head.”

“True,” Tim concedes.

Muffled laughter echoes in the hall and they both turn to study the slightly ajar door it spilled from.

“So have you seen him yet?” Dick asks.

Tim shakes his head, “No. Just my luck, he woke up the first time I leave the manor. I was finalizing the armor contract at WE when Alfred called. By the time I got back he was asleep again. You?”

“No, not yet.”

“Why not?”

Dick turns away, shame-faced, and shrugs, “Guess I’m a coward.”

Tim isn’t sure what to say to that. It’s true in some ways, false in others. Dick would and has thrown himself into a burning building to save a tenant’s aging arthritic beagle. But Dick is also reluctant to insert himself into situations that threaten to rile up his feelings.

“You still need to try,” Tim says. He’s not scolding or reprimanding, just telling the truth. “We shook on it, after all,” he reminds Dick, the corner of his mouth quirking up.

“Oh god, don’t remind me!” Dick gags, then agrees, “Okay, I’ll try. I have no idea what to say to him though. He doesn’t believe me when I try to tell him that I care about him. I broke the Rule for him, and he hates me.”

“I don’t think he knows about that, Dick,” Tim leans to the side so they brush shoulders, “Maybe you should tell him.”

“I wasn’t there enough for him, I know. Especially since I knew what it could be like growing up under Bruce, but—I was never cruel to him. I don’t know what I did to deserve this.”

“Then ask him.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

“You sound like you’re afraid to ask because you don’t want to know the answer,” Tim chides.

“Coward, remember?” Dick points to himself with a sad smirk.

“Look,” Tim wriggles around and fishes for the notes in his back pocket, “Make a list of questions you want to ask him and things you want to tell him. It will help you from getting distracted and
tongue-tied in the moment.” Tim flashes the stack of index cards under Dick’s nose.

“Are those note cards?”

“It pays to be prepared.”

They startle at the sound of the door swinging all the way open and scramble to stand when Miss Lucille walks out. She stops directly in front of them.

“Babyface.”

Dick snorts but Tim freezes, he feels something akin to ice water drip down his spine at her tone.

“Hi Miss Lucille. Uh. Miss Lucille, this is my brother Dick. Dick, this is Miss Lucille.”

Dick steps forward and extends his hand, “It’s a pleasure to meet you Miss Lucille. I’ve heard great things about you! Mostly that you’ve been keeping Jason in line, which is a feat in and of itself!”

“I’ve seen you in the papers,” Miss Lucille says giving Dick a once-over and accepting the shake, “You were wearing a knee brace last year. Torn ACL? Or hyperextension?”

“Torn ACL.”

Tim elbows Dick and thank god Dick seems to catch on.

“Ma’am,” Dick adds.

Miss Lucille hmms appraisingly before turning on Tim, “Now what in the Good Lord’s name happened to you, Babyface?” she demands, waving at his shoulder.

Tim glances down at where the wound would be through his shirt, “Oh. Yeah. That. Uh, car accident.”

Miss Lucille rolls her eyes heavenward, “Lord Almighty, you boys need to take better care of yourselves. Now,” she levels a finger at Tim, “I have a bone to pick with you, but you’re hurt so I’ll keep it short; I don’t know what happened between you and Handsome, and quite frankly I don’t care. But I do know that boy’s been beating himself up over it for weeks now. And since you’re the one who asked me to come I know you’ve been worried ‘bout him too. So why the hell did I hear Handsome say he hasn’t seen or heard from you yet?”

“I. Uh.”

“Get your scrawny little ass in there and go talk to him!” Miss Lucille stabs a finger viciously towards the doorway.

Tim swallows and manages to tick his head up and down.

“Good. I’ll see you both on Friday.”

“Friday?”

“Friday. Again, don’t know don’t care why you and Handsome split but running out on me? Unacceptable, Babyface.”

“Sorry, Miss Lucille,” Tim is chastised.
“And you’ll be wanting to work on that shoulder. Make an appointment with Don, he’s the best for that sort of thing and he has availability on Fridays.”

“Yes ma’am,” he responds automatically.

“Good,” She glares at him imperiously then transfers to Dick, voice suddenly saccharine, “And if that knee ever starts acting up on you again, you come by and see me, Sweet-cheeks.”

She pats both boys on the face and sweeps down the stairs.

“Holy shit,” Dick breathes out.

“I know,” Tim empathizes.

“She’s terrifying.”

“I know.”

They take a few minutes to recover from Hurricane Lucille, listening at the top of the stairs until they hear Alfred escort her to her car. Dick puffs out his cheeks and blows his hair up out of his face after the definitive thud of the door closing.

“So. You going to do what the mama-bear ordered and go talk to him now?”

Tim fingers the cards in his hands, “Yup. I guess so.”

Dick claps an open palm on his shoulder. “Well, good luck,” he wishes Tim with all the gravity of a furloughed soldier watching his comrade return to the front line.

“Thanks.”

“Put in a good word for me!”

Tim takes a deep breath, glances at his notes, and walks in.

Jason is sitting up in bed, leaned against the headboard with a pie tin propped on one knee and Tim’s flannel blanket draped over his shoulders. His skin is flushed light pink with fever and contrasts against the dark crescents under his eyes. His hair is a tangled mess, sticking out at the sides like he’s been pulling at it while his bangs are standing straight up from his forehead where he’s pushed them back.

He’s gorgeous.

Tim drops his notecards all over the floor.

“Shit,” he drops to his knees and starts scooping them up.

“Tim?”

“Hey,” Tim waves embarrassedly from his crouched position.
Jason has a forkful of pie halfway to his slack-jawed face. Tim watches his Adam’s apple bob, drawn to the skin there and the memory of drawing a razor down that throat made vulnerable and bare.

“I’m sorry,” Jason blurts out, dropping the fork.

And Tim has never been great at reading others, but Jason’s face makes it easy. It’s so wonderfully and openly expressive; heavy brows drawn together, forehead wrinkled, mouth slightly parted and pulled down to one side. There’s no doubt in Tim’s mind his contrition is genuine.

“For kicking you out. And all the shit I said and—are those notecards?”

Tim pauses and huffs awkwardly, “Uh. Ha, yeah.”

He grabs the last few and taps them between his fingers, trying to square them up. He looks down at card three, frowns, and reshuffles them.

“I was going to make a powerpoint,” he explains, “but Steph said that might be a bit much. Come off a little crazy.”

Jason stares at him wide-eyed for a long moment before nodding slowly, “Yeah, that would have been crazy. Notecards, on the other hand, are perfectly normal…do I want to know what they’re for?”

Tim stands, “There’s a lot things I want to say and I don’t want to forget anything or get distracted or get flustered and stuck in a circular argument or emotionally compromised logic—”

“I think I get it.”

“Oh, good. Um, I guess I’ll just get started then? Unless you want to finish apologizing. I mean talking. Finish what you were saying. I mean, I didn’t mean to interrupt you,” Tim finishes miserably.

“No. It’s okay. You can…” Jason waves, expression at the crossroad of confusion and amusement, “Do your thing. Forgot what I was saying anyway.”

“And that’s exactly why I have these!” Tim’s triumph is instantly cowed by the dramatic arching of one jet eyebrow, “Ah, alright. Well then. I would like to preface this by expressing my sincere relief and happiness that you are not dead before addressing some of the events preceding your… temporarily deceased state.”

“You know, you’re usually a lot smoother than this when I see you talking to the press on the news.”

“First,” Tim ignores Jason coolly, “Regarding the accusation that I was treating you as a pet project. I now understand how you could have come to such a conclusion, I was overzealous in my attempts to aid you in your recovery and I am sorry I made you feel that way. You’re one of the strongest, most independent people I’ve ever met and I know that you are perfectly capable of taking care of yourself and don’t need my help. I only wanted to because I enjoy your company and helping others out is the right thing to do. Not because I think you’re weak or for any ulterior motive. Which leads into point two.”

“How many points are there?” Jason asks with trepidation.

“Your accusation that I’m trying to rehabilitate you to earn Bruce’s favor. Okay, that’s just such paranoid bullshit I’m not even going to dignify it with a response except to say that helping you out
has to the contrary done nothing but land me in hot water with Bruce.”

“Tim, I know. That’s what I was tryi—

“You can apologize afterwards. Don’t interrupt me, I’m on a roll. Point three,” Tim takes a deep breath and snaps to the next card, “Regarding your accusation that I was trying to use the power of friendship or something to trick or pressure you into reforming…”

Jason groans and slaps a hand over his eyes at that.

“I have to be honest, I’m not sure where that even came from. I don’t think I ever broached the subject with you, but since it’s obviously something you’ve thought about I think it’s worth addressing. I don’t…I don’t like that you kill people. But I’m not Bruce, Jason. Just because it’s something I don’t think I could ever do, doesn’t mean I don’t see the logic and advantage of it. I’ve looked at the reports and the numbers and Red Hood was effective. What I’m trying to say is when the Red Hood makes it back on the streets, I’m not interested in stopping him. Unless it interferes directly with one of my cases.”

Tim finally drags his eyes from his tightly scrawled bullet points to Jason. There’s a long and awkward pause.

Finally Jason breaks the silence, “Is that…uh, is that it?”

“No, I’ve got one more,” Tim shoves the notecards in his pocket and strides forward. He jerks the pie tin out of Jason’s lax grip and shoves a finger in his face, “Don’t you ever pull that stunt again! I don’t care if I’m about to die, don’t you dare go all self-sacrificial on me again!”

“Wait, are you mad at me for saving your life?” Jason asks quizzically.

“Yes! No! No, I’m mad because you have such a low opinion of yourself that you think your life is worth less than mine!”

“Tim—”

“No! Stop it! Stop thinking about yourself like that. Yeah, sometimes you kill people. But you don’t deserve to die! You’re still a good person, I know it. You almost called in to pay for someone else’s cat’s surgery without even thinking! You’re the anonymous donor behind the new Sisters of Mercy Home for Battered Women, aren’t you? You force me to eat healthy and you pack snacks for Steph. You help us out on our cases. You listen to me talk about my parents and work without acting like it bores you. You’re smarter than you pretend to be, I don’t know how many other people I can have a conversation on the theoretical applications of a rotating disc electrode. You deserve to live just as much as the rest of us, okay?”

“Aw fuck, not again,” Jason groans. He draws a wrist across his eyes then tilts his head back and blinks a few times.

Tim gives him a couple seconds before speaking again, softer this time, “I know you said watching a couple movies together doesn’t make us friends. But it does to me. I’m your friend, whether or not you want me to be. And you matter to me, so just…know that if you ever need anything, I’m here for you, okay?”

He’s not expecting an answer so it’s a surprise when he catches a hoarse, “Okay,” in return.

Something changes in the room with that one word. It’s like all the apprehension Tim had felt toward this encounter before walking into the room has rushed out. Tim closes his eyes and smiles. When he
opens them he realizes he’s still holding the pie tin. The foil edges have caved in under his clenched fingers.

“Sorry,” he says sheepishly and sets the tin back on Jason’s lap, “Who made pie?”

“Miss Lucille,” Jason rumbles.

“Oh sweet, what kind?”

“Sweet potato.”

“Sweet potato?”

“Yeah, you never had sweet potato pie before?” Jason huffs in disbelief.

“I’ve had pumpkin pie yeah, I didn’t know you could make pie out of a potato though,” Tim narrows his eyes at the orange confection.

“It’s good. It’s the real fucking deal right here. Home-made, secret family recipe type shit. I ah, if you want some I’ve got an extra fork. Steph brought me one with her waffles earlier,” he says nodding to the plate on the nightstand, “If you want to try some.”

“Yeah, sure,” Tim agrees amicably and sits down at the foot of the bed.

Jason hands him the fork. When he doesn’t let go immediately Tim’s gaze brushes over where their fingers are just barely touching then turns to Jason questioningly.

“I’m sorry,” Jason says through grit teeth.

Tim’s breath catches in his throat, because damn, Jason is looking at him with shockingly blue eyes. Tim knows rationally that they’ve always been that bright hue, but till now he’s spent most of his time trying to sneak glimpses and glancing away before Jason notices. This is the first time he’s really let himself study them.

He recognizes the shade. It’s the exact same as sun-dappled water off the coast of Marseilles. When he was ten he went with his parents on a cruise of the French Riviera, one of the few trips where they let him come with them. It reminds him of salt and sun and orange tiled roofs. It reminds him of the taste of coriander on his tongue while looking out over the beach from the best table at Une Table au Sud and the flutter of Janet’s hand against Jack’s shoulder for making her laugh at something. It reminds him of his happiest memory from life before Batman. Before Robin.

“I know. It’s okay,” Tim reassures him.

“No its not!” Jason protests and straightens up, “I was being a bastard. You were trying to help me and I was a jackass to you and that’s not okay. I said some really awful things to you, and I didn’t mean them. I just said them because I wanted to hurt you and I’m sorry.”

Tim pokes at the pie with the fork.

“You’re right. It’s not okay. But I accept your apology and forgive you.”

Jason makes a disgruntled noise, “What? That’s it? I tell you I’m sorry and you just forgive me like that?”

“Uh yeah.”
“I don’t…isn’t there…more? Like I feel there should be more. How do I make this up to you?”

A whole host of thoughts flood Tim’s brain, not all of the G-rated. Or even PG-13. He’s been spending too much time around Steph. He shoves those thoughts into the dark perverted corner of his mind where they belong with that Fenris and FemHawke fantasy. What does he want? For just one more night like the one where they laughed themselves silly watching that old parody where the guy from Willy Wonka has the fastest finger-guns in the West.

“Honestly, I could settle for a good ol’ movie night,” Tim quips hopefully.

“Of course! I’ll cook you dinner. You can pick the movie. And dinner. I know it doesn’t nearly make up for me being a bastard, but whatever you want, I can make.”

Jason sounds so sincere Tim feels his face start to heat up and his lips curve. He takes a bite of pie and chews til he can assume the calm collected mask of Timothy Drake-Wayne. He swallows and clears his throat.

“Star Wars and mac ‘n cheese,” he deliberates with the solemnity of a Supreme Court Justice.

“Done! I will make you the best damn mac ‘n cheese you’ve ever had in your life,” Jason swears, “Anything else?”

“Just one,” Tim holds up a single finger then pinches it close to his thumb, “Tiny one.”

“Dessert? I can do that too, if you want. What do you like? I make a pretty killer cheesecake.”

“Ha, thanks but no. It’s not that. I want you to talk with Dick.”

“What?”

“You don’t even have to say anything, just hear him out.”

“No.” Jason snarls.

“Why not? He misses you, Jason. He worries about you.”

“Misses me?” Jason snickers bitterly, “What’s there to miss?”

“So you’re mad at him for not being there when you were a kid but now that he is trying to get to know you, you won’t give him just a chance?” Tim challenges.

“He had his chance!” Jason roars, “It’s not just about the way things were when I was kid. I came back to Gotham two years ago! And not once did he try to find me. Not once. I know, I know. Chemo, the Battle of Metropolis… Shit happens, he got busy. But fuck, he didn’t even come after me when I beat the shit out of you.”

Tim winces at the memory. Jason Todd Was Here, written in blood (his blood) on a wall.

“Do you know what it finally took for him to come after me? It took me stealing his costume and taking out the trash on his turf. Took me defiling the Nightwing name before he could be bothered to deal with his little brother,” Jason spits out the last word with a nasty twist of his lips.

Tim groans internally at his older brother’s vanity and self-centeredness. Frack, Dick.

“Okay. I get why you’re upset. Trust me, I really understand being pissed at him for that. I do. And you’re not wrong to be. But. Before you judge him too harshly I think you should know one thing.”
“What’s that?” Jason bites.

“The one thing you wanted Batman to do for you, he did.”

“What do you mean?”

“Dick went after the Joker. Tried to kill him. Did kill him actually. I mean, we revived him after his heart stopped but…Dick killed the Joker for you, Jason.”

Jason goes silent and pulls away, drawing his knees up and leaning back against the headboard. Tim bites his lip not sure what to do. Damn it. He’d stuck his neck out for Dick and it’s going to cost him all the ground he’d gained with Jason. Great, fracking great. Tim sighs. Jason has his head turned away from him, looking intently out the window and it feels like he’s a million miles away.

“I…” Tim tries, “I think I may have overstepped again. Movie night is fine.”

“I’ll do it.”

“What?” Tim yelps in surprise.

Jason frowns vaguely in Tim’s direction, “I’ll talk with Dick, but I have a condition of my own.”

“Yeah, sure! What?”

“You have to apologize to Damian.”

Tim’s eagerness dies on his tongue, “Ah.”

“Little Soul-Sucker visited me last night. Tried to apologize for letting me die or whatever. Said you blamed him. That’s kind of fucked up. And by ‘kind-of’ I mean really fucked up. I know he’s about as much fun as hemorrhoids but he’s ten—”

“Eleven.”

“Whatever. You don’t tell an eleven year old kid its his fault someone died,” Jason counters in a tone that reeks of disappointment.

Tim wishes he could sink through the floor.

“I know,” he whispers, “You… you had just died and I didn’t know if you would come back again and Damian was talking about you like…I was upset and I took it out on him.”

“So it’s a deal then?” Jason asks.

“Yeah, yeah it’s a deal.”

“Good,” Jason sticks out his hand.

Tim looks at it. He examines the callouses and whorls on the large blunt pads of his fingertips, the tiny raised lines of scars, and crooked knuckles from old breaks. He spits in the center of that palm and curls his hand around Jason’s.

“What the hell was that?” Jason’s splutters dissolve into astonished laughter, “You little shit!”

Jason tries to pull away. Tim squeezes his hand tighter and cackles. It feels good. It feels so good it’s a little while before he realizes he’s been holding onto Jason for a bit too long, especially with a glob
of saliva gluing them together.

“Uh, can I… Um. My hand,” Jason mumbles.

Tim drops it instantaneously in mortification, “Sorry.”

“So,” Jason rolls his eyes around restlessly and scrubs his slicked palm over his pants, “What now? When can we jet out of here? I want to go home.”

“When you stop looking like you’ll pass out if you try to take the stairs I suppose you can drive us out of here.”

“Why do I have to drive?”

“Uh. Wounded,” Tim points to his shoulder, “You told Damian to shoot me with an eight inch steel rod, remember?”

“So? You telling me Bruce didn’t train you to be ambidextrous?”

“He did, but I can’t reach the gear shift with my left.”

Tim runs mentally through the roster of cars in the civilian garage. He’s pretty sure they’re all manuals. They really, really need to invest in some more practical vehicles.

“Yeah, you do have those short little midget arms,” Jason snorts.

Tim punches him with his good one.

“Oh, hey! The guy. The car guy, Will. Call him. I would, but I guess my phone is gone,” Jason murmurs absentmindedly patting himself down.

“I think I still have it saved,” Tim pulls his out and starts scrolling through his history.

He hadn’t saved Will’s contact but he’s pretty sure he can find it by date. And there it is.

Tim waits patiently as it rings, on the seventh ring it’s snatched up with an annoyed, “Yes?” at the other end.

“Oh um, sorry is this a bad time?”

“Is this an emergency?” Will’s breathing sounds labored.

“Uh no. No emergency. Jason and I were just wondering if we could get a ride—

Tim cuts himself off when he hears what sounds distinctly like a male moan.

“You both okay?”

Huh? Jason raises an eyebrow.

“Yeah. We’re…okay. I. I’m sorry I think I’ve called at a bad time.”

There’s rustling on the other line and Will’s pants become louder. Tim holds the phone a few inches away from his face, wrinkling his nose. Jason holds both palms up in a ‘what gives?’ manner. Tim mouths, ‘I think he’s having sex’ back.

“Good, good. Yeah, um I’m out of town right now.”
“When will you be back?”

“Uhh, tomorrow I think?” there’s a gasp on the other end of the line. “Yeah, tomorrow. Definitely.”

“Tomorrow is fine too. We can wait til then.”

“Sounds good. Hey, sorry but I got to go.”

The line goes dead but not before there’s an embarrassingly drawn out whimper.


Jason looks impressed, “Well, well done Will. What?” he presses at Tim’s expression, “he’s a good-looking guy. You’re surprised he’s getting a little action?”

“Not surprised! Traumatized!” Wait, did Jason just call another guy good-looking? “Why would you answer the phone in the middle of…sex? That’s just weird!”

“Dunno. Maybe the ringtone is obnoxious. Interrupting the moment or something. You’re thinking about this way too hard Tim. Unless…you’re embarrassed because you got a little crush on the guy?” Jason teases.

“What? No! Don’t be ridiculous! I met the guy like once.”

I have a crush on you, you gargantuan moron.

“Once is enough for a crush!”

“Stop being gross! He’s our Uber driver!”

“So?”

“So? It’d be like if it was Dick. I mean yeah sure, he’s attractive but he’s our brother. Will’s our Uber driver. It would just be…wrong.”

“Your mind works in odd ways,” Jason says shaking his head, "Pretty sure Uber Drivers are fair game." 

“Well then why don't you ask him out?”

“What?”

“You’re the one who said he’s good-looking. Sounds like you have a crush.”

Jason eyes widen and his jaw works before words finally make their way out.

“Well, first of all doesn’t really sound like he’s single. And uh, just because someone’s attractive doesn’t mean you’re attracted to them. I mean, he’s got an alright face but I’d rather talk baseball and have a beer with the guy.”

And Tim just can’t help himself. He really truly can’t.

“Not your type then?” he asks coyly.

Jason rubs the back of his neck, “I uh, no. Guess not. …I haven’t really thought about that kind of thing much. Kind of had other things on my mind.”
Tim’s mind starts running wild. Because Jason hadn’t reacted at all to the implication he might be attracted to other guys. Because Jason had said Will wasn’t his type. Because if Will wasn’t his type there’s still a chance Tim could be…
Guess Who's Coming Coming to Dinner

Chapter Notes

Sorry this took a while to get out. There were some technical difficulties.

BUT! For your patience...I present to you a !fun! chapter! Lots of awkward-adorkable JayTim exchanges (including touches, oooh scandalous!) and some slightly over-the-top Dick and Jason reconciliation.

Oh, and yes. I really do hate *Wuthering Heights* with a passion. I thought perhaps it was just because it had been forced mandatory reading in school, but after trying to give it another go as an adult...no. Still no. I swear it was the *Twilight* of its age (albeit with a far better vocabulary) and I don't understand people's fascination with it (this is not an invitation to try and sway my opinion btw). Though...there was one part that I didn't hate, when Hareton "opens the mysteries of the fairy cave" at Penistone Crag gave me a smug chuckle.

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**Chapter 20**

Jason is stuck.

In a position he’s *really* not familiar with.

He has the feeling Alfred isn’t going to let him opt out of dinner tonight. No meals will be brought up to him to enjoy in peace and privacy. If he wants to eat he’s going to have to descend into what has to rank at least the seventh circle of hell—Family Dinner. Something he’d managed to avoid his last stay at the manor. He wishes he could stay up here forever instead, closed away in his room while Tim prattles on about the progress the Swedish team is making.

Except Tim’s knee keeps knocking into his as he talks animatedly. It’s distracting. He keeps glancing at the point of contact, losing track of the mostly one-sided conversation. Ever since Tim asked him what his type was…*Who doesn’t know what their type is?* Tall, short, black, blonde, pensive, talkative, quiet, outgoing, large breasts, small breasts, no breasts? It’s a simple question. But he doesn’t know the answer and that bothers him.

He hasn’t even thought about someone in that way since…well, before he died the first time. *Rena.* And he barely remembers her. Since then there was Talia and a few of the working girls and boys (a warm wet mouth is a warm wet mouth) but that was everything to do with opportunity and release. Not any real attraction. Definitely nothing close to a relationship. Honestly, he didn’t even think that was a possibility with his lifestyle. Dating a civilian always struck him as irresponsible, you were
practically painting a ‘please kidnap/murder me’ target on their back. Dating within the hero community was also problematic considering he wasn’t a hero. None of them would deign to date a fuck up like you, Todd.

But he knows he’s caught Blondie checking him out before. He thinks she might be interested if she wasn’t already with that cop. Hell, he might even be interested back. They got along well. She doesn’t have a stick up her ass like most of the other masks and knows what it’s like growing up on the other side of the tracks. He appreciates a girl who’s not afraid to let rip with a sailor’s vocabulary or decimate a pizza on her own. Not to mention she’s gorgeous and has a fantastic rack. Boyfriend, remember? Jeremy something, Right.

Tim also knows how fucked up he is and he’s still here. Right now. In front of him. Knocking his knee against Jason’s like he doesn’t even realize he’s doing it. Jason flinches, the joke Stephanie made suddenly coming to mind. He knows she and Tim used to date. He wonders what that would have looked like. Blondie all warm and golden in contrast to Tim’s cool complexion. Her softer female flesh entwined with…Jason realizes he doesn’t actually know what Tim looks like under his clothes. He’s slim. Has to be to fit in those jeans of his. But other than that? Jason can only suspect he’s all sharp angles and lean muscle from his role as Red Robin.

He should really shut down this line of thought. Tim and Blondie are his friends, Sweet Virginal Mother of Christ.

Yeah. Dinner will definitely be the lesser of two evils if it gets his mind off this. Being dead was so much easier than having to deal with this shit.

The dinner bell rings and Tim offers a hand, pulls him up from the bed. Jason feels the way Tim’s tendons and muscles shift under the skin of his forearm. His dread grows with every slow halting step down the stairs.

Oh god, oh god. He wishes he was dead again.

Really.

Dead people don’t have to go to family dinners with their estranged pseudo-family. Dead people don’t have to hobble like an invalid into the dining hall where your adoptive father and brothers are already seated and waiting because you had to take a breather at the bottom of the staircase. He almost refuses to go in. He comes to a full-stop in the doorway when Bruce, Dick, and Damian’s gazes all swivel to watch his entrance. Bunch of creepy ass vultures. It’s only Tim’s palm planted firmly in the center of his back, blocking his retreat, that forces him to move grudgingly forward.

The floor plan of the dining room is a bit like a stunted corridor though, with a doorway on the far
side that leads to the kitchen. Jason zeroes in on the exit and hobbles faster, bypassing the empty chairs clearly meant for him and Tim when Alfred’s figure fills the doorway, cutting off his escape route. If he picks up enough momentum he could probably push past the old man. Alfred wouldn’t be able to stop him with his arms full of serving platters. A hand catches at his collar and he chokes a bit when Tim pulls him down to the seat on his left.

Jason sits unhappily and unsure of what happens next. Apparently staring happens next. Long agonizingly awkward moments of silence as they all stare at each other while Alfred finishes bringing out the covered dishes. He lifts the lids and it’s not pot roast again, but it’s still one of Jason’s top three. Lobster lasagna in white sauce with sides of garlic bread and green beans. Jason narrows his eyes at the butler when a large square of lasagna is cut and set steaming on his plate. He knows what the old man is doing. He’s trying to bribe Jason, butter him up with his favorite childhood meals. And it’s working, which is upsetting. Jason really needs to strengthen his defenses against the old man. It’s hard holding onto that resolve when the first bite hits his tongue though.

He’s about halfway done when something worse than awkward silence happens. Bruce breaks the silence and tries to talk. Jason swears the man times it on purpose. He is a manipulative bastard like that. As soon as Jason’s mouth is full, Bruce clears his throat pointedly, prompting them all to look up from their plates and says, “I think this is the first time we’ve all been here to sit down and dine together. I’m glad you joined us Jason, thank you. Are you feeling better today?”

Jason glares at him. He can’t answer through his mouthful of creamy garlicky noodles. He grunts incredulously back at Bruce instead.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Bruce replies seriously in his monotone bass.

Snickers rise up from the opposite side of the table. Dick’s got one fist raised to his lips, laugh lines creasing the corners of his eyes. Damian’s puggy little face twists into a smirk before returning to its usual scowl. Jason’s face heats up. Fuck it. He didn’t come here to be the butt of their jokes. He doesn’t have to deal with this. Jason starts to get up and is stopped by a set of bony fingers digging into his knee. He gapes at them then follows the wrist up to the elbow, up to the shoulder of Tim’s arm, before settling on his face. Tim’s lips are rolled between his teeth in restrained amusement and Jason is almost offended by that, but the grip on his knee eases into a gentle squeeze plainly meant to soothe and comfort. Jason settles back into his chair.

“How was your day at school, Damian?” Bruce moves on.

Jason relaxes a fraction as the attention shifts to someone else.

“Standard,” Damian reports curtly and resumes chewing.

Bruce doesn’t exactly frown, but the lines at the corner of his mouth deepen and the skin around his eyes tightens.

“Would you care to elaborate?”

“No.”

What a little shit. The look of defeat in Bruce’s eyes lights a tiny spark of joy in Jason’s cold dead heart. The gremlin is really starting to grow on him.

Undeterred, Bruce tries again, “Dick, how long will you be in Gotham for?”

Of course Golden Boy can’t wait to answer Daddy Dearest.
“Oh, well I’ve already taken five days now. Chief was pretty sympathetic when I told him it was a family emergency, but I’d rather not be gone for more than a week, y’know?” his gaze flicks to Jason. “Of course I can be here as long as I need to be,” he adds.

Obnoxiously optimistic as ever. Jason rolls his eyes then breaks into a hiss when he receives a harsh pinch under the table, a bit higher up his thigh than he would have expected. He glares at Tim from the corner of his eye, pouring as much consternation into it as he can. That earns him a second pinch. Jason’s fairly sure the pinches are a warning. He had promised Tim he would talk with Dickhead, and maybe antagonizing Dickie at the dinner table isn’t the best way to facilitate that. But Jason is feeling stressed and petty so rather than heed the warning he retaliates. Jason pinches him back in the same spot, high up on the thigh. Tim makes a noise sort of like he’s choking, which Jason thinks is a bit dramatic. He didn’t pinch him that hard. Besides, Baby Bird shouldn’t dish out anything he can’t take himself…

*Oh shit.*

Tim is actually choking. Jason looks around the table in alarm. Bruce is listening intently to whatever Dick is going on about now, and Damian is busy digging chunks of lobster out of his lasagna. These guys are supposed to be heroes—in the business of saving lives and all that and they haven’t even noticed one of their own is starting to turn purple. Fucking pathetic. Jason slaps Tim on the back. Too hard. He forgot about the shoulder. Tim’s cough morphs into a pained whimper as a piece of noodle slips out from between his lips, leaving a slimy trail of saliva down his chin.

“Aw fuck, Tim. I’m sorry!” Jason shoves his glass of water at Tim frantically.

Tim accepts the glass, takes a few sips, and gives a deep shuddering breath.

“Is…everything, okay?” Bruce asks and Jason realizes they have an audience. Three pairs of eyes are trained on them wide in concern. Damian’s are slitted in amusement.

Tim gives a shaky thumbs-up and draws his sleeve across his chin.

“I’m good. Must’ve been a piece of shell ‘r somethin’,” he croaks.

Alfred gasps in horror. Perish the thought.

“Sorry,” Tim waves him off, “Didn’ mean—just meant—food—went down th’ wrong tube.”

“I was going to enquire how the contract signed off, but I can wait til you’re recovered,” Bruce offers apprehensively.

Tim nods and Bruce moves on once again, coming full circle to his final target, “Jason—”

“No,” Jason cuts him off emphatically. “Just, *no*. If you want to talk to me later then fine. Whatever. You know where to find me but I am not participating in this Beaver Cleaver family dinner sharing thing. It’s creepy. And I’m finished anyway so, may I be excused?” he asks with a sickeningly insincere grin, already pushing his chair back and grabbing his plate.

Tim elbows him in the ribs.

“What?” he snaps.

Tim smothers another round of coughs and points across the table at Dick.

“I didn’t mean now-now, just reminding you sometime soon. But fine,” Tim bites back spitefully and turns to Damian, “Damian, I’m sorry I blamed you for Jason’s death. It was wrong of me. I also probably shouldn’t have hit you.”

“You did what, Tim?!” Dick squawks. Bruce looks taken aback as well.

Tim smacks Jason lightly on the bicep, “Okay, now it’s your turn.”

Jason scoffs, “You call that an apology? Yeah, I could really feel the remorse.”

Tim pivots in his seat to face Jason directly, “The terms of the deal was an apology. Level of remorse was not specified. Now it’s time for you to hold up your end.”

“What deal?” Bruce queries suspiciously from the head of the table.

“Jason and I made a deal that if I apologize to Damian he will talk with Dick,” Tim explains, eliciting a surprised squeak from Dick.

Jason groans drops his head back heavily. Best to get this over with as quickly as possible.

“Dear Dick, Tim said you tried to kill the Joker. That makes me hate you slightly less. Sincerely, Jason,” he monologues to the ceiling. “And now we’re square,” he informs Tim and tries to leave again but the younger man snags his wrist.

“Whoa, hey! That does not count. Deal was you talk with Dick. Not at him. ‘With’ infers two interacting parties.”

“Are you kidding me? After that apology? What a fucking double standard, that’s bull shit, Tim!” He jerks his arm free and grabs his plate, “Y’know what, I’m done here. Dinner was great, Alfred. Thanks.”

He limps to the kitchen and dumps his plate in the washer and god, he just wants to leave. He swears there’s something about this house. When he first came to the manor its size was frightening. There were too many shadowed doorways to redundant empty rooms. Too many entrances and exits for him to keep an eye on at all times. It was too easy a place to get lost in. He always felt like a hand was going to reach out and yank him into the darkness, into the dusty spaces between the walls.

Then it became his playground as he explored the space, mapping out all of its rooms, crawlspace, and hidden service passageways. Jason was an expert at rooting out small forgotten nooks he could squirrel away in and feel safe. He was willing to bet he knew of a few spots even Bruce and Dick were unaware of. Not that he was sure he could fit in them anymore, his shoulders had broadened out quite a bit since then.

Now the house feels oppressive, as if the weight of the heavy oaken support beams, the masonry walls, even the slate shingles on the roof, are pushing down on him. He just wants to go home. Where there’s a coffee table he can put his feet up on, the shelves he built by hand, the slightly dented copper kettle he got at a garage sale whistling on the gas stove-top. That’s all he needs. Just four rooms and no stairs, he thinks wearily as he lifts his foot onto the bottom step of the grand staircase. When he gets to his room he flops face first on the bed so he doesn’t have to stare at the walls still covered in the posters from his youth.

Fantastical job, Todd. You didn’t even make it a full twenty-four hours without causing a scene and falling out with Tim again. What a crap friend you’ve turned out to be. Wonder how long it will take Tim to realize that and drop you like the gutter trash you are. Think Tim is going to want to come over for Star Wars and mac and cheese now?
There’s a quiet knock and he rolls over to find a silhouette in the doorway.

"I uh, brought you dessert. Alfred made custard or something."

Jason pushes himself up into a seated position, crossing the ankle of his good leg over his knee. Dick wanders in and stands a few feet away. Jason is grateful for the distance, that he isn’t trying to sit down next to him. He accepts the ceramic ramekin Dick holds out to him. Cracks the back of the spoon over the burnt sugary surface.

“It’s crème brulee,” he mutters.

“What?”

“It’s crème brulee, not custard,” he explains with a sigh, “Alfred knows it’s one of my favorite desserts.”

Dick shifts and taps his fingers against his thigh, “Ah.”

Jason takes a bite and savors it, letting Dick stew in his own nerves for a while.

“So, dinner was kind of a mess huh?” Dick chuckles.

Jason snorts.

“Did you, uh. Did you really agree to talk with me?”

Jason nods, the spoon handle sticking out of his mouth bobbing along with it.

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

Jason shrugs. He knows he’s being juvenile, but he didn’t really think this far ahead when he agreed to the deal. Like…what they would actually talk about. He’s gonna leave that ball in Dick’s court.

“So, uh. What do you want to talk about?” Dick asks.

Well fuck. Nevermind. He should have expected that. He shrugs again to indicate his apathy and turns his attention to the dessert.

“Greaaaat. This is turning out real well, huh?” Dick rocks back on his heels and hunches his shoulders in a irritatingly good kicked-puppy impersonation.

Jason sets aside the empty ramekin and gives a sigh that’s more of a groan, “Honestly Dick, talk about whatever the fuck you want. Weather, sports, I don’t care. If I open my mouth I’m just gonna start screaming at you so it’s probably best if you do the talking. But I promised Tim to give you a chance, so…”

Dick stares at the floor for a moment then nods and makes a ‘bring-it-on’ motion with his hands, “Okay. Then scream at me.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Scream. If screaming at me helps get whatever it is out of your system so that we can move on, then go ahead. Have at it.”

Jason squints at him, “Are you serious? You really want a second round of thrashing?”
Dick’s hands tighten into fists, “Yeah. Like I said, if it will help you, then I’m ready.”

Jason laughs and leans forward, “Fine, fucking fine. You want to know what my problem with you is? My problem with you is that I died. I died and then clawed my way out of my own goddamn grave, came back to Gotham, and not once did you come after me.” His voice grows from a hiss to a shout, hard biting consonants and drawled out vowels. “I thought at first maybe Bruce hadn’t told you. We both know what he can be like. But over a year goes by and nothing? Even though we weren’t close you were supposed to be my brother. Christ, Dick! Were you not even curious to see if the rumors were true? That. That is why I have a fucking problem with you. You keep wanting to make nice and hug it out but you didn’t give a shit about me before I died, you didn’t give a shit about me when I came back. But I’m supposed to believe you magically give a shit about me now? How the fuck is that supposed to work, Dick?”

Dick slumps against the dresser and rubs his hands up and down his thighs. It’s a long time before he speaks.

“I didn’t…I didn’t want them—the rumors, to be true,” he whispers, “If you stayed dead, I could keep remembering you as this pugnacious little street kid with red cheeks and whip cream on his nose from the hot chocolate at the lodge that time we went skiing. You were the best of us, you know? I mean, Bruce is all about upholding justice, maintaining order and faith in the system. I wanted to be part of something bigger and,” Dick breaks off into a breathless laugh, “fell in love with the fighting and the flying that came with it. But you…you did it because you really cared about the people, the victims we were saving. I didn’t want to believe that kid could come back as the kind of guy who filled a duffle bag with heads.”

Jason folds forward, grinding his palms into his eyes and twisting his fingers into his hair. He hadn’t asked to come back. He wishes he had stayed dead that first time too. Wishes he could have stayed the kid Dick remembered. He doesn’t realize he’s said that out loud until the bed gives slightly next to him. He tenses at the proximity.

“You still can be, Jason. Tim’s shown me pictures of you smiling and being a big ol’ goofball. You don’t have to be the Red Hood anymore. You can put down the guns and be part of the family again.”

He feels Dick forcing a smile through the strain in his voice. He wants to wipe it from his face.

“No, Dick. It doesn’t work that way. There’s no going back to the way things were. I chose this path, Dick. I chose the Red Hood. I chose to strap on those guns,” Jason swallows, struggling under the pressure of trying to make Dick understand, “I didn’t ask to come back, but this is who I decided to be after I did. I’m not ashamed of that.”

He doesn’t necessarily like who he is now all the time, but he’s not lying to Dick either. Dick blows his hair out of his face.

“I’m not ashamed of you either.”

Jason snorts in disbelief.

“No, really. I mean it. Look, I’m not going to pretend I’m okay with what you’re doing. Because I’m not. But, not for the reasons you think. I understand that desire, Jason. To stop someone permanently so they can never hurt anyone ever again. I’ve acted on that desire. I did kill Joker. And right before you came back, there was another man. I didn’t kill him myself but I could have stopped the person who did and chose not to. I felt justified in the moment, but later, after both instances it tore me apart. I couldn’t handle the guilt, couldn’t look at myself in the mirror without seeing a murderer. I cut
myself off from my friends, my teammates. Didn’t sleep, barely ate. I hated myself for what I had done. Sometimes I still do. So, I understand why you operate the way you do. But I’m scared that, just because you don’t feel anything right now... That doesn’t mean in a year, or five, or even ten, that you won’t. You’ve gone through enough, I don’t want you to have to go through that too.”

Dick bumps his shoulder companionably and Jason inches away. He can see it hurts Dick in the way his body sags, but he...he has to know one more thing.

“Why now?” he asks.

“What do you mean?”

“You didn’t really answer my question earlier. Why do you suddenly care? What happened between New York and now that you want me back in your life?” Jason’s voice quakes in frustration.

“I don’t know,” Dick shrugs and smiles brokenly. “You died in my arms? I guess you wouldn’t remember. Damian and I, we were the ones who found you. After Joker. At first I thought you were already dead, there was so much blood,” Dick laces his hands together on his lap, “But then we tried taking out the nails and...you didn’t scream. I’m not sure you could at that point. But your eyes opened, right? The whole time I was holding you up, while Damian tried to cut through the—the bar, we couldn’t just pull it out or you’d have bled out right there—you just stared at me, looking so lost. And all I could think was how I should have been there for you. How it shouldn’t take you dying again for me to realize that. I will never forgive myself for that.

"I’m sorry. I know that doesn’t change anything. Maybe it doesn’t mean much to you at this point. I get it if it doesn’t. But, I’ve had to carry your body home twice now. You don’t know...you don’t know what that’s like to sit there helpless while someone you know you let down in every way is bleeding out in your arms. You don’t know what it’s like having to fish the body of your little brother out of a pile of trash on the river bank. God, isn’t that punishment enough? Please, please, don’t punish me anymore by pushing me away.’”

Hearing those words is almost enough to set him off again. The validation of his hurt at the hands of the Robin he never could measure up to, the man he’d so desperately wanted to be his brother when he was a kid, is all he’s ever wanted to hear from Dick. But he’s already cried twice today, damn it. That’s two times past Jason Todd’s acceptable crying allotment for the day.

“Fuck, I need a cigarette.”

Jason gets up and kneels next to the bed. He stretches his hand beneath it and feels around the support slats. He used to tape cartons up there after Alfred found where he’d stashed them, squashed between the mattress and box spring. When he comes up empty he stiffly gets to his feet, trying to remember all the spots he used to secret them away as a kid. His mouth ticks up at the corner and he stumble over to the bookshelf. He’d really hated _Wuthering Heights_ when they read it in school. Two narcissistic bullies parading around as tragic lovers trying to make everyone else around them as miserable as they were. When he’s in the mood for crazy people wandering dismally through the moors, he’ll take Hardy’s _Return of the Native_ over that crap any day. He pulls the Bronte novel off the shelf and flips past the first few pages.

_Aha!_

There, in the cut away he’d carved out years ago sits a lighter and a distressingly stale carton of cowboy killers. Three sticks still in the box.

_“O buona ventura,”_ he kisses the carton and hastily makes his way to the window.
He pushes up the sash and hops up onto the sill. He can feel Dick’s disapproving stare when he lights up. He takes a long pull on the cigarette and it tastes like shit but it’s better than nothing. After he’s smoked it halfway down he lets his arm dangle out the window and turns back inside. He cocks a challenging eyebrow at Dick, whose expression is just as censorious as he imagined. Dick must really be desperate for Jason’s favor because he doesn’t rise to the bait.

Jason takes another drag and blows a smoke ring, watches it dissipate into the air. He’s trying to buy time. Come up with something to say in return. But it’s hard. And by the time he gets down to the filter he still doesn’t have anything ready. He stubs out the butt on ledge and frowns at the smear of ash before forcing himself to look at Dick.

“Thanks for the guitar,” the words rush from his mouth. “It was uh…thoughtful. And it helped. Good idea,” he says, flexing his fingers. He watches the scar tissue ripple over the back of his hands.

“You were pretty good at it from what I remember.”

“Might be something wrong with your memory then, Dickiebird,” Jason snarks, “You are starting to get up there in age y’know, taken a few knocks to the head. You should think about taking supplements. Ginko Biloba is good for your memory I hear.”

“Yeah well, Tim says you’re pretty good too which seems to corroborate what I remember in my old geezer brain,” Dick taps a finger to his temple.

Oh.

“Tim said that?”

Dick smirks, “Yeah, he said that. Said you had a voice that could make angels cry.”

Jason rolls his eyes, “Okay, now I know you’re making shit up. He did not say that.”

“Eh, maybe not in those exact words but that was pretty much the gist. He thinks really highly of you.”

“He does?” Jason’s ears feel warm.

“Oh my god, when we meet up for coffee all he talks about is you,” Dick pitches his voice a little higher with Tim’s distinctive rasp, “Dick you would not believe what Jason did today. He put a fake snake in Karen’s desk. She screamed and accidently threw right into Lucius’ face when he came by for a walk-through. It was fracking hilarious. Oh and then he tried to get Einar to teach him dirty jokes in Swedish. Did you know he can speak like 437 languages including Urdu? Oh and that he cooks like the love child of Julia Child and Alton Brown? And he can bench press a baby elephant and one time he saved a firefighter that got stuck in a tree and—

“Oh my god, stop! Dick, stop!” Jason covers his ears with his hands.

“Well, look at that Little Wing…you are turning pink. You feeling okay?”

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about Dickhead,” he denies vehemently, even though his face feels like it’s on fire.

Dick takes mercy on him, “Alright, sorry. I was just poking fun. But maybe sometime you’ll let me hear you play.”

“Look, that’s probably never gonna happen,” Jason warns Dick truthfully.
The older man’s face crumbles.

“But,” Jason concedes, “Sometimes Tim and Blondie and I go out for pies at Grotto’s. It’s a public space so I mean it’s not like anyone can stop you from coming in if you wanted.”

It’s not the stirring statement the moment deserves perhaps, but it’s the best he can do. The smile he receives for it though is blinding. Dick’s cheeks rise up so high his eyes squeeze to slits and his lips peel back showing his gums. It’s a little unflattering. That’s evidence enough that it’s real. Not one of the fake ones he plasters on for the media. Before he can stop him, Dick is crossing the space between them and wrapping his arms around him. With the open window at his back Jason has no escape unless he wants to plummet to his death. Which may not be the worst option available. Jason worms a hand up and tries to push Dick away.

“No. Stop. Stooopp! Dick! Get off me!”

He has to shove hard to get the limpet to detach. Dick ruffles a hand through his hair for his trouble.

“Damn it, Dick!” he shouts and takes a swing but Dick is already dancing out of reach.

“Love you Little Wing!” Dick yells back as he bolts into the hallway.

“Screw you Dickhead!” Jason screams after him.

“Christ,” he mutters and crawls down from the window.

He can’t wait to get the hell out this madhouse.
More Than Like

Chapter Notes

So, just an update - for those of you who read some of my other stories you'll probably notice I haven't and will not be updating them for a while. We're down to the end run (five? more chapters) and I want to put all my focus into actually finishing this monster. Hope everyone enjoyed the holidays and I wish you all a joyful 2017.

I uh, actually really like this chapter even if its a bit of a sleeper. I think its just because I get to talk about books more, but I also like the introspection here. I may be addicted to italics.

Nerd notes: Q is an entity with god-like powers from StarTrek Next Gen
And if you don’t know, the “I am the master of my fate” is from another poem entitled Invictus by Ernest Henley.

Chapter 21

Tim takes a deep breath. He should have probably made notecards for this as well. He lets out the breath one long smooth exhale and wonders if that’s enough to give him away before his knuckles tap the paneling. The door isn’t fully shut, there’s a three-inch gap between the door and frame. Office hours are open. Still, this is a delicate operation and he wants to stack the odds in his favor, so he’s going to show the proper decorum.

Sure enough, Bruce’s voice answers the unspoken request with a placid, “Come in.”

Tim slides into the office. Bruce is seated at his desk, papers stamped with the WE letterhead spread out before him. There’s a tray to the side with a cup of coffee and a plate laden with half a grapefruit, a hardboiled egg, and an English muffin glistening with melted butter. An elegantly turned lacewood pen rests lax between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. Tim gave him that pen as a birthday gift three years ago.

What do you give a man who literally has everything from a three thousand dollar bottle of A.H. Hirsch Bourbon to his own modified Kestrel chopper? So Tim had opted away from all the impressive things his wealth could buy for something small and handsome. Something Bruce could tuck away in a pocket and carry with him everyday. A part of Tim was always surprised Bruce did, considering there was a pack of perfectly usable BIC pens less than fifty feet away at any given moment in Wayne Tower. The amount spent on just office supplies is staggering. Tim has seen the
expense reports.

Jason could probably live for years off what they spent on post-it notes and paperclips alone. His mouth pulls up at the corner imagining Jason’s face if he showed him the receipts. Jason is obscenely thrifty. Tim remembers the first time he offered to take Jason grocery shopping and found the man hunched over his coffee table cutting coupons. He had laughed until Jason threw a pair of scissors at his head. The lecture that followed on the virtue of economy was more painful than losing an eye would have been. The incident left Tim subdued and ashamed. It hammered in just how different their childhoods had truly been. He never laughed at Jason’s parsimoniousness again. If saving a dollar on toothpaste kept Jason calm, Tim was happy to leave him to it. There were only two things he found the man didn’t skimp on: food and gear.

“Hey, Bruce. Can we talk?” he asks.

Bruce sets his pen on the mahogany desktop with a gentle click.

“Of course, Tim,” he gestures to a leather-padded chair nearby.

Tim grabs it one-handedly and drags it until it faces Bruce directly.

“Thanks,” Tim says, seating himself.

“So what do you wish to discuss?”

“Jason.”

Bruce exhales sharply.

“Why am I not surprised,” he murmurs.

Tim cocks his head to the side, unsure what to make of that statement. He decides to ignore it and jump straight to the matter at hand.

“Last time Jason left the manor, we…maybe didn’t go about it in the best way. You were right about that. I don’t want to make the same mistake this time.”

Something flashes across Bruce’s face. Tim thinks it’s disappointment, but Bruce isn’t nearly as easy to read as Jason.

“He wants to leave already,” Bruce surmises.

Tim chews on his lip, “He would have left yesterday if he could. I arranged to have someone pick us up later today.”

“Today? That’s not much warning,” Bruce grumbles.

Tim winces, “I know. I’m sorry. I should have told you last night but, I. Uh. I got distracted.”

It would be wise not to tell Bruce how he had been distracted. Considering it had to do with Jason sticking his head in Tim’s room while he had been getting ready for bed. Apparently he had felt the need to apologize for storming out at dinner. Tim had only half-followed his awkward attempt, more amused at how his hair was sticking out in a thousand different directions, wayward tufts curling out behind his ears and off his forehead. When Jason noticed his preoccupation, he had tried to finger-comb it down and mumbled a single-worded explanation, ‘Dickhead.’ Tim laughed and invited him in.
He watched as Jason entered cautiously, eyes roaming the walls and corners of Tim’s room. It must have been the first time Jason had seen it, and he was studying it. Tim wondered what he was deducing from its contents and arrangement. Jason’s reaction to Tim’s apartment in New York hadn’t exactly set a good precedent. Tim became suddenly acutely aware of the Millennium Falcon schematic print above his desk, the Next Generation tricorder in its case, and the row of Gundam figurines on his shelf. All the beloved knick-knacks and memorabilia he collected that his mother hated had found their way over to the manor where he could display them unapologetically. His room here was far more expressive of his adolescence than the one at his parents’ house had ever been. It had been tasteful and Spartan, as per the aesthetic of the interior designer hired, and utterly devoid of any personality.

He waited for Jason to finish his inspection and for the teasing to begin but the man had only shaken his head and muttered, ‘Nerd,’ before warning Tim he may have accidentally sort-of invited Dick to pizza night and hoped Tim was happy because now they’d probably never be able to eat at Grotto’s in peace again and—

And here is getting distracted again. Focus. Daydreaming while negotiating with Bruce is a colossally bad idea.

“Anyways, I’m telling you now so it’s not a shock when we leave.”

“You’re going with him then?” Bruce asks with suspicious impassivity.

Tim automatically starts to defend his tagging along by claiming it’s to help Jason get settled. Except, Jason had made it abundantly clear he didn’t actually need Tim’s help with much. Tim bites hard at the inside of his cheek.

“We have some things we need to work out between us. You weren’t the only one Jason stormed out on that day,” Tim says seriously.

Bruce pinches the bridge of his nose. It’s his only obvious tell after all these years.

“I should not have said what I did,” Bruce admits like it’s physically painful for him to do so.

“No. You shouldn’t have. But. As loath as I am to admit it…you had some valid points. That’s why I wanted to talk with you. I don’t want you to feel like I’m undermining you.”

“Yet you’re still removing him from my care without my consent,” Bruce reminds him sharply.

“Bruce,” Tim groans and takes a breath before continuing more diplomatically, “Okay, dinner didn’t go great—but you know it could have been a lot worse. Stop while you’re ahead. End things on a high note and he’ll be more likely to come back of his own volition.”

Bruce stares at him for a long pensive moment.

“If you remove him from the manor, what will you do to ensure he gets the help he needs?”

The atmosphere in the room changes with that question. It feels eerily similar to the first time he met Crystal Brown. He’s almost expecting Bruce to ask him what his intentions toward Jason are next. That has him sweating. Which is ridiculous, because there’s no way Bruce could know about his crush, right? Dick and Stephanie may be obnoxious meddlers but they wouldn’t rat him out to the Bat. Surely.

Stop calling me Shirley!

Tim banishes the ghost of Leslie Nielsen from his head.

“Well. I…uh. Okay, I know what you’re getting at and I agree he should talk with someone. A therapist. Eventually. And I will try to encourage it. Eventually. But, he’s not ready for that yet. If
you try and force him, he’s going to flip. He’ll think you’re just being a controlling perfectionist who
wants to fix him for your own pride.” Tim raises his hands in a conciliatory manner, “I’m not saying
that to insult you. I’m saying that because it’s what he accused me of when I got too involved. He
needs to do this at his own pace. And he’s been doing pretty well. I’ve been able to build a…
camaraderie with him. He’s come out with Steph and me a few times. She’s really good for him; I
think he feels he can loosen up around her. Last night he even invited Dick to come out for pizza
sometime. And he adores Miss Lucille. He’s making friends. He’s socializing with people other than
drug dealers and hookers—that’s a lot of progress!”

Tim licks his lips and leans back in his chair, his enthusiasm withering under Bruce’s assessing gaze.

“You believe that Jason’s time at WE was beneficial to his well-being?” he asks, tapping his
forefingers together.

Tim’s throat hitches.

“Yes,” he croaks, “Exceedingly…Jason doesn’t know what to do when he’s not Red Hood. I know
you’d rather be Batman than a CEO any day but—did you know he doesn’t have civilian identity at
all? It’s not healthy.”

Bruce actually flinches at that, just a slight twitch at the corner of his mouth, but it was there.

“I still don’t want him at WE. You have to understand there’s simply too much sensitive data at stake
there.”

Tim bites his tongue hard, to force down the bitterness that rises.

“However, as you at one point mentioned, I believe he was hired on as a consultant through Drake
Industries?” Bruce waits until Tim nods warily to continue, “Well, it is of my personal opinion that
the polymer project would benefit from being moved to a more specialized corporation where it
would not need to compete for resources or funding with WE’s other enterprises. And Drake
Industries is more specialized in optic technologies. I think it would be a better fit for Dr. Sorensson
and his team. Don’t you agree?”

Tim can’t name the feeling that arises, but it makes his chest go tight.

“Do you really mean that?” he breathes.

“I can have the paperwork for the transfer drawn up today if you can come by the office this week to
sign with Einar and make it official.”

“Are you sure?” Tim asks, and then chides himself, “Of course you are. You wouldn’t have
suggested it otherwise.”

Tim pops out of his chair and around the desk to hug Bruce with his good arm. He steps away again
quickly. After all, he’s not Dick.

“Thank you, Bruce. Really. Thank you…He’ll come around you know. If he’s willing to work on
things with Dick, one day he’ll be ready to do the same with you,” Tim assures him.

“Tim, I appreciate what you have done for Jason, and everything you’re trying to do. But I’m not
sure he’ll be so amenable when it comes to me. Not all of Jason and my issues are in the past. They
cannot be so easily resolved with an apology and a few kind words.”

Tim knows that. He’s not sure how to work past their ideological opposition. He only knows it can
be done. Jason and Bruce’s relationship is a puzzle, and any puzzle can be solved given enough
time.

“I realize that,” Tim concedes, “But for now, while he’s grounded—this is your chance to lay some
positive groundwork. Deal with the other thing when it becomes relevant.”

Bruce’s face is carefully blank. He leans back in his chair.

“What time are you two leaving today?”

“Before lunch.”

“That’s soon,” Bruce comments matter-of-factly, “Do you need any help preparing to go?”

“I don’t think so. It’s not like Jason brought anything with him to pack up.”

“What about supplies? Money, medication? It’s not an inconvenience. I can have Alfred pack you up
some meals to take with you.”

He’s 99.99% sure Alfred is already intending to do just that. He’d glimpsed the old man digging
through the freezer intently when he’d grabbed his second cup of coffee this morning. It’s good to let
Bruce know the offer is appreciated though.

“I don’t know about the rest, but I’m pretty sure Jason would never turn down Alfred’s cooking.”

“I’ll let Alfred know then,” Bruce announces woodenly.

Tim gets the hint, time to wrap up.

“Thank you,” Tim repeats and turns to leave when Bruce calls out once more.

“Tim, I owe you a thank-you also. For looking out for him. Don’t forget to look out for yourself as
well.”

Tim ducks his head and bites his lip to keep from smiling too obviously.

“I will,” he promises.

He keeps his idiotic grin as he navigates through the manor halls until he is standing outside of
Jason’s room where he takes a couple seconds to get it under control before he knocks on the door.
Not out of politeness, as he did at Bruce’s office, but because startling Jason can be detrimental to
one’s health. He takes the disinterested, “Yeah?” from the other side as permission to enter.

Jason is standing in the middle of the room, leaning on a crutch Alfred must have dug up for him, its
partner propped against the foot of the bed. Tim is obscenely pleased to see he has Tim’s plaid fleece
blanket hanging over his shoulders like a scarf. The fabric of his t-shirt is rucked up where the pad of
the crutch is caught against his ribs, revealing a tantalizing slice of skin above the waistband of his
sweatpants. It takes deliberate effort for Tim to redirect his gaze to Jason’s face. The older man’s
brow is furrowed as he studies the spines of the books on the shelves lining the wall.

“I forgot I had some of these,” he murmurs. “Do you think they’d care if I took some home with
me?” Jason snorts after a beat, answering his own question, “Why the fuck do I care? They’re my
goddamn books.”

He reaches forward and grabs three in his hand, pulling them off the shelf. Then he looks around,
casting about as if only now realizing he doesn’t have anything to pack them in. He shuffles back a
step and lightly tosses them onto the bed then leans forward to grab another handful. The action makes his shirt ride up further, giving Tim a nice view of...What is it Steph calls them? Back dimples. Tim wants to push his thumbs in those dips, sink his fingers into the skin there. Perfect little hand-holds to grip tight while he—

“I can go get a box, be back in a second.”

His voice does not squeak. Tim nearly throws himself down the stairs. It’s a miracle he doesn’t trip and break his neck. His head is a balloon, floating above his body, tethered to his shoulders by a string. Meanwhile, another part of his anatomy is growing heavier and hard to ignore. He’s trying unsuccessfully to adjust himself without sticking his hand down his pants by altering his stride when he bumps into Dick. Green-gray cereal milk sloshes dangerously in the bowl cupped in one of Dick’s hands.

“Whoa, hey there Timmy. You look like you’ve seen a ghost, what’s got you all riled up?” Dick garbles around the spoon in his mouth.

“No ghost. Zombie Jesus,” Tim mumbles before his brain catches up to his tongue.

Dick’s eyes light up and an impish grin distorts his handsome features. He pulls the spoon from his lips with a ‘pop.’ Oh god, what is it about Jason that makes Tim this stupid?

“Box!” he yelps before the other man can say something to embarrass him, “I need a box.”

Dick’s head quirks to the side in alarmed confusion, “Please tell me you’re not...gonna cut a...hole in the box?”

“What the frack, Dick? No!”

“Oh thank god. I mean, I’ve decided I might kind of be on board with this thing now that I see how good you are for him but I don’t think I’m ready to hear about that yet. You know, I really can’t thank you enough for getting me a chance to talk with him. Speaking of chances I totally think you have a chance with him.”

“You do?” Tim asks, doing his best to sound objective.

“Oh yeah, because when I told him you liked him instead of getting all growly and rude he stuttered and blushed. Right up to his ears. It was adorable,” Dick squeals.

“You what?” Tim’s burgeoning boner dies instantly, replaced by a cold sweat. Dick’s words get lost in the swirl of fear and anger churning in Tim’s gut.

“Seriously, bright pink. Like, Pepto-Bismol pink. All the way to the tips of his ears! I haven’t seen him do that since he was shorter than me,” Dick blathers on merrily until Tim yanks him by the collar down to eye level.

Cereal and milk spills down the fronts of their shirts.

“What exactly did you say?” Tim growls, voice dropping as close to the Batman’s as it will ever get.

“Oh! Oh no! I didn’t mean it like that. I didn’t tell him you had a crush or anything,” Dick explains hurriedly, eyes wide, “I just...I told him that you looked up to him and think he’s funny and cooks well and that you’re impressed by his talented tongue.”

The last word comes out as a high-pitched yip when Tim twists his fist, tightening the fabric at his
“I meant his talent for tongues—Languages! I mean language!”

Tim narrows his eyes and pushes him away.

“I swear to Q, if you I find out you’re lying…Nair. In your shampoo,” he threatens.

Dick raises the hand with the spoon still in it to his hairline defensively. Good. That means he’s not taking Tim’s threat lightly.

“Now, any idea where I can find a box? Jason wants to take some books back with him.”

Dick tips the spoon towards the garage door, “I think Alfred keeps some empty ones in the garage. Uh. On the left hand side, top shelf. Above the Christmas lights.”

“Thank you,” Tim gives him a tight grin and leaves Dick standing shell-shocked in the kitchen behind him.

When he gets back to Jason’s room the pile of books on the bed has grown by a few titles, but not as many as Tim would have expected. When he catches sight of Jason he quickly deduces why. Jason is exactly where he left him, with his nose buried in a book.

“Get distracted?” Tim asks, putting the box on the bed and neatly placing the selected books inside.

“Hm? Oh, yeah,” Jason ducks his head and blushes, not as fully as Dick described but still obviously.

“What are you reading?” Tim asks, tipping his chin towards the cover, curiosity piqued by Jason’s reaction.

“Just a collection of poems. Alfred gave it to me my first Christmas here,” Jason shrugs casually and moves to add it to the box.

“Which poem?” Tim asks quickly, before it can leave his hand, finger still stuck between the pages.

“Um. A poem by Christopher Marlowe,” Jason dodges.

“Oh, he was a rival of Shakespeare, right?’

“Yeah!” Jason perks up, “You know him?”

“Not really,” Tim admits, “Only because Stephanie made me watch Shakespeare in Love once. Is he any good? Would you read it to me?”

Jason cheeks burn brighter and he clears his throat, clearly debating with himself whether or not to acquiesce. Finally he gives in. The first few lines rush from his lips before slowing into a rhythmic cadence, voice at turns rough then smooth and dark as raw honey. Tim could drown in it.

“It lies not in our power to love or hate,
For will in us is overruled by fate.
When two are stripped, long ere the course begin,
We wish that one should love, the other win;

And one especially do we affect,
Of two gold ingots, like in each respect:
“The reason no man knows; let it suffice
What we behold is censure by our eyes.
Where both deliberate, the love is slight:
Who ever loved, that loved not at first sight.”

He practically hurls the book away as soon as he finishes. It lands against the cardboard with a loud smack.

“Sounds pretty, but its kinda bullshit if you ask me. Love at first sight. I mean sometimes someone can really piss you off at first but after you get to know them, they’re alright,” Jason opines, ears red.

“And the whole ‘will overruled by fate’ thing kind of chafes me,” he adds, and then mutters, “I am the master of my fate,” under his breath.

He picks up another book blindly and frowns at the cover. Tim squints at the spine, Catch 22. Jason flips through the pages, scowl deepening.

“What’s wrong?”

It’s one of Jason’s favorite books. Jason never told him that, but he read many of the books on these shelves when he would sneak in to learn more about the Robin that died. The notes scribbled in the margins were sacred clues. Catch 22 was densely highlighted, underlined, and starred. Passages Jason thought were particularly funny had laughing smiley faces drawn next to them in green ink. He had been especially amused by the plight of Major Major Major. The book had in turn been instrumental in the development of Tim’s own off-brand sense of humor and was something he felt a sort of companionship with his absent predecessor over.

“I…I don’t remember reading this,” Jason takes a breath, “There’s notes in it. In my handwriting and I don’t remember making them.”

There’s anguish in his voice. It’s a strange and sobering realization that Tim may know more of Jason’s thoughts on certain volumes than Jason himself.

“Hey, you know…that could actually be awesome,” Tim puts as much enthusiasm into his voice as he can.

Jason glowers at him in disbelief.

“No really!” Tim warms up to the idea, “Think about it, you know that mystery and adventure when you read a book for the first time and you don’t know how it ends? What I wouldn’t give to read Lord of the Rings for the first time again!”

Jason runs his finger across the top of the pages contemplatively. He shakes his head.

“It’s just…it’s frustrating. If I don’t remember this, what else don’t I remember? Fuck, I don’t even know what’s missing,” he chuckles humorlessly.

Tim can’t think of anything to say in return. It’s not that he doesn’t want Jason to address the predicament of his own mental health. It’s just that he doesn’t want him to start now. Here. In the manor. With Bruce only a few hundred feet away.

“You should take that one, Catch 22. I think you’ll like it,” he says encouragingly, hoping to distract Jason from following that line of thought any further.

Jason raises an eyebrow but places it in the box. Something inside Tim warms at how easily Jason takes his word for it. They spend the next hour of so going through books. They talk about their
favorites and favorites to hate, Tim interjecting his opinion when Jason blanks on a volume. He notices most of the items going in the box aren’t the books he and Jason stop to discuss: Hemingway, Dumas, Dostoevsky, etc. Instead the box is filling with poetry anthologies and beat-up paperbacks with titles like *The Black Cauldron*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, and *The Once and Future King*.

The oddity rouses his curiosity. It could be Jason already has copies of most of the classics at his house, but the tender care with which he handles the poems and children’s novels prove these mean something more to him than beyond the words printed on their pages. He’s trying to reclaim bits and pieces of his childhood. It makes Tim’s heart hurt. Jason pauses, turning a book over in his hands; *The Secret of Nimh*. He sets that one on top of the shelf. A few minutes later he adds *The Last Unicorn* to the new stack.

“What are those for?” he asks.

“Damian,” Jason answers without taking his eyes off the shelf he’s weeding through. “I let him borrow *Huckleberry Finn*. Since he hasn’t brought it back complaining it’s an affront to written language yet, I’m assuming he doesn’t hate it. Thought I’d leave him some others he might like.”

Tim stares at him slack-jawed. Dick and Bruce are idiots. *Idiots*, if they can’t look past the Red Hood to see the thoughtful, generous, passionate soul they think they’ve lost is still there. Tim is afraid he is in very real danger of becoming more than merely attracted. He’s saved from reflecting on that terrifying development further when his phone starts buzzing in his pocket.

“Will’s here,” he announces shortly.

He looks at Jason. Jason looks at the box. They eye each other’s sling and crutches.

“Well, shit,” Jason swears lightly.

“Hm,” Tim taps his thumb against his lip, “Well, you know. If there is one thing Bruce is good for… it’s heavy lifting.”

Five minutes later they’re standing on the front steps of the manor watching Dick and Will wrestle a large cooler into the back of Will’s SUV while Alfred supervises. Bruce waits a few feet away, the box of books propped effortlessly on one shoulder. The whole scene is eerily domestic. It reminds him of the day he and Dick got roped into helping Stephanie move into the dorms, loading boxes into Crystal’s beat up Honda until you couldn’t see out the back window. It’s a rare nice day as well, adding to the Rockwellian surrealism. The sky is a perfect slate of robin’s egg blue and without any clouds between the sun and them the chill in the air is actually burning off over the green lawn.

“You know we’re definitely going to have to pull over and check for trackers before I bring either of those into my house, right?” Jason grouses.

“Yup,” Tim concurs, “Pretty sure I just saw him stick one under the trailer hitch too.”

There’s a thump that makes the SUV bounce on its back tires and Dick sends them a sunny thumbs-up.

“Good to go!” he jogs across the grass to join them.

Bruce follows more sedately, hanging back as Dick dispenses good-bye hugs.
“Thank you, again. Good luck, I hope it all works out. I love you no matter what,” Dick whispers in his ear, “Even if you put Nair in my shampoo.”

Tim shoves him away but Dick is already twirling toward his next victim. Jason puts up a valiant effort, trying to wedge a crutch between himself and the oncoming attack but Dick weaves to the side and wraps his arms around Jason from behind. Resistance is futile. Tim turns to Alfred, embracing him as best he can with one arm.

“It was a pleasure having you both home for a time,” the butler confesses, “It would be greatly appreciated however, if the next time you visit is under less tragic circumstances.”

Tim looks over to where Jason’s eyes are bugging out angrily over Dick’s shoulder and giggles.

“You’re giving me too much credit,” Tim replies, shaking his head, “I can’t force him to do anything he doesn’t want to, so no guarantees, but I’ll see what I can do.”

“I understand it may be too much to request another family dinner anytime soon, but surely not for a cup of tea with yourself at least on occasion. I’ve missed our chats, Master Tim.”

Tim smiles, “Alright, now that I can do.”

Dick eventually releases Jason, leaving only Bruce left for farewells. Jason and Bruce stand like two stags sizing each other up; backs straight, chins up, chests puffed out. With the two of them standing toe-to-toe the similitude is striking. Of all of them, Jason could best pass as Bruce’s offspring, even in comparison to his true son. Damian too closely resembles his mother in coloring and facial structure, and it’s too early to tell if he’ll cut the same figure as his father. Jason and Bruce however could have been cut from the same cloth. They share the same complexion, height, and powerful build. They share the same determined cut of the jaw and flint sharp gaze. Finally, Bruce offers his hand. Jason stares at it before clasping the other man’s forearm. Tim catches Dick rolling his eyes and secretly agrees. Apparently Jason and Bruce are too manly to shake hands like mere mortals.

“Take care of yourself, Jason,” Bruce murmurs.

“You too, Old Man.”

Bruce pulls away but Jason holds him fast.

“Bruce, keep an eye on the kid.”


Maybe too easily for all the promises he fails to keep.

“I’m serious Bruce!” Jason’s voice ratchets up, “Keep an eye on him. He cares too much about proving himself and his attitude…it’s just a bunch of false bravado. Trust me, I know. He’ll be the next to die if you’re not careful.”

Jason’s fingers uncurl from Bruce’s sleeve and he back around the grips of his crutch. He levers himself down the steps leaving Bruce to contemplate his parting words. Tim pats the brooding man on the shoulder and offers a half-smile. They’d already discussed everything they needed to this morning. Will is waiting for them at the car, leaning against the front bumper. He flips an unlit cigarette over and through his fingers. He stuffs it in his pocket of his jean jacket at their approach and greets him with a grin that’s more of a grimace.

“What the hell did you do to yourself this time, Jase?” He asks gesturing at the crutches.
Jason groans and flops his head back, “Fell down some stairs, ‘pparently.”

“Jesus. I don’t dislike the green I get from shuttling you around, but I’d rather it not be because you keep getting busted up, yeah?”

Will hovers around Jason, opening the passenger door for him and stowing his crutches in the back. Tim frowns, feeling nettled. He’s wounded too. He’s got a sling and everything! Jason hauls himself inside the Subaru, stretches his legs out and tips the seat back a few inches so naturally Tim gets the distinct feeling Jason’s done this quite a few times. It makes him uncomfortable. He clears his throat and Will’s head ticks to the side. Tim can’t see Will’s eyes behind his sunglasses, but the skin on his forehead wrinkles above the lenses.

“You too? Do I even want to know? Good lord you guys do a terrible job of looking out for each other,” Will grumbles and climbs in the driver’s seat.

Tim gapes; pretty sure he just got the cold shoulder from their Uber driver. He narrows his eyes at Will and climbs in the backseat pouting. He doesn’t like sitting in the back seat. For one, it makes him carsick. For another, it puts Jason in closer proximity to Will than is preferable. Especially now that he’s aware of Will’s proclivities. The memory of that phone-call, fresh in his mind, makes Tim cringe. Just because Jason wasn’t interested in the other man, didn’t mean the reverse wasn’t true.

He scrutinizes every movement the two men make in the seats in front of him. Will’s hands rest easy on the steering wheel at ten and two. His neck twists minutely as his gaze sweeps the road ahead of them; occasionally it flicks to the side to check on his passenger. Jason’s fingers dig into the armrests making the leather squeak until they pull out on to the street. Once the manor falls out of sight he thumps his head back against the headrest and sighs.

Tim empathizes. All in all, things went far smoother than last time, but he’s glad to be leaving the manor and Gordian knot of tension between Jason, Bruce, Dick, and himself behind. Will wordlessly fishes the cigarette from his pocket and a lighter from a cup holder and passes them to Jason. Tim bites back a sneer when Will’s fingers brush Jason’s completely unnecessarily. He could easily have dumped them straight into Jason’s palm without touching. He hopes Will washed his hands since last night. He will personally give Demon Brat the go-ahead to sever the driver’s hands from his wrists if he catches Will placing them inappropriately on Jason in any way.

Oh frack.

What is wrong with him?

Asking Damian for help?

To sever someone’s hands?

He’s being ridiculous, acting jealous of their Uber driver for handing Jason a gorrarn lighter. He and Jason aren’t even a thing.

Yet.

*Focus Tim, focus.* Nothing is going on. In thirty minutes he and Jason will be back at the house getting ready for a night of Star Wars and macaroni and cheese. Thirty minutes. Ten minutes, three times. Five minutes, six times. He just needs to get through five minutes six times and then movie night. Excitement bubbles up under his skin as he thinks about laughing while reading the opening credits out loud over the fanfare of music. He thinks about Jason standing over the stove stirring with one hand, while the other grips the support bar of the crutch, that sliver of skin between his t-shirt
and waistband showing. He thinks about crashing on the couch together, bumping elbows as they dig in.

“So, Jase—you look like you could use a stiff drink and a good burger. Wanna stop by Sal’s on the way?” Will asks.

No, no, no! Every delay is another obstacle, another five minutes six times (maybe even five minutes twelve times!) between Tim and his own chance to brush *his* fingers against Jason’s. Handing him a cold beer, or the remote, or a blanket, or… *Since when did Will give him a nickname?!*

“I don’t think so,” Tim pipes up hastily, “I mean we’ve got a cooler full of food. We’ll be fine, besides we kind of already have—“

But Jason cuts him off, groaning in agreement, “God, yes. Please.”

Tim catches the white flash of Will’s grin in the rearview mirror and scowls, hating the man just a little.
Chapter Notes

Hey, everyone. I hope you enjoy this chapter. It's a long one...actually I think its the longest one as of yet. We get to see Jason and Tim start to build, a role-reversal, some slice of life, and OC development. Things are starting to shift again. There are a couple transitions that take place. I think they're pretty easy to identify and follow, but let me know if not.

I wanted to take this moment to thank you all. This story broke 1,000 kudos last chapter and I am astounded. That's completely insane. I never ever thought it would get this kind of response when I started. I cherish every comment and conversation that's come out of this.

The featured poem is *Stars* by AE Housman.

Chapter 22

Jason wakes to the smell of something burning. He jolts upright, instinctively scrabbling for the .22 in his nightstand and launches himself out of bed. Pain spikes through his ankle, but he’s not slowing down to put on the boot or grab crutches. It’s only bruised after all, not rebroken. He is not getting trapped in a burning building again. He considers escaping through the window but… Tim spent the night. He left him sleeping on the couch while the end credits scrolled with Cat tucked against his side. He can’t leave them behind. They should both be smart enough to get out on their own. Or at least Cat should. But he has to be sure. Especially since he doesn’t know what started the fire.

He touches the back of his hand to the doorknob. It doesn’t sear his skin so the flames can’t have spread too far yet. There’s an extinguisher under the kitchen sink. He opens the door smoothly, too fast will cause a blowback, and makes it three determined steps in before careening to a halt. There’s no fire, no heat. Just Tim. Standing over the stove and frowning at the smoking pan in his hand. Cat sits on the counter, tail ticking in interest at the catastrophe taking place before her.

“What the *fuck* are you doing to my kitchen?” Jason howls.

Tim’s head snaps up, his eyes wide and bottom lip caught between his teeth. If Jason’s heart wasn’t about to pound out of his chest, it might even be cute.

“I was trying to make breakfast, since you made dinner,” Tim explains haplessly, waving the pan through the air.

Jason closes his eyes and digs the fingers of his free hand into his hair and twists.

*Breathe in through the nose, out through the mouth. In through the nose, out through the mouth.*

“But I—“

“Tim,” Jason threatens, opening one eye.

“Okay,” Tim agrees meekly and sets the ruined piece of cookware on a cold burner.

Jason limps into the kitchen, gingerly now that there’s no emergency, and pushes Tim away from the stove. He wrinkles his nose at the ingredients laid out on the countertop and gives up on figuring out what Tim was trying to make.

“Eggs,” he commands, setting down the gun in his right hand and holding it out expectantly.

When it doesn’t dip under the weight of a cardboard carton, he glares sourly over his shoulder. Tim is standing frozen, eyes impossibly wider than before.

“What?” Jason barks.

Then he follows Tim’s gaze. It lands on his own chest. In his haste to save the house from burning down, he’d neglected to pull on a shirt. He splays one hand over his belly and the crudely welded ridge of tissue there, then brings the other to the junction at his breastbone. Nausea rolls thick and noxious from his stomach to his throat.

“Oh. I—” he struggles with the words, “I know it makes you uncomfortable. I’ll go get a shirt.”

He moves to brush past Tim, keeping his eyes on the linoleum, and is brought short by a palm and five fingers just above his hip. Tim’s thumb is an inch from where his navel used to be. Jason sucks in a short harsh breath.

“Wait, wait—what?” Tim asks, shaking his head.

“The scar,” Jason grinds his teeth, “I know it weirds you out. I get it. I’ll cover it up.”

He tries to step forward again but Tim’s hand doesn’t move. Insistent. Firm. Jason can’t tear his eyes from the long slender fingers sending sparks under his skin, raising the nearly invisible soft downy hairs along his side.

“Wait, you think…you think your scar makes me uncomfortable? Why?” Tim squeaks, voice at odds with his stubborn stance.

“I know it does. I remember. You couldn’t bring yourself to look at it,” Jason chokes out, “You don’t have to pretend. It’s okay. I know it’s disgusting. I hate it too.”

Tim’s hand falls away. The noise that comes out of him is so dissonant it finally shocks Jason into looking him in the face. He’s… laughing? Or something else that makes him sound like a seal in a Sea World show. Jason bristles, confused and offended.

“What?” he demands brusquely.

“I don’t—I can’t even—oh frack. Please, just trust me when I say me dropping you in the bath had nothing to do with your scar. At all. Nada. Zilch,” Tim wheezes

“Then what—“

Tim wipes his eyes with the back of his hand, “It’s super humiliating and has nothing to do with your
scar and I am literally begging you to please take my word for it and not make me say anything.”

Jason raises an eyebrow suspiciously. Usually, he is all for watching Tim make an idiot out of himself, but there’s embarrassment and then there’s humiliation. Maybe Jason isn’t a good person, but he’s not cruel. Unless someone deserves it. Even if Tim is telling the truth and the scar doesn’t bother him… Well, it still bothers Jason. He ducks back into his room and grabs a shirt and the crutches he’d left behind the first time.

He takes his vexation and shame out on the cutting board. The mechanical motions of dicing and sautéing potatoes and onions, flipping them up and back into the pan help realign his thoughts. He cracks eggs in a bowl and whisks them with a fork. A tablespoon of cold water in the mix keeps them fluffy when he scrambles them. He spoons eggs and vegetables in columns on to spinach tortillas for breakfast burritos and drizzles a healthy amount of sriracha on two of them. Tim’s gets a significantly lighter dose. Jason shakes his head; Tim is one of those pasty white boys who can’t handle heat. It’s tragic.

He carries the plates into the living room where Tim is sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the coffee table. His laptop is out and there are notepads and pens neatly arranged on its surface. He drops Tim’s plate in a clear space.

“What’s this?” Jason asks, tilting a burrito towards the impromptu miniature office.

Tim gestures for him to sit down, “I think we should draw up a contact. Like a roommate agreement.”

“A roommate agreement?” Jason repeats perplexed.

He lowers himself stiffly down to the floor, stretching his bad leg out in front of him.

“No technically, obviously, since we’re not roommates, but a contract where we agree to abide by certain terms in relation to each other. I thought it could help prevent another argument like the last one.”

“Huh,” Jason stares at Tim, trying to decide if he’s yanking his chain or not.

Then he remembers the notecards. Yeah, this is right up Tim’s alley.

Tim slides him a notepad and pen, “I think it would be good if you and I listed out things that the other does that bothers us. Then we’ll compare notes and see what we can compromise on. Sound good?”

Jason picks up the pen. He rolls it between his fingers and flicks it over his knuckles. He’s not sure how he feels about this. Legislating behavior. He was always more of the type to break rules than follow them. Except…

“So like, if I said it bothers me when you fuck up my kitchen, you’ll agree to never touch anything in my kitchen again?”

Tim’s mouth opens and he stammers, “Uh. Yeah. I—that’s the general idea.”

Jason grins and starts writing at the top of his pad. This may not be so bad if he’s the one getting to call the shots. Jason’s list ends up longer than Tim’s. Fortunately, that doesn’t seem to bother Tim too much.

Most issues end up easily resolved. Like Tim’s kitchen access. He is forever banned from emptying
the dishwasher or using any appliance other than the coffee maker without Jason’s express permission. Jason agrees to taking turns picking out movies. He actually likes this compromise, though he’ll never admit he’s curious to learn what Tim likes. Tim is tasked with providing food at least once a week to offset the groceries he eats and give Jason a night off from cooking. Jason gets full control of his schedule. He writes his PT sessions and work shifts in black on the calendar.

That had been a surprise—the option to work again. He had accepted the offer so readily he astonished himself, considering how things ended last time. But it would be different now, without the specter of Bruce hanging over his head. When Tim said he’d never punish Jason by firing him for anything that happened outside of work, Jason trusted him in a way he knew he’d never be able to trust Bruce again.

Tim is allowed to add optional events in blue dry-erase. Things like pizza nights at Grotto’s, case reviews at Blondie’s, and teatime with Alfred. He even puts up his requests for movie nights on the calendar in advance. It’s a huge relief for Jason. Knowing which nights Tim wants to come over or go out, he can mentally prepare himself for socializing. The disagreements start when they get into the details. Jason wants incontestable veto power, the right to cancel any event at anytime without having to explain himself. Tim’s lips twist, and Jason knows he doesn’t like the idea. But Jason needs it.

He needs the assurance that on a bad day he has an out, without fear of being guilt-tripped about it, and its not something he’s willing to concede on. Tim finally capitulates, with the concession that Jason send a follow-up text within forty-eight hours to let him know he’s alive. Jason almost scoffs at his paranoia, but he hasn’t had the best luck at staying alive this year. It’s not exactly an irrational fear.

It takes a couple hours to wrinkle out all the fine print, but when Tim finally has them both sign the document, it doesn’t feel as ridiculous as he was expecting. Strict rules and regulations have always chafed, but these rules aren’t a cage locking him in and rubbing raw against his will. He gets to set these boundaries and the control it gives him is comforting. There’s a little smile hovering at the corner of Tim’s mouth and Jason realizes that was the point all along. No one’s ever made this kind of effort on his behalf before. It’s big. Jason runs his hand through his hair and offers his own grin in thanks. They stick a copy on the fridge.

It works. Really well. For about a month.

Jason, at least, feels far more at ease integrating Tim and the others in his life knowing there’s a system of checks and balances in place. He thinks its made Tim more confident as well. The younger man doesn’t tiptoe around him as much now and makes more eye contact. Jason appreciates it. For the most part. Except now sometimes Tim does the opposite and holds it for too long. It makes Jason feel like he’s being broken down into his component parts; from tendons and tissues to molecules and protein strands, all the way down to his atoms and their electron clouds.

Like right now.

“Is, um…is everything okay?” he asks.
Tim is standing in the living room, so still Jason’s not sure he’s breathing. He wonders if there’s something on his face. No. He just shaved. He watched himself rinse his face off in the mirror less than five minutes ago. Maybe he missed a spot? Or cut himself and didn’t notice. Or maybe there’s something on his shirt.

He looks down at the black cotton. There are some water spots on it but no stains. It’s not as nice as Tim’s, he’s wearing a deep blue-on-blue patterned shirt that brings out his eyes, but its one of the only four Jason owns that isn’t a warm flannel number off a Goodwill rack. They’re only going to Blondie’s tonight, but suddenly he feels underdressed. Tim’s shoulders twitch and his expression shutsters, losing some of its intensity.

“Yeah, sorry. Everything’s great. You clean up nice is all,” Tim smiles softly. Then it sharpens into something wicked, “You know, now that you aren’t limping around like a bum on your crutches in sweatpants all day with a hobo beard.”

Jason snorts and points a finger at him, “Fuck you. It was not a hobo beard. You’re just jealous because you can’t get anything more than a pedo-stache going.”

“It was not a pedo-stache!” Tim whines.

“It was a lip caterpillar, Tim,” Jason shudders at the memory of Tim’s face before the man worked up the courage to try shaving left-handed.

“Oh shut up,” Tim turns his back on Jason and heads towards the front door.

“Don’t forget the wine!” Jason shouts after him.

Tim reroutes to swipe the bottle of the counter, his middle finger sticking stiffly out from where the rest are wrapped round the neck. He tries to recall if he’s ever seen Babybird flip the bird, or if it’s something he’s started doing since hanging out with him. Jason grins. He kind of likes it when Tim does shit like that. Mildly contemptuous sarcasm is a good look on him. It would probably piss Bruce off to no end, knowing his bad influence is rubbing off on the polite well-mannered prodigy, which is its own reward.

He slings his keyring around his finger while walking down the driveway. God, it feels good to be driving again. He’s been doing it every chance he gets, even coming up with dumb ideas like midday coffee runs as an excuse. There’s a Starbucks kiosk in the Drake Industrial Park but Tim claims its inferior to Gotham Grind in every way. Personally, Jason can’t much tell the difference in the coffee between the two, but he does like the pastries at Gotham Grind. So a few times a week he makes the downtown drive. Croissants for him, coffee for Tim. He’s almost gotten to the point he can predict Tim’s order based on his moods. A plain dark roast is Tim’s usual, but he likes a basic latte on particularly good days, and on really bad days he orders a noxious concoction Jason isn’t convinced is not jet fuel.

Tim’s ordered the jet fuel twice this week. Something’s up. He hides it well, better than most. But then, Jason is better at reading people than most. It’s nothing obvious. Tim is still polite and invested at work, then witty and loose outside the office…but his smiles waver and he’s quicker to lash out with snide comments than normal. It could be irritability from his injury. Jason understands the frustration of being benched from patrol all too well. It could be nerves at their upcoming first meeting with Blondie’s new beau. Officially. Or it could be something else entirely. He’s tempted to ask, but Jason figures if Tim wants to talk about it with him, he will. Until then, Jason turns up the volume on the radio to temper the silence.

Jason pulls into the parking lot of one of the Gotham U dorm quads. Old habits die hard, and he
parks in one of the non-descript dark areas between streetlamps. He and Tim time their entrance, following on the heels of a group of co-eds who hold the building’s door open for them. There’s a security guard leaning against the welcome counter cracking jokes with one of the maintenance workers.

Jason strategically moves to block Tim from their view with his greater bulk, hiding the wine bottle they’re smuggling in. It doesn’t go unnoticed by the students that join them on the elevator though, and they shoot him and Tim sly winks before getting off on one of the lower floors with a giggle. Jason’s brow crinkles, puzzled. It’s not until they’re standing in front of Blondie’s door side by side, that he realizes the undergrads may have been giggling at more than Tim sneaking in contraband.

“Well, it was good seeing you Jason. You should come over some time for dinner, meet Jeremy.”

“Wouldn’t want to be a third wheel,” Jason shakes his head.

“Then bring Tim with you and it’ll be a double date,” Blondie sticks her tongue out at him, “He’s gotta meet him too at some point.”

Oh holy fu—

Jason darts a look at Tim, to see if he’s been struck with the same realization: how they look standing together in the narrow hall, arms brushing, bringing a bottle of wine like a couple walking into a dinner party. Tim’s staring straight ahead at the cheap paneled door with his mouth pressed into a thin line, seemingly oblivious. Jason debates whether or not to shift a couple inches to the left and put some space between them. Not because he’s ashamed at the idea of being seen with Tim like that; if they were a thing.

Objectively, Jason knows Tim is a damn good catch for anyone lucky enough to hook him. He’s got money, looks, a sharp sense of humor, drive, an intimidating intellect…and as cheesy as it sounds—a good heart. He’s proven to be caring and understanding. The amount of patience he has to put up with Jason is saint-like. It’s just that they’re not a thing, and he’s not sure Tim would appreciate people assuming they were. Being associated with Jason like that wouldn’t be good for Tim’s reputation. Even the image of Bruce going into an apoplectic fit over the rumor isn’t satisfying enough to make it okay to do to Tim. He shoves his hands in his pockets and shuffles his feet a bit.

Blondie throws the door open and welcomes them with a loud, “Hey guys!” She throws a singular smile his way, “Jason, I’m so glad you came!”

She tosses an arm around his and Tim’s necks respectively and tugs them all down into a hug. Her genuine enthusiasm draws him out of his downcast slide and he’s glad he decided to come. At first, he’d been set against it. Pizza nights spent sprawled on the floor going over case files was one thing, but meeting Blondie’s civilian boyfriend? Letting her share a precious part of her life with him as Stephanie Brown and not Batgirl? He was terrified of fucking it up.

He couldn’t say no though when she explained. Jeremy was still struggling with his partner’s death. She hoped introducing him to her best friends would help get him out of his own head, if only for a night. It was probably the word ‘best’ that had sealed his fate, blindsiding him into accepting while his brain was scrambled from the shock.

“He was terrified of fucking it up.

“Curiosity got the best of me. Had to check out this guy you’ve been yakking about the past couple months. Make sure he’s good enough for you an’ all,” Jason jokes.

“Oh god, please tell me you guys aren’t going to give him the shovel talk,” Stephanie groans.
“Nah,” Jason reassures her, “No point. If he does anything, you’ll have him six feet under already before I could lay a hand on him.”

Tim grumbles quietly under his breath. Blondie either doesn’t hear him or ignores it.

“Well, come on in! Jeremy’s in the kitchen. It’ll be a few minutes before dinner’s done. Ends up I’m awful at rolling cha yow—"

“Chả giò,” a voice corrects from further inside the suite.

“That’s what I said!” Stephanie shouts back. She rolls her eyes, “Anyway, I’m terrible at making egg rolls so Jeremy had to go back and fix all mine and we’re running a little behind schedule.”

She laughs and jogs into the kitchenette to peck a kiss on the back of the neck of the young man standing over her stove.

Her boy in blue risks a quick glance over his shoulder at them and gives a friendly nod, “Hi. I’d shake hands properly but I’ve got a pan full of hot oil here so…”

“No problem,” Jason waves him off and sits down at the card table shoved against the counter.

“It’s cool. Hope you don’t mind if we start drinking without you though,” Tim replies coolly, already fiddling with the corkscrew on his Swiss army knife to open the bottle.

Blondie grabs four coffee mugs and Tim pours a healthy serving into each. They stare at each other. Jason’s not sure how these types of things are supposed to go. He looks to Tim for guidance but Tim’s buried in his mug, leaving Blondie and Jason to fill in the silence over the sizzle of hot oil.

Jason struggles to think of something that’s not related to their nighttime activities. He’s not sure how much Blondie has revealed to Boy Blue. Better to play it safe. Small-talk, right?

“So. How’s…classes?” he asks.

Blondie’s top lip curls in a sneer that could rival any gangster’s.

“Alright. Believe it or not, organic chemistry is not the problem. I’m rocking a solid B there. It’s these stupid core classes I have to fulfill before I can be accepted into the nursing program. They don’t have anything to do with my major so forgive me if I haven’t been trying my absolute hardest in 20th century American history. Which wouldn’t be a problem, except apparently attendance is like thirty percent of our grade.”

Jason’s eyes slide over to Boy-Blue, “Yeah, I can see how that would be difficult to juggle with work.”

“Exactly,” Blondie bops her head.

She chats and Jason listens enough to follow the conversation and add in when required. His true attention is split between the man neatly stacking a pile of freshly fried chả giò and Tim. Boy-Blue stands around 5’10”-5’11” and has a decent build visible through his jeans and henley. Jason guesses he’s the kind of guy who hits the gym enough to keep in shape but doesn’t obsess. There’s a bit of softness about him, a lack of definition that sets him apart from anyone in their line of work. His shoulders are relaxed but he’s tapping his feet and his head is locked forward too stiffly to be natural. He’s nervous, but not terrified. Smart man. Jason approves so far. Tim on the other hand seems determined to glare holes through the back of Boy-Blue’s head.

Finally, the last roll is pulled from the pan and Jeremy pours the excess oil into a jar. He picks up the
platter and turns to face them. There’s a hesitant smile on his face when he sets the platter down in
the center of the table. Jason thinks Tim’s description of him as a floppy haired buffoon was a little
unfair. He does seem a little eager for approval, but he’s handsome enough with big dark eyes set at
a slight slant in his open boyish face.

“I hope they’re okay. It’s been a long time since I’ve tried to make these,” he apologizes and sits in
the chair next to Blondie.

Blondie edges closer to him and wraps an arm around his waist. Jason takes note of how Boy-Blue
relaxes into her touch. Their casual intimacy and the way it communicates an exchange of
encouragement and comfort reminds him of Tim’s hand on his leg during dinner. He’s starting to
understand why people seek out this type of relationship.

“I’m sure they’re great,” Blondie murmurs, giving him a kiss on the cheek and reaching out for one.

“Careful, they’re still hot. Give them a few minutes to cool down, Stephie,” Jeremy warns her before
turning to him and Tim, “So you guys must be Jason and Tim?”

“Oh! Shit, I’m sorry. Jeremy these are my best friends. The big guy there is Jason, and that’s Tim,”
she introduces them belatedly.

“It’s nice to meet you guys. Stephanie talks about you both all the time,” Jeremy extends his arm
over the table.

Jason shakes his hand. When he goes to do the same with Tim, Tim grabs him by the forearm
instead. Jason watches Tim’s aggressive display with mixed feelings. It’s amusing as hell, but does it
mean Tim still has thehots for Blondie? Boy-Blue’s eyes widen and Jason wonders how tight Tim is
digging his fingers into the poor guy. Is he seriously going to have to be the responsible one tonight?
He reaches out under the table and settles his hand on Tim’s knee and squeezes. Not hard enough to
hurt, but enough to let him know Jason has his eye on him. Tim drops Jeremy's arm like he’s been

“Good, so you already know we’re assholes and we don’t have to pretend otherwise,” Jason
chuckles.

“Yeah, but the way she says ‘assholes’ makes it sound like a compliment,” Jeremy fires back,
“Mostly she raves about your cooking, Jason. I wanted to call out for delivery. Bit nervous about
cooking for you, but Stephie insisted.”

“I wanted to show you off,” Blondie waggles her eyebrows and bumps shoulders with her
boyfriend.

Jason raises an authoritative eyebrow and picks up a roll. He turns it over in his hands inspecting it
from every angle, drawing the action out and building anticipation before finally taking a bite. He
chews. Swallows. Boy-Blue and Blondie are leaning forward in their seats, waiting for a reaction.

“Holy shit, man. These are fantastic!” Jason drops the charade to gush, “Where’d you learn how to
make chả giò? These taste just like what I had in Hanoi.”

Jeremy’s grin splits clear across his face, “My grandmother is Vietnamese. She made help her in the
kitchen when I visited her and granddad over the summers.”

“You’re never going to get rid of her now,” Jason snickers, jutting his chin out at Stephanie.

She has a roll in each hand, double-fisting them like a pro.
Boy-Blue laughs fondly, “Yeah. Unfortunately, I never really learned how to cook outside of grannie’s lessons, so if she ever wants meatloaf or something she’ll have to make it herself.”

“Screw you, jerks,” Blondie spews through a mouthful of mung bean threads and pork.

They crunch through the stuffed wheat wrappers and take turns talking and passing the wine, though Tim remains suspiciously reticent. When the bottle empties, Blondie slips into her room and comes back with another.

“They never search through your underwear drawer during room inspections,” she winks and hands the bottle off to Tim to uncork.

Instead of sitting back in her chair, she plunks herself down in Jeremy’s lap. He wraps his arms around her but leans back so he can fix her with a serious glare.

“How did you get that?” Jeremy asks.

“Get what?” she asks innocently in return.

Boy-Blue gives a long-suffering sigh, “Do you seriously have a fake ID? Stephie, I’m a police officer. The fact I buy you wine is bad enough.”

Blondie flashes him a mouthful of pearly whites and kisses the tip of his nose. Jeremy groans and drops his face into her shoulder. Jason can’t help but be impressed how thoroughly Blondie has him wrapped around her finger. Sucker.

“My roommate is gone for the weekend, officer. Maybe you should cuff me for being a bad girl,” she purrs.

The corkscrew goes flying out of Tim’s hand, skittering into the living area, and he goes bolting after it. Boy-Blue flusters and stutters. Jason tilts his head back and guffaws. This is the most fun he’s had in a long time. God bless Stephanie Brown.

“Alright, I gotta know. How did you two meet?” Jason asks, once he can breathe enough to speak.

Boy-Blue and Blondie exchange a look. It’s fucking adorable. Jason has never had a real close glimpse of what an intimate loving relationship looks like before. He knows Catherine loved Willis, but he was too young to remember what that was like before his dad skipped out on them. He’d heard plenty of rumors about Dick’s string of whirlwind teenage romances, but didn’t actually see much of them as Robin. Lord knows, Bruce’s trysts were not a shining example of healthy relationships. He finds himself fascinated by the easy tender warmth between Blondie and her boyfriend.

“In a coffee shop actually,” Jeremy answers for them, “She was in front of me in line and well…I’d never had a lady offer to buy me a drink before.”

“Ha, yeah. Subtlety is not Blondie’s forte,” Jason teases.

“It’s called self-assurance, jerkwad. I see what I want, I go for it. It’s not my fault most people lack the balls to make a move,” she punctuates her statement by reaching for the last roll and biting it clean in half.

Tim returns to the table, corkscrew in hand and applies himself back to the task with determination. He stabs the tip of the screw into the cork with more force than is probably necessary.
“So. What brought you to Gotham, Jeremy?” Tim asks with a razor sharp smile.

Unease prickles across Jason’s skin. He hates that smile. It’s the one Tim wears on magazine covers and in board meetings. Too symmetrical, too even, too many teeth showing.

“You’re from Baltimore originally, right? My brother works in the Bludhaven PD. I hope you don’t mind if he did a little digging when we heard Steph here was dating a fellow cop.”

Tim pulls the cork free with a startling pop. Boy-Blue’s carefree expression falters, but he recovers well.

“Ah, yeah. I am. I came to Gotham for school. Actually went right here to Gotham U on a baseball scholarship.”

Sirens go off in Jason’s head. Blondie’s eyes are narrowed to slits.

“What position you play?” Jason interjects.

“Pitcher,” Jeremy turns to him in relief.

“Sweet. Knights fan all my life,” Jason nods.

“Orioles, of course,” Boy-Blue perks up, pointing to himself. “You ever play?”

“Nah, not really. A bit in middle school but that’s it. Love watching the games though. America’s favorite pastime an’ all that.”

“A sports scholarship, hm?” Tim breaks back into the conversation, “Was to serve and protect not your first choice of career then? What happened to get you into the force?”

“Threw out my arm junior year,” Jeremy answers with a measured calm, “but I did graduate with a degree in criminal justice.”

Tim sets the bottle down with a heavy clink, “And you just decided to stay in Gotham afterwards, of all places. Why not move back to Baltimore?”

Damn it, Tim. It’s an innocent enough question but there’s venom behind it. Blondie looks like she’s about to blow a gasket. Jason drops his hand on Tim’s good shoulder and squeezes hard. Maybe he can grind some sense into the little shit through his scapula. He doesn’t know Boy-Blue well enough to care about his feelings, but Blondie doesn’t deserve this.

“I hear Camden Yards has a great field,” Jason booms louder than necessary, “If you ever wanna catch a game sometime, me and my friend Will like to watch at Sal’s. Beer is cold, burgers are the best you’ve ever had.”

“Thanks. Yes. That sounds awesome actually,” Jeremy accepts, buoying back up.

“Wait, you watch baseball with Will?” Tim snaps, heading whipping round to glare at Jason.

“Oh, yeah.”

“Since when?” Tim hisses.

“Since I started driving again. He’s cool, I like spending time with him. Is that a problem?” Jason growls.
Tim opens his mouth, but Jason decides he doesn’t want to hear anymore. Definitely not here. They are not airing their shit in front of Blondie and Boy-Blue. He stands and uses the grip he still has Tim’s shoulder to haul him up to his feet.

“Blondie. Jeremy. Nice to meet you. Thanks for dinner. We need to go now. Excuse us,” he grimaces and drags Tim out of the dorm.

“What the FUCK is your problem, Tim?” he shouts as soon as they get back to the house.

Jason tosses his keys down on the counter with enough force that they shoot off the other side. He digs his cell phone and wallet out of his pockets and dumps them on the on the formica with slightly more care. Tim is slouched in the doorway, right cheek sucked in. It’s a new facial tic he’s noticed cropping up with increasing frequency. He’s classified it as the ‘sulking face’ in his mental catalog of Tim-isms.

“You were a pain in the ass all night, man! I thought Blondie was going to jump the table and fucking murder you and I wasn’t going to stop her because you goddamn deserved it. You embarrassed her! She wanted us to come and meet her boyfriend, who’s partner just died, in case you forgot, and you acted like a petty bitch. So what the hell is going on?”

Instead of answering Tim shoulders past him and rummages through the fridge. When he emerges he’s got a bourbon stout in his hands. Far heavier than his usual preference.

“Don’t ignore me, Tim. Don’t be like him,” Jason half begs, half snarls.

He watches the muscles in Tim’s jaw work. They tense and relax, then tense again.

“It’s just weird, okay? I know she dates other people. I’m okay with that. Fuck, I don’t even know why I’m angry. I’ve just…never had it shoved in my face like that before. The sitting on his lap, and kissing, and innuendos. And he’s tall, and likes sports, and cooks, and is everything I’m not. And you’re there making best friends with the idiot, inviting him to join your boys night out club with Will that I had no idea about.”

Tim grits his teeth, twisting futilely at the bottle’s cap. Jason wrenches it out of his grasp before he can tear his palm on it.

“So that’s what this is about? You’re jealous of Jeremy and Will because I’m making friends with them? Christ! You were the one preaching about how I should be trying to forge healthy relationships and all that shit!”

“You’re not supposed to like them more than me!” Tim howls back, red-faced.

Jason blinks. Oh.

“Yeah, Tim. I like going out with Will, and Jeremy seems like an alright guy. But… You’re the only one who comes home with me at the end of the night.” He feels his face flush immediately. “Also, these aren’t screw caps,” he explains quickly, popping the beer cap off with his lighter and shoving the bottle back at Tim.

Tim takes it dumbly, and there goes Jason’s hope that maybe he hadn’t heard that middle sentence. Jason’s not sure how long they would have stood frozen like that if not for the distinct whish of Cat
coming through the cat door. Tim jumps at the noise. Jason uses the distraction as an excuse to turn his back on Tim. He grabs the bag of treats from the top of the fridge and shakes a small mountain of them out in front of Cat’s nose. Then he takes extra care aligning the Ziploc strands at the top of the bag when he seals it, before putting it back. When he turns around again, Tim is staring at his converses, shoulders slumped.

“I’m sorry. I don’t… I guess I just felt left out. It sounds dumb now,” Tim admits quietly.

Jason maneuvers past him to grab an IPA for himself. He takes a good long look down the neck of the bottle before tilting it back to pour down his throat. He comes up for air and sighs.

“Yeah, it is dumb. But… I get it. Sometimes I feel the same when you and Blondie start going off with all your private jokes and talking about those shitty TV shows you both watch. *Sleeping With Dragons* or whatever.”

“*Sleeping With*—are you talking about *Game of Thrones*? R’hllor, Lord of Light, forgive him for he knows not of what he speaks,” Tim prays dramatically to the ceiling then rolls his eyes in Jason’s direction, “By the way, that’s definitely what we’re watching next.”

Jason wrinkles his nose. Tim’s tendency to take control still rankles, but he’s learning to deal with it. Tim doesn’t mean to. He isn’t trying to assert authority over Jason like Bruce would, he’s just… motivated.

“You mean after we watch *The Sting*. We agreed to take turns picking movie night, hell it was your suggestion. Next week is my choice,” Jason reminds him.

“Oh, yeah. Of course. After that.”

They raise their bottles and drink. Jason watches Tim over the rounded glass lip. Tim watches Jason. Jason watches Tim watch him. Tim looks away first and starts peeling the label off his bottle.

“So is that it?” Jason shrugs.

“Is that what?”

“Your prissiness. Am I supposed to believe it’s all jealousy over Jeremy and Will?”

“… Yes?”

“Bullshit,” Jason spits.

Tim frowns at him, “How do you know?”

“Because I’m good at reading people and you’ve been twitchy for days before this, moron. You do this thing where you chew on the inside of your cheek when you’re upset,” Jason taps his finger against Tim’s face to illustrate.

Tim flinches away, “How’d you get so good at reading people?”

“Because I’m good at reading into people’s actions. I know when people are being manipulative. Just, less good at decoding facial expressions. I didn’t really have many friends or even peers growing up. Not until I became Robin and joined the Titans. Blame it on poor socialization in my early developmental years.”
“Okay, that explains a lot. But spill dude. What’s got you so on edge lately?”

“It’s… stress. From work.”

“Are you seriously going to make me call bullshit on you again?” Jason argues.

Tim squeezes his eyes shut, looking for a second as if he is in actual physical pain. Jason’s irritation gives way to concern. Was it his shoulder? Had he overworked it today?

“It’s about you,” Tim forces out, peeking through one eye.

Jason reels back. “Me? What…what did I do?”

He searches his mind frantically for any mistakes he may have made at work. All he can come up with are a few ribald jokes he made to Einar, but they weren’t in English so he can’t imagine that’s the issue. Maybe it was something he had done outside of work, offended Tim somehow without realizing.

Tim snaps both eyes open, “Oh, no! I didn’t mean it like that. You haven’t done anything. It’s just…”

“Just what?” Jason’s voice and patience cracks.

“With this dinner coming up with Jeremy, I’ve been thinking about that night on the bridge a lot and, doesn’t it bother you?”

“A lot of things happened that night, Tim. You’ll have to be more specific.”

“That you died! That you died and came back, again. And we still don’t know how or why. What if… What if three times is the charm and that’s all you get? What if the next time is for real? Don’t you want to know how this works?”

Jason goes rigid.

“You have only died three times, right?”

Jason shotguns what’s left of his beer.

“Jason, how many time have you died?” Tim cries.

“I don’t know,” he whispers, “There might have been one other time. Four, I think. Maybe. I’m not sure.”

“When?” Tim splutters.

“Tim, I really, really, don’t want to talk about it.”

He notices his hands are shaking. Huh, when did that start? He sets the empty bottle down before he can drop it and shatter glass everywhere. He leans over the counter so he doesn’t have to look at the younger man. This should be obvious enough for Tim to read.

“Okay, you don’t have to tell me. I just… I don’t get it. How can you not be curious?”

Jason digs the heel of his hand into his eye socket and snorts, “When has that ever turned out well for me, Tim? When has asking questions ever not screwed me over even more?”
“Jaso—“

“No!” Jason torques his head towards Tim and sneers. “You listen! Y’know, my mom always used to tell me my dad was on business trips when he was gone. And all the guys leaving her room got a kick out of asking me where he was and how he was doing. And I’d tell em, he was on a business trip and they’d laugh their fucking heads off and mess my hair until one day I chased one of thefuckers down the street and made him tell me what was so damn funny. Big surprise, my dad wasn’t this great entrepreneur jetting off to Chicago and L.A., gonna come back with presents and fat pockets. He was just another junkie loser got tossed in lock-up and shivved there.

"Then, come find out my mom’s not even my real mom. And I just have to know who she is. She’s some big doctor doing charity work in Africa! Like, how awesome is that? God, how could I not want to be her kid? She’s gotta be smart and kind and…” Jason chokes, “Well, we all know how that turned out right? And let’s not forget Bruce. Fucking come back from the dead and—and all I wanna know is if I ever meant anything to him… And he chose the fucking clown over me. So no, I’m not particularly curious to know why I don’t stay down. Whatever the fucking reason is… It ain’t gonna be good Tim.”

Fuck. *Fuck.* He does not want to talk about this anymore. His throat is closing up so tight it’s painful to keep talking.

“Besides, even if we did find out what’s wrong with me, then what? Does putting a name to it—is that supposed to make it easier? I’m still some kind of freak. Christ, Bruce can’t stand having any goddamn metas in Gotham. Me being a freak of nature just gives him another reason to want me gone.”

For a long time all he can hear is the sound of his own breathing, a ragged staccato punctuating the silence of the kitchen.

“Nothing’s wrong with you, Jason,” Tim speaks softly, “You’re not a freak. And Bruce doesn’t want you gone. He loves you; he’s just really bad at it. Alfred loves you. Dick loves you. Babs loves. Steph loves you. I love you. That’s not going to change, whether you’re a meta or alien or vampire or unicorn or were-cat or whatever.”

Jason huffs. He appreciates the attempt. He really does. He can feel a circle of warmth grow on his back where Tim’s hand hovers, not quite daring to touch. He thinks of Boy-Blue relaxing into Blondie, they way she helped shoulder and soothe the burden of his anxiety. For a second he wishes Tim would drop his hand that fraction of an inch. He’s sure if he could just feel the press of a palm through his shirt, part of this crushing weight would lift. Instead he shoves up and away from the counter. He squares his shoulders.

“Stay or go, I don’t care. I’m done here.”

He tosses his bottle in the recycling bin and heads to his room, slamming the door behind him.

He sits at the edge of the pier, trailing his toes through the water. He’s still wearing his boots. Can’t feel the water through the leather and rubber. He brings his knees up one at a time and pulls at the laces. He strips off his socks and sets them to the side. His bare toes dip beneath the surface. The water isn’t cold. It isn’t warm either, but that odd concurrence where it’s the exact temperature as the air. All he can feel is the slight drag of water against his feet as they move. He’d almost drowned
here once. Got tossed in… three… Or was it four months into his tenure as Robin? Batman was busy throwing fists and batarangs into a bunch of drug runners. Or was it arms dealers? He can’t remember.

He remembers it took a few minutes for Batman to notice him flailing around helplessly in the water. When he’d finally been pulled up onto the splintered wood, coughing up river slime and gasping, Batman had looked gobsmacked. Robin, you don’t know how to swim? Like it was something everyone knew how to do naturally. Well Jason sure as fuck hadn’t been born with gills. When the hell would he have learned how to swim in the Narrows? His world was asphalt, brick, and rusting fire escapes. As long as he could run and climb, he could survive.

He’d liked it though. Learning how to swim in the manor pool. He learned backstroke, breaststroke, how to dive, how to swim supporting someone who couldn’t. Bruce had made him tread water for hours. His favorite thing to do though was to stretch out on his back, inflate his chest, and let the pool jets push him around from one end to the other. He especially liked when his ears filled with water and all the background noise of the world disappeared, and it was just him. Floating.

Kind of like being dead, now that he thinks about it.

He wonders what drowning felt like. He’d been unconscious when he hit the water. Probably a good thing. Enough asshats have tried to strangle him he’s familiar with the burn of struggling for air. It’s not pleasant. Still, it had been the first time he hadn’t died choking on his own blood. Jason leans out. Stares into the inky bay. He edges forward so his feet are fully submerged past his ankles, wetting the hem of his pants. There’s no lights on this stretch of the docks to reflect on the surface. The water melds seamlessly into the night sky. If he fell, would he be falling up or down? Swimming through galaxies, brushing past stars.

Stars, I have seen them fall,
But when they drop and die
No star is lost at all
From all the star-strown sky.
The toil of all that be
Helps not the primal fault;
It rains into the sea,
And still the sea is salt.

He pushes off the rough planks. Water closes over his head. He releases small streams of bubbles he can’t see in the pitch until he starts to sink. He sinks and sinks and sinks. He waits for his feet to hit silt. They don’t. He should have hit the bottom by now; it’s not this deep off the pier’s end. Every foot presses harder on his chest. His lungs are starting to ache. His body wants to fight it, hold on to his last breath as long as he can. He forces it to breathe in; it’s not suicide if he can’t die. He waits for thick dark water to flow in his mouth and nose.

It’s not cool and quenching. It’s…god, it’s fire. Searing him from the inside out. It spits and fizzes in his throat, eating through tissue and bone. This isn’t right. This isn’t—their’s a glow bleeding into the dark below him. Green. No, it can’t be. The Pit. He’s…how did he…No! No! He kicks, out, thrashes his arms. Out, he needs to get out. Up. To the…which way is up? He can feel his capillaries corroding. He screams, but his lungs are already full of acid burning holes through them. His lips sizzle as it gushes over the soft mucus membranes.

He gasps. Hands sliding in silk, until the back of his skull slams into the wall.

“Jason?”
He looks up. Chest heaving. Panicked. Tim is standing over him, face drawn. Jason coughs and water trickles down his chin. He raises his hand to his mouth and when he pulls it back, there are droplets clinging to his fingers.

“Nightmare,” Tim explains.

“But…but…” he rasps, holding his hand out where the evidence still lingers.

Then he sees the empty glass in Tim’s hand. He crumples in on himself, shoulders hunching forward and drawing his legs up into a tight curl. He swallows. Presses his forehead to knees. His throat stings. Raw from screaming. God, he feels like an idiot. Hot tears squeeze out the corners of his eyes. Pathetic. Trembling from nightmares like a child. He wants to bawl at Tim never to do that again. Except, it’s better than waking up swinging. At least he’s not hurting Tim this way.

“Hey, it’s…you’re alright.”

The words are accompanied with the touch he had so desperately craved earlier. It’s not hesitant or shaking like he is. It’s warm and steady and he shudders under it. The mattress dips beside him and Tim is at his side, sliding his other arm around him. Not very high since his shoulder is still healing, but enough to encircle Jason and pull him against Tim’s chest. He’s too exhausted and overwrought to do anything but lean into it, burying his face in the juncture of Tim’s neck and shoulder.

“You’re okay. You’re safe,” Tim murmurs, sliding the flat of his palm up and down Jason’s spine, “I got you, you’re safe.”

And fuck, Jason believes him.
Guys! GUYS! SOMEONE MADE A FANART! Big thanks to I’msuchchillin for letting me know about it. It’s a scene from Ch. 12, by Bananart and it’s GORGEOUS! Go check it out on her tumblr, here’s the link!

https://careamorran.tumblr.com/post/156506498208/sooooo-i-drew-some-quick-fanart-for-zoeleos

And Bananart, if you’re out there…I LOVE IT! Thank you! If you ever make any more, let me know or link it in the comments because I would have never found out if I’mjustchillin hadn’t said anything. You have no idea what it was like when it popped up in my Pinterest feed the next day and I was like… “Wait a second…Of course it’s recommended for me! That’s mine, bitches!” Is it too much to say this is my favorite thing in the world (aside from my cats and family)?

Btw…if anyone else wants to make a fanart…feel free! I love that shit! I encourage that shit! It makes me ecstatically happy. And uh, no pressure or anything…but tomorrow is my birthday…*puppy eyes*

Chapter 23

Oh Mara, Mother of Skyrim. Tim stares at the curly black head of hair tucked into his shoulder. What had Dick done when they pulled Jason out screaming on a slab? Soft shushing sounds and body contact. With the way Jason is clinging to him, he’s 94% sure it won’t end in a head-butt this time. He slides the flat of his palm up and down Jason’s spine.

“You’re okay. You’re safe,” he promises, “I got you, you’re safe.”

Jason’s skin is slicked with sweat and his hands alternately stick and slide as he tries to comfort him. Tim looks down the broad expanse of Jason’s back. There’s so much bared skin there to skim his fingers over, it’s heady. It would be a problem if not for the wet spot on his shoulder. This is not how he had imagined their first embrace. There was significantly less panicked screaming and crying in those fantasies. He moves his hand in an expanding ellipse, from shoulders to sacrum, repeating variations on, ‘You’re okay. I’ve got you. You’re safe.’

Gradually Jason’s shuddering eases and the moist pants against Tim’s neck gain depth and lose speed. Something tickles, and Tim is completely irrationally endeared when he realizes it’s the brush
of Jason’s eyelashes as he blinks. Tim waits patiently for Jason to pull away, sniff, and snap off a sarcastic one-liner in an attempt to soothe his own embarrassment over the overt display of vulnerability. It doesn’t come. Instead, he stays slumped in exhaustion against Tim, seemingly content to rest there for the moment. Tim lets the litany of reassurances fade off in favor of giving his full attention to listening to Jason breathe and tracking his flagging pulse. He continues to let his one hand circle over Jason’s scarred flesh. The muscles stay rigidly locked beneath Jason’s skin, refusing to relax despite Tim’s efforts. He winces at the uneven twists and gnarls he can feel embedded deep in the tissue.

“Hey, Jason,” he whispers gently to get the other man’s attention, “Do you mind if I touch you?”

Jason rolls his head sluggishly to look at Tim.

“You’re already touching me,” he frowns, voice rough and quizzical.

“No, I mean…not like this,” Tim explains, “You’re holding all of your tension in your body. Your neck and shoulders are so stiff it’s got to be uncomfortable. I could help with that, if you’d like.”

“What, like a massage?”

“Yes. Exactly like that.”

Jason pulls just far enough away for his skeptically raised eyebrow to achieve maximum dramatic potential.

“Hey! You know how you’re always asking me how I’m still alive with my diet? Well I want to know how on earth you’ve been swinging all over Gotham every night for the past three years with your body in this shape. Your knots have knots. I’m surprised you can even move.”

The eyebrow drops and Jason sits back to scrub a hand over his eyes.

“Sheer force of will. Can’t exactly waltz into a spa looking like this without raising a lot of questions,” he sighs, indicating his mutilated torso with a wave.

Tim worries his lip with his teeth then pats the stretch of mattress beside him decisively, “Well, here. Lay down and I’ll work some of those knots out for you.”

Jason eyes the space and Tim thinks he’s going to refuse. Of course he’s going to refuse. Why would Tim even entertain the notion that he’d be okay with submitting to a round of groping, whether it’s therapeutic or not? But then Jason starts to lower onto his stomach, and cranes his head forward to expose the nape of his neck. Tim exhales cautiously and rubs his hands nervously over his thighs before raising a leg and settling on Jason’s hips. Oh god, he’s here. He’s really here. He looks sternly at his lap before letting himself reach out to touch Jason, and silently warns his dick, ‘Any funny business and I will cut you off.’ With that taken care of, he leans forward and digs his thumbs into either side of the cervical vertebra just under the base of Jason’s skull.

“Shit, that feels good,” Jason groans as Tim works his way down his neck.

The sound feeds the smug satisfaction growing behind Tim’s sternum. He makes Jason feel good.

“How did you learn to do this?” Jason asks, “I don’t remember this being a class in Bat training.”

“Steph and I used to give each other post-patrol massages to loosen up after a long night.”

“Now there’s an image,” Jason slurs, turning his face into his pillow when a tangle in his trapezius
pops loose.

Tim’s fingers lose their flow for a second, “Yeah, Steph is gorgeous, isn’t she?”

He thinks he hears Jason mumble, “Mhm. Both of you,” but it’s muffled by the pillow.

Tim prods especially hard at a burl under Jason’s left scapula and something crackles. Jason bites down on a whimper, and Tim’s dick twitches in his sleep pants. ‘Don’t you dare, don’t you fracking dare,’ he threatens his mutinous penis. Dead puppies. Sewers. That time Killer Croc decided pants were no longer a necessity. Damian’s puggy little face. Annnd, he’s good to go. Disaster averted. He keeps moving his hands along the path of Jason’s back, smoothing out the kinks and cricks as he goes. Jason’s pained moans and pleased murmurs come fewer and farther between before finally ending altogether.

“Jason?” he asks quietly.

The only response he gets is a light snore, a barely-there wheeze of air. He keeps rubbing his knuckles into Jason’s lower back, in that precious space between his dimples. Jason’s face is tilted to the side, eyes closed, dark eyelashes fanned over his cheek. Tim studies the curved shell of Jason’s ear. He considers the cowlick on the back of his head, memorizes the scars that dot his back. There are more than there should be, and uglier too. They are the physical proof of how long Jason’s been fighting without anyone to watch his back and patch him up after, with steady hands and even stitches. Not anymore, Tim swears to himself savagely.

Still, as much as he’d like to, he can’t straddle Jason like this until sunrise. He tries to get up, intending to head back to the couch but is stopped short by a tug on his pants. One of Jason’s hands has a tight grip on the fleece of his pajama pants. He pries gently at Jason’s fingers until they let go of the fabric, but they re-curl around his hand instead. Tim sighs, deliberating. How badly will Jason react if he wakes with Tim in his bed? Will he freak out or play it off like nothing happened? Frack. He really should just leave and spare them both the awkwardness. Except now that Tim’s actually had the chance to get his hands on Jason, he’s reluctant to let go, and Jason (at least unconsciously) feels the same.

Finally, he shifts, drawing his right leg up and over Jason’s thighs so he can lie down on his left. He settles carefully, keeping a respectful few inches between them, even as his arm is held tightly to Jason’s chest, much like a child with a favorite toy. This close he can smell the clean spice of Jason’s soap and see the faint dusting of freckles along his shoulders. His eyes narrow on the pale scar that cuts down Jason’s throat, he’d noticed it while shaving the other man but had been too focused with the task at hand to think on it further. Hacked footage from Bruce’s cowl the night Chemo dropped plays through his memory in fast-forward. Oh god, surely that’s not it.

Tim squeezes his eyes shut and stifles a sob. Poor, unlucky, Jason Todd. He fights the urge to immediately storm the Cave and demand Bruce’s head on a platter. He’s only stopped by the certainty that Jason would never forgive him for it, and the slight disturbance of the mattress when Cat jumps up, like a marshmallow bouncing along the surface of the moon. She treads over Tim’s head, belly fur grazing his face, to sniff Jason’s nose delicately. She looks back at him with her slitted yellow eyes and mews.

“He’s had a rough night. I’ve got this side if you get that side.”

Cat blinks and leaps nimbly over Jason to curl up in the crook of his knees.

“Good girl, Cat. We’ll take care of him, yeah? You and me, we’re a team now. We got this.”
He can hear the scritch of her claws in the sheets as she sheathes and unsheathes them, followed by
the rumble of her purr. He’s come to find the sound comforting over the months, often lulling him to
sleep on the couch. He knows it won’t help tonight, though. And not just because of the agonizing
proximity to Jason, which accounts for only about 33% of his restlessness.

7% is wishing he had his phone right now so he could take a picture of the three of them and send it
to Steph. She’d squee herself blue in the face.

10% is guilt. He’s fairly certain if he had his phone, Steph would delete the message without opening
it. Jason was right. He’d royally fracked up at dinner. Jeremy didn’t deserve his hostility. Steph has
every right to want him drawn and quartered. He needs to find a way to make it up to her, to them
both.

18% is taken up with the disturbing revelation that Jason has died more times than they were aware
of, and the horrific possibility of the nature of his other death.

The rest is fixated on the message he’d found in his mailbox on Wednesday. Someone knows
about him, and more importantly, about Jason. His own investigation into the matter had come up with
nothing and it’s driving Tim mad with worry. He was almost at the point of calling Bruce, though he
hated the idea of going behind Jason’s back. But now, in light of his new suspicions, going to Bruce
is an impossibility. He needs to tell Jason immediately, first thing in the morning before he loses his
resolve. They’ll figure this out together.

It sounds so easy, but scenarios whirl turbulently around his skull, each ending worse than the one
before. His gut churns in anxiety and he only manages to nod off for an hour, maybe two, before
pale pre-dawn light turns the room a murky gray. Somewhere in that hour, Jason let go of Tim’s
hand and rolled over in his sleep. Cat is now nestled in the hollow of his stomach and Tim is fitted
neatly against his back, one arm slung over his waist. Tim listens attentively. Jason’s breaths are still
slow and deep.

He closes his eyes and presses a kiss between the sleeping man’s shoulder blades, lips lingering on
the stretch of skin made damp by his own breath. Jason makes a small noise in his throat and Tim
freezes. Minutes pass. It takes a monumental effort to rip himself out of the bed, but he has work to
do. Cat raises her head and watches him, her tail circled around her body, tip tucked over her nose.
He raises his fingers to his lips and tiptoes out of the room.

There’s a coffee shop not far away. It’s not as good as Gotham Grind, but they have a decent
selection of breakfast stuffs. It’s also directly across the street from the 4th Precinct. By the time he
gets there, there is a thin orange glow on the horizon and they’ve just opened their doors. He asks for
two of their darkest roast and sips on one while he looks over the glass case of bagels and pastries.
He tries to think of what Jason would like. The girl behind the counter waits with a pair of tongs. He
picks out a couple of almond scones, cinnamon swirl muffins, and rosemary bagels with a tub of
veggie spread, and has her divide them into two bags. He compliments her scarf and drops a twenty
in the tip jar on his way out.

He steels himself for what he must do next, the paper bags crinkling under his fingers as he walks
across the street and down another two block until he’s outside of the 4th Precinct. The heavy glass
doors swing shut behind him with a dismal clang. He approaches the middle-aged woman sitting
behind the counter in the front lobby. She’s wearing a blue ribbon pinned over the heart of her pink
floral blouse.

“Hi, I’m Timothy Drake. I was wondering if Officer Poole was in yet?”

She taps the eraser end of her pencil against the crossword puzzle she was filling in.
“Yes, he came in just a few minutes ago. Would you like me to call him for you?” she asks, her voice higher than he expected.

“Yes please. Thank you, I’d like to speak with him if he’s not busy.”

The receptionist smiles and bobs her head, dialing a three-digit extension.

“Hello, Jeremy? Timothy Drake is here at the front desk to see you. Mhm. Mhm. Okay. Will do, bye.”

She turns back to Tim, “Officer Poole will be here in just a few minutes, if you’d like to take a seat while you wait, there’s a bench just there.”

Tim nods his thanks and follows her pointed pencil to the slatted wooden bench. He looks longingly at the untouched second coffee in his hand. He should have ordered three.

“Tim?”

The word echoes in the barren lobby. Tim’s head jerks up. Jeremy is a few feet in front of him, body angled partially back as if ready for a fight. Tim supposes he can’t blame him. He raises his full hands in surrender.

“I don’t know if you’ve had breakfast yet, but I brought you a bagel and coffee. Is it okay if we talk?”

Jeremy glances around, “Sure. Mind if we talk outside though?”

Tim bites his lip. Clearly, Jeremy is expecting him to make a scene.

“No problem,” Tim shakes his head demurely and follows Jeremy out.

They sit on the low brick wall that runs in front of the wheelchair ramp. Tim sets his offerings between them. Jeremy looks at the bag and cup, but doesn’t touch.

“So what is this about?” he asks, there’s an edge to his voice that hadn’t been there the night prior.

Tim chews on the inside of his cheek.

“I wanted to apologize for the way I acted last night. I was incredibly rude to you and Steph and I’m sorry.”

Jeremy’s brows draw together, “Um, thanks.”

This is not easy. He falls back on what he had rehearsed earlier.

“I shouldn’t have had my brother look into your files. It was an invasion of privacy. I shouldn’t have insinuated you don’t belong on the force or in Gotham. Stephanie really likes you. That’s all that matters. I know I didn’t act like it, but I really am happy for the two of you.”

Jeremy picks up the coffee and fiddles with the lid.

“Thanks. For that, and for coming out here to say it. It’s, um, big of you. It’s a bit intimidating, y’know, being the guy who comes after Timothy Drake-Wayne. Can’t really compete with that. I live off a civil servant’s salary and definitely didn’t graduate magna cum laude from an Ivy League school or anything. Hell, wasn’t even top of my class at the academy. And Stephie is—well, you know. Amazing. Sometimes I wonder, what on earth is she doing with me?”
“Because you’re a good man. A good boyfriend. You could’ve put me in my place last night but you didn’t, because you cared more about her than your own pride. I loved Steph, I did. But that was something I was never really able to put aside. We were in high school when we met, and believe it or not, being Timothy Drake-Wayne isn’t always what it’s cracked up to be. I was going through a lot and…was kind of a condescending jerkwad to her. I’m sure you can guess how well that went. Steph doesn’t suffer idiots for long,” Tim chuckles wryly.

Jeremy laughs, “Yeah, I figured that one out real quick.”

“Well, long story short; she deserved better, and now she has better. Steph is strong and loyal. She doesn’t need anyone to take care of her, so if you’re in her life it’s because she wants you there. Trust her.”

Jeremy assesses him over the rim of the coffee cup, “Sure you’re not still in love with her?”

His tone falls shy of being completely teasing.

Tim grins, “I’ll always love her. But no, not like that. I…ha.”

“Someone else?” Jeremy asks, taking a sip.

Apparently he’s finally decided this wasn’t all a ruse for Tim to poison him.

Tim’s grin softens, “Yes. And actually I need to get back to them if you’ll excuse me. It was nice getting to actually talk with you, Jeremy. Maybe we can try for dinner again soon.”

“I’d like that,” Jeremy reaches out and shakes his hand.

Tim starts to go, then pivots back, one finger aloft, “Oh, and if you could call Steph off before she tries to castrate, disembowel, or otherwise maim me, I’d appreciate it.

Jeremy laughs and waves before disappearing back inside the precinct. Tim hopes Jeremy realizes he wasn’t joking about that last bit. He’ll call his secretary and have her deliver flowers and chocolates just in case.

The house is still dark when he gets back, sucking the pinprick on his thumb. He sets the second bag of goodies on the counter and navigates his way to the coffee maker. He’s not allowed to operate the kettle, so he’ll just run a pot of hot water to make Jason’s tea. He pulls a mug from the cabinet and digs out a box of unbleached tea bags and a tin of loose leaf Earl Gray, conscientiously putting everything back exactly when he’s done. When the coffee maker starts to plop and fizz, he sticks his head around the bedroom doorway. Jason is just starting to rouse, eyes wandering blearily around the room, hair a tempestuous mess. He blinks owlishly at Tim and pushes up on an elbow. Tim smiles helplessly.

“I’ve got breakfast in the kitchen when you’re ready and a pot of tea going.”

“Br’fass?” Jason rubs at his eyes, “But…damnittim. Y’r not allowed in th’ kitchen.”
“I know, I know! I didn’t cook or anything. Just picked some stuff up by the coffee shop on 9th and Porter,” Tim reassures him.

“Oh.”

Jason sits up fully, prompting Cat to leap down and race into the kitchen, howling for her own morning feeding. Tim sets a tin down for her then makes himself busy pulling plates and napkins. He keeps one ear tuned to Jason fumbling around in the bedroom, as he gets dressed. When he stumbles in through the living room a couple minutes later in a red t-shirt and grey sweatpants, he’s still half-asleep. Usually Jason is a light sleeper, the kind who snaps awake into full consciousness. Seeing him like this makes Tim warm and fuzzy on the inside, even if it’s only an after-effect of how thoroughly the night terror had fatigued him.

Jason seats himself on a barstool and Tim passes him a mug of hot tea. It looks small in Jason’s hands as the man stares down into it, watching the steam paint patterns across its surface. Tim sits next to him and smears a layer of veggie spread over a bagel. He nibbles on it, watching Jason take small sips from the corner of his eye. He wants to get this over with, but it’s a weighty issue to spring on someone first thing in the morning. Best to let Jason wake up a bit. He’s halfway through his bagel when Jason clears his throat.

“So. I didn’t mean to make a fuss last night. Sorry. Thanks for…sticking around. That was…hell, probably the best sleep I’ve had in years. The Big Sleep excepting,” Jason tries to joke.

“Hey, anytime you need a masseuse or a cuddle buddy or whatever, just let me know. Happy to help,” Tim titters nervously.

Did he really just offer his services as a cuddle buddy? Tim withers on the inside.

“I, uh, might take you up on that,” Jason mumbles, rubbing the back of his neck as rosy pink creeps up his shirt collar.

Tim thinks he might just drip off his stool into a puddle on the floor, his insides have gone that gooey. He shoves a big bite of bagel in his mouth. His heart is racing, much like the first time he’d had Martina’s Tim Drake Special at Gotham Grind, back before his body had acclimated to the potentially fatal caffeine dosage. He struggles to get his thrumming mind and body under control, because there are still important things he needs to bring up. Mood killing things, guhh. He chews the dense ball of dough in his mouth, rolling back and forth between his teeth until he can swallow it in a painful gulp.

“I also wanted to say something about last night. Please don’t be mad, but I wasn’t completely truthful about why I want to know more about your resurrections,” Tim backs away, trying to ignore the look of betrayal on Jason’s face.

He rifles through his backpack and retrieves the damning newspaper clipping, then slides it in front of Jason.

“It’s also because of this,” he says.

Jason’s eyes widen. It’s page three of the Gotham Gazette printed a few days after the events on Kane Memorial Bridge. Sandwiched between an article on municipal budget cuts and an op-ed on rezoning is a column following up on the bridge collapse. Red marker circles the second paragraph. Several emergency responders claim to have seen Red Hood at the scene in addition to the vigilantes known as Robin and Red Robin. Witness statements are corroborated by officers’ reports of a man
in a red helmet arriving on a motorbike and aiding the officers against the gunmen. When asked, GCPD declined to confirm any relation between this masked man and the vigilante known as Red Hood who was gruesomely executed last December. It’s likely one of several mysteries from this disaster that will continue to go unsolved, as several observers report the purported copy-cat was still on the bridge when it collapsed. Rescue crews have yet to recover any bodies from the river.

Beneath that in that same red marker is a note in loose but graceful print, “If I noticed, so will someone else. Keep a lower profile.”

Jason’s eyes track side to side as he reads the message over.

“How did you get this?” he chokes.

“It was in my mailbox at the New York apartment.”

“When?”

“Wednesday. I didn’t want to show it to you until I knew something more.”

“And?”

Monosyllabic responses don’t bode well.

Tim huffs in frustration, “Nothing. I ran it, and the envelope it came in for prints. Nada. Must have worn gloves and the envelope was one of those mailers that seals with an adhesive strip, not a lick-n-stick, so there was no DNA either. I went through the security feeds in the lobby and didn’t come across any glitches if someone looped or scrubbed footage, and the only person who touched my mailbox was Gerald, the same postman who’s been working that route since Lex Tower went up. There was no postmark on the envelope either so unless my sixty-seven year old mailman is secretly tracking down vigilantes in his spare time, it must have been snuck into his bag or truck at some point.”

Jason grunts. Which is even better than monosyllables. Yay.

“It doesn’t really sound like a threat, so much as a warning,” Tim muses, “is there anyone you can think of who—”

“Talia and I aren’t in contact anymore. Even if we were, she’d contact me directly. She wouldn't go through you,” Jason answers shortly.

“Well, it’s someone who knows us even if we don’t know them. They know I’m Red Robin at the very least, there’s no reason to send it to my civilian address otherwise. They must know I know you outside of the nightjob, because as far as I’m aware there’s nothing to tie Red Robin and Red Hood together, they’ve never worked with each other before. By extension we should assume they’ve figured out the rest of us as well. Look, I know you don’t want to look any deeper into your resurrections, but this is too big to ignore. I think there’s a good chance whoever this is, knows something about what’s happening to you. That gives them a massive tactical advantage over us,” Tim hypothesizes, fishing for an angle he thinks will appeal to Jason.

Jason’s shoulders tense and Tim can practically see them knotting up all over again.

“Have you shown this to Bruce?”

Tim shakes his head, “Not yet.”
“Good. Keep it that way.”

“Jason—”

“Tim. Please. If he finds out about this, he’s never going to let it go. He’ll try and put me under house arrest or lock me up in a cell in the Cave til he finds whoever wrote this.”

Tim wants to argue with that, but he really can’t. It’s exactly what Bruce would do. Tim has half a mind to do it himself if it means keeping Jason safe.

“So, what do you want to do?” Tim asks through gritted teeth.

Tim already has a handful of half-conceived plans, but that had been one of the issues Jason brought up while formulating the contract. He thought Tim was bossy. Tim is working on it, though it physically pains him to do so at times.

Jason shrugs, “We find this son of a bitch ourselves and get some answers. Between the two of us working as a team, case closed in no time.”

While Jason calling them a team makes his heart stutter in his chest, he can’t help but point out, “Jason, you are nowhere near recovered enough to go back out there yet. Heck, I’m not recovered enough.”

“So stay at home,” Jason shrugs, “If you’ve got such a hard on for figuring out what kind of a freak I am Doctor Moreau, then use that tech magic of yours to do a little digital detecting. I’ll hit the streets and hunt this guy down. By the way, been walking for a couple weeks now. Miss Lu said I could start up light exercise in our lest session.”

“I don’t think jumping rooftops was what she had in mind when she said light exercise.”

“Fine. I will stay off the roofs and restrain myself to punching and shooting people, instead of kicking them. Happy?”

Tim could scream. The stubbornness of this idiot.

“Happy? Is that supposed to make me happy? Are you out of your gorram mind? Shooting people instead of kicking them? In what world should that make me happy?”

“Don’t get pissy about it, I’ll aim for knee caps,” Jason says dismissively.

“Jason! The note is warning Red Hood to keep a low profile! Going out, guns blazing to scare up some clues is the complete opposite of that!”

“Then I won’t go out as Red Hood!” Jason yells back, “I’ll come up with something else.”

“Like what? No way is Dick letting you in the fingerstripes again.”

“I dunno! I’ll paint the helmet or something!”

“Are you kidding me? That’s the stupidest fracking thing I’ve ever heard!”

A week later Jason calls out of work sick with the most unconvincing fake cough Tim has ever
heard. If Tim wasn’t locked in quarterly board meetings all day, he would have left at lunch to hunt him down. Jason had planned his revolt well. By the time Tim is finally able to make his getaway, it’s only a quarter of an hour until the official end of the workday. The sky is just starting to glow pink on the horizon, casting purple shadows on the streaky clouds above, when he pulls into the driveway. Or rather, when he tries to pull into the driveway and finds another car already there. He parks on the side of the road and glares at the Honda in his spot. He’d recognize that hatchback anywhere. He stomps up the path to the door, jams his thumb in the bio-reader and jabs his code in.

“Steph!” he hollers as soon as the door swings open, “Jason! Stephanie!”

He makes a circuit of the cottage and comes across no one but Cat sleeping lazily in a square of sun slanted over a workout bench in the gym room. Then he hears it; giggles. He looks up and out of the window into the backyard. Jason and Stephanie are kneeling in the grass, leaning out over something spread across a layer of newspapers. They’re wearing goggles and are armed with cans of spray-paint. Oh hell no. He storms outside in a righteous fury and finds them brawling. Jason is on his back, his good foot in Stephanie’s stomach and the leg fully extended to keep her at bay while she valiantly waves her can, misting bright purple paint across his shirt. He retaliates by catching her in the face with a plume of electric blue.

“You fucker!” she shouts and twists, trying to get around him with renewed effort.

“No! You are not adding purple hearts to this! That is not my aesthetic!” Jason catches her by the ankle and sends her plummeting to the ground.

Steph rolls, spraying blindly behind her and striping Jason’s chin.

“Purple is the color of royalty, Jason!” she shrieks.

“It’s also the color of Barney!” he yowls, getting to his feet and dragging her bodily away from the project area.

“What the FUCK are you two doing?” Tim screams.

Jason and Stephanie jump apart from each other to face him, breathing heavily from their tussle.

“Oh, just some arts and crafts,” Steph beams up at him, pushing hair out of her face.

“Arts and crafts my ass!” Tim barks.

“You can tell he’s really mad because he’s using real curse words,” Steph stage whispers to Jason.

“That is body armor!” Tim gestures at the collection of pads, plates, and helmet laid out on the newsprint. “Jason, we talked about this. Wait, are those flex armor pieces? Where did you get those!”

“Ask me no questions, I’ll tell you no lies,” Jason intones somberly.

“This is why you called out of work today? To make this?”

“It was the only day Steph could make it,” Jason reasons in an infuriatingly rational manner.

“I can’t believe—out of all the irresp—I was stuck in quarterly review meetings all day and you were playing Pica—”

He never finishes. Stephanie rises halfway through his rant points her can at him and, pssssssst. Tim looks down. There’s a purple circle on the breast pocket of his blazer.
“That was Givenchy, you bitch,” he rasps and throws himself at her.

They clamor and crawl over each other, studiously avoiding each other’s injuries but viciously making up for it elsewhere. None of them make it out without a fresh set of bruises. Tim doesn’t remember when or how, but ends up with a can of yellow paint he unleashes on anyone who gets close to him. It’s only when the noise brings curious neighbors out to try and poke their nose over the fence that they stop.

Tim is lifted off Stephanie and thrown over a shoulder. His head dangles down inadvertently giving him a perfect view of a splendid derrière. Jason stumbles a few steps before daring to set him down again, a safe distance from Steph. Tim glances around. All three of them are covered head to toe in splashes of Nightwing blue, canary yellow, and purple dinosaur purple. Jason pushes his goggles up onto his forehead to wipe tears of mirth from his eyes. Tim grins. It’s not possible to stay angry with Jason when he looks this stupid-silly happy. Steph is another matter.

“Steph, you owe me two thousand dollars for the suit,” he wheezes.

“Nope. That’s payback for my dinner party,” she snipes back.

“Didn’t you get the chocolates and flowers?” he pants.

“You mean your bribes? They did nothing to avenge my wounded soul.”

“Fair,” Tim concedes.

He lolls his head around to look at Jason. There’s purple across his chin, yellow in his hair, and splatters of blue on his hands and up his arms.

“And you, is there anything I can do to stop you from going out tonight like you are clearly planning on?” he asks tiredly.

“Not really.”

Tim groans and flings an arm over his face, “Stubborn moron. Make sure you wash all of that crap out of your hair first or you’ll look like Spike and Buffy.”

“And Buffy?”

“Steph is going with you, of course. I’d go myself but Don says I still can’t put more than fifty pounds of strain on my shoulder. And you’re sure as hell not going out alone,” Tim explains, “Steph! You let anything happen to him and—”

“You’ll scatter my atoms across time and space. I know,” she finishes for him.

“That’s sweet guys, I’m flattered,” Jason rumbles, pushing himself up from the ground to make his way back inside.

Grass is stuck all down his back and thighs and Tim is tempted to leap up and brush it off.

Jason pauses in the doorway and looks back over his shoulder while Tim and Steph pick themselves up, “Oh hey, and Tim, since you’re already here—I know you’ll be up all night while we’re out anyway. Feel free to crash here if you want.”

“Thanks,” Tim croaks.

Steph shoots him a wink and nudges him with her elbow.
“Yeah, yeah,” he swats at her, smiling from ear to ear.

Jason makes puttanescsa.

They sit on the floor around the coffee table and kill time catching up and trading stories until the sun sinks below the horizon. Tim figures if Jason trusts Steph enough with his address, he probably will trust her with their current predicament. She had been the Robin least taken in by Bruce’s… brainwashing was a harsh term…ideology? Tim knows her loyalty to her friends exceeds that of any obligation she might feel to the mask.

Still, he waits for Jason’s non-verbal confirmation (a nod), before filling them both in on what he’s found so far. Tim had spent the preceding three nights mapping out Gerald’s commute and systematically going through the security footage in the buildings leading up to Tim’s. It’s only four seconds of grainy footage but in a building a couple blocks down, a man wearing a baseball cap bumps into the postman. With one hand he reaches out and steadies himself on Gerald’s arm, meanwhile his other slips into the bag at Gerald’s hip. He plays it for them on his laptop. Jason leans over him to look at the screen, hand on his shoulder.

“So we’re supposed to be looking for a guy in a hat that was in New York a week ago. Awesome.”

“You’re not supposed to be looking for anything until we get a more solid lead,” Tim glares at him, “Tonight is just so you don’t go mad from cabin fever. Keep it to shutting down muggings and helping little old ladies cross the street, okay?”

Jason rolls his eyes. He and Steph disappear to suit up while Tim sets up a mobile HQ. Tim is more than happy to let them think he’ll be playing a second O for them tonight. It’s partially true. He’ll be listening to their comm chatter and sitting ready for any tech back up or data reports they’ll need, but he’ll also be working on his own project: Project Unicorn.

Jason had clearly said, ‘If you’ve got such a hard on for figuring out what kind of a freak I am Doctor Moreau, then use that tech magic of yours to do a little digital detecting,’ and that’s exactly what he’s going to do. He’s already pored over the blood and hair samples Bruce had analyzed in the Cave after Jason’s first reappearance, looking for any kind of abnormality until his eyes crossed. Nothing stood out. His hand is hovering over the keyboard ready for more digging when Jason and Steph strut back out.

Steph stands smugly to the side while Jason turns in a slow circle, helmet tucked under his arm, looking like a cover model for Guerilla Tactics GQ. They’ve marbled the body armor in shades of slate to midnight with hints of deep red, an effect meant to blend more seamlessly into the urban landscape than plain black. Only the helmet is left a solid pitch. There are no logos to be found either; nothing to affiliate him with the Red Hood, the League, or the Bats.

“So?” Jason prods, hands held slightly out from his sides.

“Wow. Uh. What do you call this look?”

“I was thinkin’ bout Prometheus, maybe. Or is that too on the nose?”

Tim wrinkles his nose.

“I think that if we want to avoid anyone associating you with the guy who keeps miraculously
coming back from the dead, that’s a terrible idea for anyone with a passing knowledge of mythology.”

Jason’s hands drop back to his sides, “Damnit. Okay. Work in progress then. I’ll come up with something else later.”

“Wait, hold on a sec,” Tim moves his laptop to the coffee table and stands.

He walks right up to Jason until he’s only inches away, nose coming even with the larger man’s chin. He stands on his tiptoes and raises a hand to Jason’s temple, drags it back behind his ear.

“You’ve still got some paint in your hair, hold still.”

He scrapes his fingers through it until the last of the yellow flakes away and sinks back to his heels, “I can’t believe I agreed to this. Knew I should have put sedatives in your pasta when you went to the bathroom.”

“Tim, you’re already twitchy after being laid up for a month. I’ve been cooped up either here or at the manor for four now. I’m gonna go batshit if I don’t get out. Steph’s with me, we’ll be fine.”

Tim sits back on the couch, “I know, I know. Just don’t push yourself. Okay?”

Jason opens his mouth to say something but Steph grabs his arm and starts pulling him towards the garage, “Ugh, gag me with a spoon. Let’s go Lover-boy.”

Jason chokes and shoves the helmet on his head. He zips up a new leather jacket over the armor and shuffles out, hard on Steph’s heels. Tim laces his hands behind his neck and snickers. He could spend all night reminiscing the expression on Jason’s face before he hid it, but he has work to do. He cracks his knuckles and starts scouring old medical records, a process that would be easier if the Todds had had insurance. Then he could track claims and copays. It doesn’t help that Jason’s early childhood took place before most of the clinics in the Narrows digitized. After an hour of searching, he only comes across one visit to Leslie’s when Jason was nine for a broken arm. Actual hospitals like Gotham General and MCGU have more complete records, but also far more to sift through.

Tim drags his hands over his face and takes a break. He listens to Steph and Jason banter back and forth. It puts him at ease, though he has to bury a flash of jealousy at how well they get along in the field. He wonders if he and Jason would have the same breezy rapport, watching each other’s backs and reading each other’s moves. He’s interrupted when his laptop screen is swallowed up in darkness, a pixelated green mask rotating rhythmically in the top right corner.

“So, when were you planning on telling me that Hood’s flown the coop?” crackles over his earpiece.

Tim jerks a few inches back before reining his reaction in, “Hey there O. What’s up?”

“Red, did you really think putting them on a different frequency was going to keep me out?”

Yes. That is exactly what he thought.

“Oh, sorry O,” he weaves smoothly, “We’re just trying to keep this off B’s radar. Forgot to clue you in. Had to let him out for some fresh air. I’m keeping close watch.”

“I bet you are,” O replies slyly, “At least you’re a better liar than Hood.”

“I have no idea what you’re insinuating.”
“I take that back, maybe you’re not that great at lying,” O purrs and a new window opens on his screen.

He’s not sure how she found this particular camera, but it sure has an…interesting angle of Batgirl and Jason scaring off some teenage drug dealers in an alley. True to his word, Jason’s keeping his feet planted as much as possible, letting Batgirl take the more active role. The result is a fairly steady shot of Jason’s backside.

“How did you…?” Tim starts to ask.

O laughs, “Consider this a gift Red, and a warning. Don’t think you can run a covert ops with my girl without me being in the know. And don’t worry. I’ll keep eyes on your boy as well.”

“Geez, does everyone know now?” Tim throws his hands up in exasperation.

“Sweetheart, you told Wing and BG. Both of whom happen to be rather avid gossips. There was no reality in which I wasn’t eventually going to hear about it.”

Tim sighs in defeat.

“I’ll run interference for them tonight. If it looks like their path may intercept with B and Babybat, I’ll reroute them, and the birds are ready to deploy if anything bigger than a burglary crops up. Don’t worry. Unless you’d prefer I help you with whatever you’re working on right now? Old Gotham General files, hm?”

“Thanks O, I appreciate it, but not for this. It’s…something personal. For Hood. Not for a case.”

“Alright then, I’ll leave you to it. And I’ll let you know if anything interesting happens.”

A screenshot appears of Jason giving Steph a boost up onto a fire escape, slightly crouched, thighs tensed, shoulders rippling as he effortlessly tosses her upwards.

“Thanks,” he replies dryly.

It’s hard concentrating after that. Frack, he wishes he were out there with them, not stuck inside hunting for clues he isn’t sure exist. The closest thing he can find to another possible resurrection is an admittance to the Gotham General ER when Jason was five. The little boy had been rushed there from a clinic with shallow breathing, constricted pupils, and cyanosis – all the symptoms of an opioid overdose, a tragedy too common with addict parents who left needles lying around. The report states CPR was applied at some point, it doesn’t say for how many cycles. Tim’s gut feeling is that the incident is unrelated, but he saves a copy of the report anyway.

The only other documents he can find are Jason’s birth and death certificates. For all of his ‘Gotham born and raised’ pride, Jason hadn’t actually been born in the city. Sheila Heywood had given birth at the Capital Health Regional Medical Center in Trenton. Jason Peter Todd had been delivered three weeks early, six pounds and five ounces, nineteen inches long. Tim ogles the tiny footprints and saves that document as well, even thought there’s no new or seemingly helpful information on it. He makes a few half-hearted attempts at slogging through John Does that have passed through the OCME after Jason’s first known resurrection, but there are just so darn many. He shuts his laptop with a groan when it hits eleven, leans back and closes his eyes. They’ve gone fuzzy from staring at the backlit screen for so long.

Steph and Jason are also taking a break apparently, to stop and get ice cream. The goobers. Stephanie’s fault he’s sure. Her patrols always seemed to encompass the best custard and gelato stands open late. Tim still has a photo of them with dumb grins on their faces while in m full Red
Robin and Batgirl get-ups, holding dripping cones. He tries to picture Jason with ice cream dribbling down his sleek new militaristic chest plate and can’t help but laugh. Now that is something he wants a picture of.

His amusement cuts off sharply when he realizes he doesn’t have any photos of Jason as the Red Hood. He has hard drives full of photos of Jason as Robin, and more candid shots than he’d like to admit of Jason on his phone, but none of the man in action. What a shame that is. Tim’s photography skills and tools have improved drastically since he was running after their cape hems at night with a Canon PowerShot. His subject matter has improved drastically as well he thinks. Long legs and thick thighs come to mind. Tim’s eyes flick guiltily from his laptop to the front door. He grabs his jacket and keys.

He uses the comms to track them across town until he’s close enough to park and continue on foot. He tails them as they loop through the streets, maintaining a calculated distance that keeps them in sight of his zoom without catching their notice. He has to freeze for nearly five minutes at one point when Jason stops for a smoke break. Finally, Jason stubs it out with the toe of his boot to rejoin Batgirl and Tim’s knees creak when he stands out his crouch behind a dumpster.

“Hear that Hood?”

“The sweet sounds of a drug deal about to go horribly wrong?”

“That’s it exactly,” Steph cackles, “How about I drop down from the StoveWorks building on the West and you—

“Will make a surprise appearance blocking the alley mouth on Perry when the shitheads try to make a run for it. Yeah, sounds good.”

Perry Street is four blocks away. Tim moves as fast as he can without breaking into an outright run. His sneakers make only the lightest sound of rubber soles grinding against concrete. He’s just turned the corner onto Perry when Jason’s imposing form slinks into the alley. He wastes no time, climbing the fire escape of the building that abuts the StoveWorks. He relies on his left arm and legs to carry him up, while his weaker right arm cradles the camera to his chest. He races across the rooftop, counting on the noise of the fight to cover his approach.

He jumps lightly down from the roof to the top fire escape landing of the StoveWorks across the alley, wincing when it rattles under his weight. Tim quickly removes the lens cap and tweaks the settings. He does not need the glow of the view screen giving his position away, or the flash going off at the wrong time and blinding Jason or Steph. Once everything is configured to his liking he puts his eye to the viewfinder and pans the alley below.

Steph is an ebullient flurry of motion, launching herself off walls and laughing carelessly as she breaks a man’s jaw. He adores watching her kick ass but…he’s never had the chance to truly watch Jason in his element before. He’d been too preoccupied with defending himself from Jason’s attacks in the past to stop and admire his style. There are no frills and flourishes with Jason. He doesn’t transition with liquid grace from hitting to blocking to dodging. Tim is mesmerized nonetheless.

Jason reminds him of an engine; continuous movement driven by a seamless series of explosive bursts. Watching him, Tim feels the same rush as watching a Moto3 hurtle across the asphalt of the Mugello Circuit. His adrenaline spikes the way it does when he opens up the throttle on his Redbird. He wonders how it would feel the same with Jason under him; all that rumbling barely contained power. He aches between his legs. Then the alley echoes loudly with gunfire and a stray bullet pings through the grate he’s hunkered down on. He yelps. Jason’s helmet swivels up and does a double take. Shit.
Jason takes out the last two men with frightening efficiency, shooting one in the shoulder and curb stomping the other. A tiny sliver of Tim is pleased to see he does so with his right foot. Most of him is wishing he too could be unconscious for whatever happens next.

“Get down here,” Jason’s hisses.

The electronic pops and fizzes of the voice modulator mold his words into something dark and sinister. Tim climbs down the fire escape rung by rung, trying to buy time and stave off the inevitable. Once he’s on the ground he chews on his lip nervously. Batgirl crosses her arms over her chest. Jason rips his helmet off. Tim’s eyes glue themselves longingly to a nearby manhole cover.

“The fuck are you doing here? I thought you weren’t ready for patrol! You were supposed to be staying in doing research!” Jason berates him.

“I’m not on patrol, I’m just…” he fades off trying to come up with a believable lie.

“Well it’s a bit fucking late to be out on a grocery run. In the goddamn fucking Bowery!”

“I uh…” Damnit, he is usually so much better at lying.

He's having an off-night. His fingers look for something to do while his mind races. He flattens the camera strap running across his chest where it had twisted. Jason latches onto the movement. He grabs Tim by the jacket and hauls him close. Tim gasps when Jason shoves his hand between layers of clothing. Jason’s knuckles brush his stomach through the fabric of his shirt before jerking sharply at his camera.

“What is this?” Jason growls.

“A, uh, camera.”

Stephanie snorts off to the side.

“Tim,” Jason gives it another painful tug for emphasis.

“It’s a Leica M-E Digital Rangefinder. It was my birthday gift to myself last year.”

“Tim.”

Tim cringes, “It’s embarrassing.”

“Embarrassed is better than a broken wrist. I will hurt you,” Jason promises.

Tim makes a strangled sound of protest before hanging his head in defeat, “I was taking pictures.”

“No shit, Sherlock! What of and what for?”

He closes his eyes and rushes the words out, “Of you.”


Stephanie gives them a mocking two-finger salute, “Well it’s been fun boys but I think that’s my cue to go. Hood, take this loser home. I’m gonna go meet up with Bluebird.”

“You’re a terrible best friend,” Tim accuses desperately.

“Ha, I’m the best friend you’ll ever have butthead. The fact you haven’t figured that out yet is
beyond tragic,” she drawls over her shoulder before shooting off her grapple and zipping up into the night sky.

“Explain. Now,” Jason demands, bringing Tim’s attention back to him.

“It’s…a hobby?”

“Macra-fucking-mé is a hobby, Tim.”

“Some people macramé, and I take pictures! Not as much anymore, because usually I’m too busy, but I used to all the time. That’s actually how I figured out who Batman and Robin were. I would sneak out and take pictures of them at night. One night I was following them when I saw Dick do a quadruple somersault, and I remembered seeing him do at the circus when he was a Flying Grayson.”


“I told you it was embarrassing. Anyway, I got bored of research and realized I only had pictures of you from…before. None of you now.”

Jason shifts his weight back and forth restlessly, face awash in confusion.

“But…I’m not…I’m not Robin anymore. I’m not even a hero. Why would you want to take pictures of me?”

“You really have no idea do you? What you look like when you’re out here? You don’t have the scaly panties anymore but…damn,” Tim chuckles breathlessly. “When you’re fighting, you’re a force of nature. Fierce. Relentless. It’s…beautiful. How could I not want to capture that?”

Jason looks down and scuffs his boot against the asphalt. If it wasn’t so dim, Tim knows he’d see a blush blooming up Jason’s neck and cheeks.

“Huh. Um. Did you…do you think you got anything good on there from tonight?” Jason asks, almost shyly.

Tim’s face splits apart at the seams, he’s smiling so widely.

“Not sure yet, a few probably. Want to check them out back at the house?”

Tim drives them back to Robbinsville. It’s a battle to keep his eyes on the road while Jason sheds his gear in the passenger seat. His face is flushed with activity and his sweat dampened hair is curling at the ends. He looks so deliciously alive, Tim is salivating. He whips into the driveway with a squeal and a tad too much speed, eager to get inside. Jason stops in the kitchen to fish out treats for Cat, then flops down on the couch in the living room. Tim darts to his laptop and hooks his camera up. The roll of pictures he’d taken tonight automatically starts to upload. Jason watches keenly from his lazy sprawl as Tim flips through the images, weeding out the unfocused and dark ones. Occasionally Jason will raise a finger to the screen and Tim will leave that picture up. He explains how he lined up the shot or slipped in a puddle while trying to take it, before moving on.

“That’s a really good one,” Jason says, pointer finger hovering.

It’s a photo Tim snapped while Jason was having his smoke break. In the picture, Jason is leaning into the shadowed alcove of a stoop. His helmet is shoved up off his face and his hands are cupped around the flare of his lighter while he savors a cigarette. His expression is distant, his eyes glittering with the glow of the red-orange ember. Tim has another photo, almost identical from when Jason
was Robin.

“I’ll make you a copy.”

Tim has no warning except for a quick blur of motion in his peripheral vision, then there’s a dry brush against his cheek. Lightning quick. A peck, nothing more. By the time he turns in shock, the door to Jason’s bedroom is already closing.
Lots of thanks to dole out:

Thanks to pornyplothead for pointing out that out I got my canon twisted up a bit there last chapter. Appreciate you speaking up on that.

Thanks to Embleer_Frith0323 for beta-ing this monster for me, and helping me through a really rough few weeks :D If you're a Young Justice or Dresden Files fan you should check out her current on-going mash-up fic, *The Nahash*.

Thanks to Careamorrnan for totes catering to my not-so-subtle birthday demand and making MORE awesomely hilarious art. Check it out yo! (https://careamorrnan.tumblr.com/post/157576109163/so-someone-linked-my-first-fanart-to-zoeleo-and) Featuring a shirtless Jay, a struggling Tim, a nekkid Killer Croc, and Damian's puggy face. And she's got so much other awesome stuff, just like spend a few hours surfing her work and send her love.

To everyone else...Y'all don’t know much writing this chapter fucked me up. Like… crafting this beautiful slice of heaven for baby boy, knowing that...gah! Yo. I'm cruel.

Featured poems include:
*The Young Soldier* by Wilfred Owen
*Love's Philosophy* by Percy Bysshe Shelley
*To a Kiss* by Robert Burns
*Book II of Endymion* by John Keats

Chapter 24

*Oh god, oh god. Fucking face of Christ on a tortilla, what was he thinking? So stupid. So fucking stupid.*
His hands shake as he turns the sink’s tap on. Water bursts from the faucet in a bubbling rush. He stares at it and can’t remember why he turned it on. He turns the tap off. Oh, that was it—he was going to douse his face with cold water to try and shock some sense into himself. Not a bad idea. He turns the tap on again. Then off once more. A shower would be better. He needs a post-patrol rinse anyway. Kevlar doesn’t exactly breathe and he’s hot and sticky under his armor.

He strips out of it and steps under the icy spray. It does not help his jittering nerves. Instead of calming down, his breaths are coming quick and shallow. His lungs are working against him, holding the air inside them captive despite his desperate need to breathe. He changes tack and brings up the heat in the shower, hoping the warmth will relax his muscles and trick his brain into following their example.

He longs for his phone, left on the coffee table. Miss Lucille would know what to do. She may not appreciate a phone call at two in the morning, though. What would he even say?

*Yo, Miss Lu. I’ve got an emergency! No, I didn’t fall down the stairs again. Or get hit by a car or anything like that. Why’d I wake you up so late? Well…I…kinda kissed Tim?*

Yeah, no. What would she tell him, though, if he did call? Hypothetically. She’d…She’d tell him to fucking calm down and breathe before he passes the fuck out in the shower and drowns like a dumbass.

He squeezes his eyes shut, digs his fingers into the grout lines between tiles and concentrates on bringing his inhales and exhales into a steady, measured beat. Breathe in for a count of four, hold for seven, and exhale in eight. In for four, hold for seven, out in eight. He slumps against the wall and bangs his forehead against the tile, the dull pain driving the last of the dizziness away. Okay. He can handle this. Apologize. Explain that what happened was just the result of a post-patrol adrenaline high from his first night running the streets in so long. Yeah. That sounds…Like a fucking weak lie. If that had been the case, he would have been rubbing out a quick one in the shower, not doling out chaste kisses. He turns the water off and scrubs himself down with a towel.

“What the hell were you thinking?” he asks his reflection, fingers gripping the edges of the sink.

He looks at himself in the mirror. He doesn’t get it. Crooked nose from four or five too many fists to the face. Heavy brows, one cut through with the white line of a scar. There’s a pit in his cheek on the same side where he’d been hit by a mob boss’s gold ring. And though they’ve lightened a bit in the past few weeks (he sleeps more soundly nights Tim stays over), the ghosts of dark circles still haunt the hollows under his eyes. He knows he’s not handsome, not like Dick.

What is it that Tim sees in him? Why does he have dozens upon dozens of pictures of him? Not just from tonight, either. He’d seen the thumbnails of others: him standing at the stove taste-testing from a sauce spoon, in the recliner with his nose buried in a book, napping on the couch with Cat curled on his chest. Jason has never had any pictures of himself. Certainly not from his childhood, a camera would have been an obscene waste of money. He used to wonder if he had died before Bruce took him in, if there would be any proof he ever existed except for that damned water-stained birth certificate crammed in the back of a molding box in a crumbling apartment.

There were a few pictures from his time at the manor—the official annual portrait and one or two snapshots of him and Bruce, like the time they’d gone to see Gotham Knights play the Metropolis Monarchs. It’s not like they’d buried those with him though, and there hadn’t been much of a chance or reason to take more since he clawed his way out of the grave.

Now… now there are folders of photographs of him saved on someone’s hard drive. Tim had not only seen him, he had wanted to remember Jason was there in those moments. Maybe even wanted
him there to begin with. It was... too much. And he had felt an overwhelming need to say thank you and I’m glad you’re here too. Of course why for the ever-loving-fuck his brain had decided to express that through a hit-and-run lip job, he had no clue. Probably because for a split second he had thought it would be accepted, maybe even appreciated.

Tim’s thumb an inch from where his navel used to be. Tim on his tiptoes, raising a hand to Jason’s temple and scratching at the paint there. Tim’s lips ghosting over the back of his neck—

Though maybe he had dreamed that last one and misread the rest. Tim hadn’t exactly chased him down after he kissed him. Not that he’d given Tim much of a chance to before locking himself away in the bathroom either.

Jason grinds the heels of his hands into his eye sockets. What the hell is he supposed to do now? He lets go of the sink and slides down to the floor. Apologize. Explain. Move on. He can do this. Tim is rational and kind. He’ll understand. He won’t use this against Jason, won’t use it to hurt him. He might be a little awkward and distant for a while, and Jason would deserve that, but once Jason shows that nothing’s changed between them by never ever doing anything so grandly idiotic again… Tim will understand and everything will go back to the way it was, like the kiss had never happened. He wouldn’t leave Jason and their friendship over this. Would he? Suddenly the only thing more frightening than having to go out and face Tim is the possibility that when he goes out there, Tim will be gone.

He left you before.

No. Jason shakes his head. No, Tim hadn’t abandoned him. Jason had pushed him away. That was on him. And Tim had come back. Tried to make him breakfast. Drew up that ridiculous(ly considerate) contract. Held him while Jason shook, the claws of a nightmare still hooked under his skin. Jason takes a deep breath. He can do this. Everything will be fine.

He has one arm stretched above his head to pull himself up by the sink, when there’s a knock on the bedroom door. He scrambles to get off the tile floor and to his feet. He’s crossed into the bedroom, hand lingering over the doorknob, before realizing that all he has on is the towel wrapped around his waist. He wants heavy layers of denim and Kevlar and leather for this. He wants the protective blank mask of the hood. For fuck’s sakes, he at least wants some pants… He quickly digs through a drawer and is shimmying a pair of sweats up his thighs when he hears the doorknob turn.

“Jason?” Tim calls through the widening crack as he cautiously opens the door.

Jason jerks the waistband up the final few inches, whirling around to face the young man in the doorway.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I don’t know why I—I shouldn’t’ve—”

Tim steps forward, cutting him off by cupping the sides of his face.

“Can I kiss you?” he asks.

Oh.

Well.

Fuck.

“I—Uh, I—okay?”
Tim smiles and slides his hands away from Jason’s cheeks to curl into the short hair at the back of his neck and tug him down. His lips move softly against Jason’s in a gentle questing press. Jason doesn’t even think to respond until Tim is pulling away. He stares at Tim’s lips, pink and a little chapped. His gaze travels up to his eyes. They are wide and dark with the barest ring of blue around them. They remind him of an article he’d read in National Geographic on the cenotes that dot the Yucatan Peninsula. Now he understands why people threw offerings of gold and human sacrifices into their depths. He thinks he might just want to throw himself over the edge, too.

When Tim leans forward on his toes again, Jason ducks to meet him. When Tim pushes against his mouth, he pushes back. It’s stumbling and awkward, like that first time with Rena under the bleachers. Truth be told, he hasn’t gained much experience since then. He isn’t virginal by any means but… kissing has not often been a component in his sexual affairs. When he and Talia had fucked, it was more like being devoured than anything that could be called a kiss.

Nothing like this exchange of movement as Tim sucks Jason’s bottom lip between his and gently massages the tissue there. This is… This is Keats. This is Burns. This is Shelley.

*Now a soft kiss—Aye by that kiss, I vow an endless bliss… Humid seal of soft affections… The winds of heaven mix for ever with a sweet emotion…*

His lips part further in a surprised gasp, not in any coordinated reaction, when Tim laps at the seam of his mouth. Then Tim is licking into him and running his tongue over Jason’s teeth and fuck. He is going to have to reconsider his assumptions regarding Tim’s purity. The bastard clearly knows what he’s doing. More so than Jason. God, isn’t that a twist? Jason’s pretty sure no one would have bet on him as the one in danger of being corrupted in this situation. Definitely not Bruce or Dick. He giggles slightly hysterically at the thought. Then Tim swipes his tongue inside Jason’s cheeks like he’s *exploring,* and Jason whines. He wants more. Closer. He has half a mind to pick the smaller man up and prop him on his hips when Tim pushes forward, backing him up until his knees hit the bed behind him. He topples onto the covers.

Tim stands over him, predatory. “I’ve been wanting to do that for a long time,” he grins.

“What? Kiss me or get me flat on my back?” Jason jokes breathlessly, attempting to regain some of control of the situation.

Tim tilts his head back and laughs. “Both.”

Tim looks down at him, lips curled and head cocked to the side like a bird of prey. And Jason is a hare, heart jack-rabbiting in his chest. He’s hyperaware of Tim drawing one knee up onto the mattress between his legs. The movement sends a jolt to the base of his spine like a Taser charge. This time when Tim takes Jason’s bottom lip between his, he bites down lightly with his teeth, just holding it there for a second before plunging his tongue inside Jason’s mouth. It glides over his own, rhythmically sliding along the muscle, and Jason groans. Tim takes the sound as a cue and lowers his body until it’s pressed flush against Jason.

He’s not as light as Jason expects, his slight body heavy with lean muscle. The weight of him pushes Jason deeper into the mattress as his tongue thrusts further into his mouth. His body reacts conflictingly; hips bucking up into the pleasurable grind while his shoulders twist away, trying to escape the inherent threat of being held down. The weight lifts abruptly. He opens eyes he hadn’t known he’d closed to see Tim retreating, sitting back on his heels at the foot of the bed.

“You okay?” Tim’s brow is furrowed in concern. “Looked like you freaked out a bit there.”

Jason shoves up an elbow and rakes a hand through his hair. “I’m sorry—I, uh. I’m not sure I can—
Christ, I really am a freak,” he mutters into his palm.

“What? No, Jason.” Tim shakes his head vehemently, rubbing his hands over his thighs. “If anyone should be sorry, it’s me. You’re just… fracking you and gorgeous and… I got carried away. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. I’m sorry.”

Gorgeous? Tim thinks he’s gorgeous?

Jason grabs at one of Tim’s hands, but keeps his eyes locked on his own knees. “No, I wanted to—I want to—I’m just not—not ready. For that.”

Heat rushes to Jason’s face in a flood of embarrassment. It’s true though. It’s… been a while. And Tim isn’t a Park Avenue hooker. He deserves better than…that. Whatever that is. Jason should take him out to dinner or something first. Right? Jason’s never actually done that before, but he’s pretty sure that’s what you’re supposed to do with someone you actually care about. Maybe he should take a page out of Sky’s book in Guys and Dolls and fly Tim down to Havana for a night. Enjoy drinks and some live music at El Patchanka… Take a walk on the beach without having to worry about the rest of the batclan watching from afar like the creepy asshats they are… Or would Tim be more interested in seeing the Castillo de la Real Fuerza and the Catedral de San Cristóbal? Is Cuba going overboard for a first date?

He licks his lips and glances at Tim. Tim is studying him intently. He squirms nervously under his gaze. Finally, Tim quirks his head to the side.

“So, is just kissing okay? Because I’d really, really like to kiss you again.”

Jason jerks his chin up and down, not trusting his throat and tongue to produce actual words. Tim smiles, and it feels like sunshine. He feels stupid just for thinking that, but it’s warm and good, soaking past his skin and into his bones. Then it’s not just the smile. Tim’s actual body heat is warming him as he drapes himself bonelessly over Jason’s chest without any of the dominant posturing from before. He brings one hand to Jason’s jaw and strokes a thumb over his cheek coaxing him into another kiss. Slow and lazy this time.

Sonnets and verses—And the sunlight clasps the earth, And the moonbeams kiss the sea: What is all this sweet work worth, If thou kiss not me—swirl through Jason’s head until they have to part for air. “How long?” he asks.

Tim raises his head; chin digging into Jason’s chest. “How long what?”

“You said you’d been wanting to… y’know, for a long time. How long?”

Tim buries his face against Jason’s skin to smother a self-conscious chuckle. Jason decides he likes the feeling, even though it tickles.

“For a long, long time,” Tim admits, rolling up on Jason’s shoulder so he can speak easier. “Like since… do you remember the Christmas Gala WE threw at the botanical gardens? Was probably the second year you were Robin. I was there with my parents and Miranda Heywood had just gotten braces. She was crying because no one asked her to dance. You had been a royal pain in the ass all night, standing by the food tables chewing with your mouth open and trying to nick champagne just to rile up Bruce and all the old ladies. Until you saw her crying. And you went over to her and extended your arm like the most proper blue-blooded gentleman, and asked her to dance. I wanted to kiss you that night. Have wanted to ever since.”

“Oh,” Jason murmurs.
“Do you not remember?”

Jason shakes his head. “Did we talk? You and me?”

“Eh, not really. You shook my hand at the door, greeting the guests with Bruce. But, I don’t think you knew I existed, then.”

Jason muses on that, feeling belatedly ashamed.

“Did we meet any other times?”

“A few,” Tim admits genially.

“Tell me.”

Jason leans back and listens as Tim recounts various charity fundraisers and society events they’d both attended. Some Jason remembers, but he likes hearing them from Tim’s perspective. Others, he relies on Tim to describe. The younger man narrates everything from the decorations to the banquet spreads in vivid detail. He closes his eyes to see them better. Tries to paint Tim into the voids in his memories while listening to his voice. When Tim runs out of their civilian encounters, he moves on to regaling Jason with stories from his time chasing after Robin. He shakes with laughter when Tim unfolds the saga of the night he lost his shoe whilst running from a waddle of mind-controlled penguins.

It’s easy to slide into sleep like this, with Tim tucked into his side, weaving stories in his ear until he starts to drift. He doesn’t dream. Doesn’t drop out of sleep in fits and starts. Neither does he lurch awake the next morning, heart knocking painfully into his ribs. Consciousness comes in pieces. First, he becomes aware of a bone-deep contentedness, something completely foreign to him. Second, the vibrations of Cat purring happily under his chin. Third, the steady warmth at his back and wrapping around him.

He cranes his neck to look over Cat at the arm snaked over his waist. The hand attached to it is flattened against the center of his chest, resting boldly atop the scar there. His stomach flips at the sight. He watches fascinated, as the fingers flex and curl. A few minutes later he feels Tim’s body roll and stretch as he wakes. Jason swears he stops breathing at the faint press of lips to the back of his neck.

“Morning, Sundance,” Tim mumbles against the shell of his ear, prompting him to roll over and face him.

Jason’s eyes narrow, then clear when he gets the reference. “Morning, Butch.”

“What time is it?” Tim tucks his over-long bangs behind his ear and glances around.

Jason squints at the filtered light coming through the curtains.

“Probably close to time to get up,” he guesses.

Tim scowls and buries his head in a pillow.

“No.”

“No?” Jason huffs in amusement.

“I’m calling in sick. I hear there’s a bad cough going around. A guy at the office came down with it
yesterday. I probably caught it from him.”

“Hey! It was willful self-contamination with the way you were shoving your tongue down my throat.”

Tim tilts his head back to shoot him a wicked grin.

“So if you’re too sick to work, what are you planning on doing for the rest of the day, hm?” Jason wants to know.

Tim frees the rest of his face from the pillow. “Not sure, no solid plans as of yet. Was there anything you wanted to do?”

To stay like this all day, immediately comes to mind, but…

“Well, actually…” he watches Tim’s expression flicker before it quickly schools itself, “I was thinking about looking at bikes. Gonna need to replace the one I lost on the bridge if I’m gonna go patrolling again. Can’t keep catching rides with you or Blondie all the time. Wanna come with?”

Whatever hint of disappointment he thought he’d glimpsed earlier is burned away by Tim’s enthusiastic, “Heck yes!”

They get dressed and Jason whips them up a couple of quick breakfast sandwiches before they pile into Tim’s ‘I-don’t-need-to-compensate-for-anything-I’m-just-ungodly-rich’ car. He must have driven it in for the quarterly reviews he’d complained about yesterday; a pristine white Maserati Quattroporte. The car comes in handy. He’s never had dealers bend so ass-backwards over for him before, but rolling in with Tim is a completely different experience. Suddenly they’re offering him coffee and laughing off down payments with an obsequious hand on his shoulder. Tim must sense his mounting aggravation, because when they make their next stop at the Honda dealership, Tim slides his hand into Jason’s before it can ball into a fist. It’s concerning how well that works. It’s concerning how much he enjoys it.

Tim, he finds out, is a total gear-head. Listening to him opine on torque, liquid cooled engines, hydraulic clutches, and carbon belt drives only boosts Jason’s admiration. And the way he runs circles around the sales associates, spouting tech jargon from behind his smug CEO smirk? It’s fucking sexy. It also works way better than Jason’s usual method of intimidating them into a better deal through grunts and glares. They jump from dealership to dealership – Suzuki, Kawasaki, BMW - going on test rides and haggling down prices. Jason almost cries when he gets to sit on an NCR Macchia Nera at an exotic imports autohaus Tim takes him to. Unfortunately, it’s just a few hundred thousand over Jason’s budget.

In the end he narrows it down between a Ducati Diavel and a Harley-Davidson V-rod Muscle. They both sport dual front Brembo brakes and 240mm rear tires for excellent traction. The Diavel has a better compression ratio but the V-rod engine has a tad more punch to it. He can tell Tim favors the Ducati; the Harley will take more modifications to get it to perfect it for their line of work, but Jason falls in love with the mean lines of its abbreviated subframe. He rides it off the lot.

They run up to New York so Tim can change out of his suit into jeans and switch the Maserati out for his civilian bike; a Ducati 959 Panigale. Redbird is too conspicuous to take out for a daytime joyride. They snake away from the coastline and the urban sprawl that clings to it, sweeping inland along country roads up into the foothills of the Catskills. They playfully leapfrog past each other, occasionally daring to reach out on a curve and ‘tag’ the other with tap on the elbow or a kick to a calf. Jason grins behind his helmet with unbridled joy.
Around four in the afternoon, they pull over at an old clapboard house with peeling white paint that’s been turned into a gas station and diner. The lettuce is crisp and the bacon is thick on Jason’s BLT. He plays with the condensation on his bottle of coke while Tim looks over a map, tracing routes with his finger. There’s a smear of mayo at the corner of his lip and Jason reaches forward, testing the waters of whatever this new thing between them is. His thumb swipes at the remnant and Tim sucks it into his mouth, eyes crinkling up when Jason’s jaw drops. He jerks his thumb back and wipes it on his thigh.

The way Tim is looking at him… He leans back in his seat. No one’s ever looked at him that way before. There’s heat, to be sure. But it’s tempered with amusement and something softer. Like… like he’s something precious. Which is absurd. Of the two of them, Tim is definitely the one who deserves to be cherished. Jason had heard of Tim’s intellect before he ever met him. His gift for stratagems, his resolve. He hadn’t heard about his patience, his generosity, or wry sense of humor. The waitress sets their check on the table, startling him out of his thoughts with a jump. Tim snickers and snatches up the check before Jason can reach for it.

“It’s like twenty bucks tops.” Tim laughs at the face he makes. “Let me get this.”

Jason tosses up his hands and rolls his eyes. They head back out on the road not long after and ride for another hour before deciding to start winding their way back down. The sun paints golden stripes on the asphalt through the trees, which gradually thin out as they descend, revealing glimpses of fields in the valleys below. When Tim veers off at a pull-over, Jason follows curiously. Tim toes his kickstand and strides a dozen yards into a sloping meadow. Jason pushes his helmet off and hooks it on his handlebars. When he catches up to Tim, Tim is stretched out on his back in the grass.

“Tired?” Jason asks.

Tim shakes his head and turns a stunning smile on him.

“No. Just wanted to watch the sunset for a bit.”

Jason lies down next to him. They can’t stay too long. They still have a good two hours of driving back to civilization and neither of them are keen to navigate rural roads at night. But they can stand to waste a few minutes watching the sky grow orange and the horizon tinge red. It’s not as exotic as watching the sun set off the cape of South Africa or over the Sinai dessert, but it’s still beautiful. He should probably be watching it, but he can’t look away from Tim.

His too-long bangs are slicked back from his face showing off his delicate features; fine eyebrows gently arching over wide-set eyes, sharp cheekbones, and a pointed chin. Jason wonders at the graceful line of his nose, how it can still be so straight after as many beatings and breaks it’s surely had. His lips are thin, but he likes the way they curl at the very ends. They’re almost feline. He feels that same urge he did the night before. To show Tim how much he’s enjoyed today. To prove it by touching Tim’s lips with his. He rolls over, holding himself above the other and hangs there for a second, attention darting between Tim’s eyes and mouth as he works up to repeating Tim’s question from last night back to him.

“Can I kiss you?”

Tim answers by sliding his hand around the back of Jason’s neck and guiding him down. Jason eases into the kiss, still following Tim’s lead, but moving against him with more confidence and initiative. Time stretches like thick threads of amber honey. He has no idea how long has passed when they finally separate, except that it’s been long enough for the sky to purple at the edges and turn a soft shade of lavender. Tim traces the tip of his nose back and forth over the curve of Jason’s cheek. Jason wonders if it’s something he’s picked up from Cat.
“Come home with me? My apartment’s closer than going back to Gotham tonight,” Tim hums against his neck.

“Yeah,” Jason breathes. “Okay.”

The fifth time Jason wakes up to lips against the back of his neck, he thinks, *I could get used to this.* It’s a fleeting fantasy—a future in which he’s lost count of the times waking up in Tim’s arms is so implausible it’s absurd. He’s not sure if he’ll get thirty or three hundred mornings like this before Tim realizes the mistake he’s made, but he knows it can’t last. Until then, he’s going to keep count. So when everything comes to its inevitable end he can look back and remember there were at least thirty (or three hundred) mornings where he was wanted. Was held close enough to someone’s heart he could hear it beat.

*Saving up sunshine for a rainy day,* Catherine used to say. He has a vague notion of doing the same at the manor as a child, cataloging every time Alfred smiled and thanked him for helping wash dishes, or each time he managed to make Bruce laugh. Storing them in his head for when they finally decided he was too much trouble and dumped him back into the system. Most of those are gone now. When he tries to conjure them, he comes up blank and is left wondering if they were washed away by the Pit or if they never actually existed.

*It’s better not to remember,* a dark part of him insists. *It will only make it hurt more when it’s gone.*

He has no use for nostalgia and sentimentality. They make you weak. Make you soft. Keep you from doing what needs to be done. He’s already going soft. He hasn’t killed a single person since he’s started patrolling again. No. That’s got nothing to do with going soft. He respects Blondie, and while he patrols with her he’s going to respect her boundaries. Unless her life is in danger, then he’ll put a bullet between someone’s eyes without a second thought. It’s a different game; just patrolling as opposed to actively working cases. Whatever the bats think, he doesn’t kill indiscriminately. He doesn’t take out any ne’er do well he happens upon in a dark alley. He only kills in self-defense or when a case calls for it. Red Hood just had a tendency to specialize in taking on those types of cases—the rapists, drug pushers, and human traffickers. As his new alias will continue to do so… once he gets it figured out and is working on his own again.

A wisp of breath against his skin stirs the hairs dusting down his nape, distracting him from that line of thought.

Five.

He’s gotten five mornings of waking up with lips pressed against the back of his neck so far.

He slips out from under Tim’s grasp and pads into the kitchen. He’d made puttanesca again last night so Tim could take pictures and record him as he ad-libbed the recipe. They hadn’t finished off all of the garlic bread that went with it. Jason considers the loaf left out on the counter overnight. He could make a savory bread pudding. It’s the weekend, he’s got time. He wants to try and talk Tim into working on the bikes today. Anything to get him off that damn laptop.

He knows what Tim is doing. Tim hasn’t outright told him he’s digging into Jason’s past, trying to unravel the mystery of his resurrections, but he hasn’t tried to hide the fact either. The only reason Jason hasn’t thrown a fit is because, as loath as he is to admit it, it’s necessary. They can’t risk someone running around knowing more about him than he does. Especially not if it gives them any
kind of leverage or control over him. With his luck there’s probably some kind of self-destruct or a kill order buried in his psyche.

He grabs a knife from the block and starts cubing the bread into one-inch squares. Green onions, prosciutto, and dark briny olives fall into rough chopped pieces under the blade next. He dumps it all in a baking pan and then starts cracking eggs. Whipping cream and spices into the eggs helps settle his thoughts. He pours it over the bread mixture and liberally sprinkles parmesan over everything before popping it in the oven. Tim wanders in when the scent of coffee starts to mix with crisping cheese.

“What are you making? It smells divine,” he says, sniffing his way over to stand next to Jason.

“Savory bread pudding.”

“Savory bread pudding?”

“Yup.”

“I didn’t know it came in savory.”

“I weep for your deprived palate.”

“Ha. Very funny.”

“Hey, I was thinking about suping up the bike today. Wanna help? Your Redbird is a pretty sweet machine, you’ve made some nice upgrades,” he drops as casually as he can without sounding too impressed.

Tim’s smile actually shows his teeth. “I’d love to!”

Jason saves up a lot of sunshine watching Tim putter excitedly from the bikes to the workbench all day. He’s so fucking cute when he’s doing something he’s passionate about. Eyes big and shining, mouth going a mile a minute as he talks about exciting things like… spark plugs and fuel injectors. They don’t actually do much to the V-rod in the end. Mostly, they spend their time examining every inch and brainstorming the adjustments they could make (like nitrous boosters, retractable snow spikes on the tire treads, a data readout screen) and the best way to do so. Somehow Tim still manages to smear grease across his forehead despite the fact he’s spent more time with a pencil in hand, rather than a wrench. They’re arguing over the pros and cons of installing a projectile launcher on the front—

‘I’m not going to help you stick a missile launcher on your motorcycle Jay,’
‘Not missiles…obstacle obliterators. You never know when you might need to drive through a wall, Tim,’

—when the perimeter alarm goes off. Jason glances at his phone, pulling up the security cameras. Stephanie appears on screen, parking her black and purple Yamaha R1. He pushes his feet against the concrete floor of the garage propelling his wheelie chair to the wall with the switch for the door. Blondie ducks impatiently under the door as it rises. He’s surprised to find that beyond her the sky is dark. How long have they been in here?

“Hey, Blondie, what’s up?”
“Mind if I borrow Lover-boy tonight?” Steph asks Tim.

“Uh, what for?” Tim looks up from a hastily rendered sketch, tucking his pencil behind his ear.

“I’m right here,” Jason grunts in annoyance.

“I need someone who speaks Mandarin. He speaks Mandarin, right?”

“Yes, I speak Mandarin,” Jason growls.

“Uh, yes. He does in fact speak Mandarin,” Tim informs Blondie helpfully.

“So is he free?”

“I think so. His schedule is on the fridge, but I’ve got a copy uploaded to my phone, let me check.” Tim fiddles with his phone and squints. “Looks like it. Borrow away.”

“Fuck you two,” Jason sighs, dragging himself out of the wheelie chair to slouch inside and grab his duffle bag of gear.

When he walks back in five minutes later, Blondie and Tim are bickering as usual.

“Oh come on Tim, I think it’s a great idea! You never know when you’re going to have to drive through a wall!”

Jason grins savagely. “I knew there was a reason you’re my favorite, Blondie!”

Tim face-palms. “Oh frack, don’t encourage him, Steph. Please.”

“So what are we doing? It’s not a patrol night and you want someone who speaks Mandarin,” Jason prods.

“Well, you remember that creepy organ harvester case? How it went cold about a month back?” Steph asks, tossing a leg over her bike.

He and Tim exchange a look. “Yeah?”

“I think I know what happened, but I want to confirm before officially closing it with O,” she says, popping her helmet on.

“Oh, so why do you need me again?”

“I want to check in with a contact I have in the Triad, and some back up would not be unappreciated,” her voice comes slightly muffled from under the helmet.

“Ah.” Jason almost follows suit, but detours over to Tim first.

It’s hard to kiss someone good-bye with a helmet on.

“Wish I could go out with you guys,” Tim says longingly.

“Just two more weeks, Babybird,” Jason mumbles into his hair. “Can’t wait to run the city with you.” He brushes his lips briefly against Tim’s forehead, and then less briefly against his mouth.

Blondie makes a gagging noise behind them. Tim flips her off cheerfully, much to Jason’s glee.
“Be safe, okay,” Tim orders.

“Well, I guess because you say so, then I have to,” Jason grouses light-heartedly.

Tim reaches out to smack him and he dances away, tossing Tim a mocking two-finger salute before sliding his helmet on. He idles in the garage for a minute, drinking in the sound and the feel of pistons working their constant cycle of compression and combustion before following Blondie into the night. He zips behind her, trailing closely as they navigate to and through Chinatown.

It’s slow going. The night is still early and with the warming weather the vibrant cultural pocket is still bustling with a lot of pedestrian traffic. It makes Jason uncomfortable, to be in such a highly populated area. But no one seems to give them much notice, and he figures Blondie must be a regular in this part of town. She leads him down into an alley with an entrance to a basement lot and parks. She dismounts from her bike, shaking her long blonde hair out of her helmet where it escapes her cowl. Jason backs in beside her and walks away with more obvious trepidation. He hasn’t had a chance to install any of the stronger security measures yet on his new baby.

“Your baby will be perfectly safe here,” Blondie assures, reading his mind. “I promise. This building belongs to Wang Wei. He’s got a pretty harsh no-thievery policy. First offense, takes a hand. Second offense, takes your head.”

Internally, he’s screaming. The Wang Wei? Jason’s killed more of his men than he can count on his fingers.

“You know what, that’s not a bad policy. I feel much better about this already,” Jason quips sarcastically instead, stretching his long legs to catch up with her.

Blondie snorts, “You would.”

She walks further into the dimly lit parking garage and stops in front of a steel door. She gives a cheery wave to the camera mounted above it. There’s a series of audible clicks and the knob turns easily under Blondie’s gloves, letting them inside. Waiting for them in the narrow hallway on the other side is a man even shorter than Blondie. He lets her pass but steps firmly in front of Jason, blocking him. He has no doubt the hall monitor could wipe most people’s asses no matter their size, but in addition to an extra eighteen inches and hundred pounds, Jason has bat and League training on his side. Jason looks to Blondie questioningly.

“Oh! I’m sorry, no guns allowed. I forget because I never carry one. Give him your guns.”

“What?!” Jason yelps, the word cracking further through the voice modulator.

“Give him your guns, you can pick them back up when we leave,” she tells him flippantly, like he’s a child refusing to leave a toy behind.

And well… okay, so guns kind of are his toys… but still… Handing them over to someone who could very likely use them against him later is just…


That earns him a laugh from the guard. Jason reluctantly hands him the guns holstered at his thighs and crosses his arms over his chest, daring the man press his luck further. They stare at each other for a long drawn out minute before the guard finally steps to the side. Blondie rolls her eyes and bounds up a narrow set of stairs into a restaurant above. A nice restaurant.

The ceiling is gilt in gold foil and lit with a mix of modern chandeliers and traditional red lanterns.
Black lacquered tables and chairs are spaced far enough apart to provide each with a sense of privacy. Unlike on the streets, they do get a few looks here, in their masks and body armor amongst the diners dressed in formal evening attire. Blondie flounces through the tables heedlessly. She definitely has her own flair, Jason thinks with no little admiration. It’s a vigilante style he’s never seen before. She prances right up to a corner booth and graces its occupants with a beaming smile.

“Hey, Wang Wei!” she sings out.

A spindly old man with liver spots and glasses throws up his arms. “Baywatch!”

Jason hangs back as they hug. He tries to imagine Tim’s face if he could see his ex making bosom buddies with a Triad boss. Especially one with an apparent fetish for well-endowed blondes. His head would explode.

“Oh, Mr. Wang this is… uh, well this is my boyfriend I told you about!” Blondie tugs him forward.

Jason’s head whips around and Blondie must read his panic even through the expressionless shell of his helmet. She makes a face, lips tugging down to one side while looking pointedly at Wang, begging him to play along.

He extends his hand awkwardly. “Uh. Hi, Mr. Wang.”

“Oh, this is him!” Wang exclaims and shakes his hand enthusiastically, “My son will be heartbroken. But you are a lucky man to get Baywatch, yes. She is beautiful. And full of fire.”

All in perfect English.

“Oh. Yeah, ha. Thanks,” Jason stutters as he tries to figure out what the flying fuck is going on.

Blondie plops herself down at the edge of the booth seat, cozying up to Wang.

“I’m sorry to interrupt your dinner. I just have a quick question—”

Wang’s friendly face instantly takes on a harder edge.

“No worries! It’s nothing at all to do with any of your operations. I know better than that, but I’m doing a little follow up on that mutual problem we had a few months back,” Blondie smoothes over.

“You know that hungry ghost?”

Wang nods.

“Well, I was wondering if you’d heard any more about that.”

“No. Nothing for nearly a month now. It would seem that it has moved on. Hopefully to harry the hēibāng up north.” His smile turns from avuncular to bloodthirsty.

“Alright, that was it!” Blondie kisses him on the cheek, “Thank you!”

She pops up from the booth and turns to leave.

“Oh! Baywatch. Stop by the kitchen. I will have Fang make you ready some dumplings. I know how you love the dumplings here,” Wang teases her, once again a doting old man.

The switch gives Jason whiplash. Blondie gives an excited fist bump into the air and dances off to the kitchen, where a to-go bag is pushed into her hands by one of the staff. She sticks her head in the bag and inhales deeply before rolling the top back down and making her way back to the parking lot.
Jason retrieves his guns from the hall guard, instantly relaxing with their weight once more at his thighs.

“So, please remind me why you needed a Mandarin translator for someone who speaks fluent English?” he asks, as he flicks up his kickstand with his heel.

“Oh, I just needed someone there so he wouldn’t try and grab my boobs like he usually does. And you did admirably! Thank you.”

Jason laughs, “You are something else Blondie, alright. Where to now?”

“If my hunch is right, our hungry ghost is absent because it, or more accurately he, kicked the bucket in Atlantic City. I want to get a look at his place before the cops do or before his landlord clears the space out. See if I can find anything to confirm that he was our guy. Maybe get some clues as to who did him in and why.”

“I’m down,” he assents, and they peel out of the garage.

They wind up in front of a brick row house on the western edge of Burnside. A neighborhood slowly creeping back from the brink of poverty due to a heavy-handed effort at gentrification. The house is in decent shape. It’s plain enough not to call any attention to itself, but the porch isn’t sagging and there are no broken panes in the windows. Jason doesn’t trust it, and he doesn’t let Blondie in until he checks all of the entrances and exits thoroughly. He doesn’t come across anything nasty, but all of the windows and doors on the first floor are wired to a security system. They go in through a second floor window. They stay quiet, communicating through hand gestures until they clear the house and all of its rooms.

“Rowan Richardson,” Blondie fills him in as she rifles through the desk in the office. “Found dead in Atlantic City, body washed up on shore a few days ago gutted like a fish. ME timed his death to just after the killings stopped here ’bout three and a half weeks ago. He was a driver for one of those third-party medical companies. You know, that provide services but aren’t actually associated with any one hospital? Well, he worked for the Tri-Cities Medical Conglomerate, which if you can believe it, specializes in arranging transplants. One of their services includes the delivery of transplant organs. Perfect cover, huh?”

“Yeah. So what do you think? Business deal gone south, employer did him in?” Jason mutters, making his way into the kitchen.

“Could be. Certainly looks like he was trying to make a run for it and someone caught up with him,” Blondie agrees.

He casually slides drawers in and out. It’s always interesting to him what people keep in their kitchens. Tells you a lot about the person. This one is eerily empty. There are only one or two bowls and plates in the cabinet. More glasses. Almost no utensils. There’s a complete lack of any accessories – toaster, blender, microwave. Not even the telltale drawer of take-out menus that usually belong to someone who doesn’t cook. Jason stares at the refrigerator.

“Would never have made the connection if I didn’t widen the suspect parameters to include medical personnel beyond doctors and nurses. Still, it’s a bit disconcerting. Richardson had no surgical training, but the organs were removed so precisely. Like, where’d he learn how to do that?” Blondie rambles on.

He raises his fingers to the stainless steel handle of fridge and tugs.
“Oh! Hold up! I got what looks like a list here. Names and dates. Holy shit. I think this is it! I bet you, I bet you these match up to our victims!” she buzzes excitedly.

“How much do you want to bet?” he asks woodenly, knuckles whitening.

“Jason?” She sticks her head around the doorway and freezes. “Oh. I think I’m gonna be sick.”

The fridge is stocked, shelves and drawers full of neatly stacked bags with dark bloody contents.

“Well, I think your hunch was right. Case closed.” Jason shuts the door and turns, but Blondie is gone.

He can hear the sounds of vomiting echo from the bathroom down the hall. He finds her on her knees hunkered over the smooth white bowl. He crouches down on his haunches and brushes her hair back over her shoulders.

“Guh, sorry. Weak stomach,” she explains, drooling.

“Weak stomach? Blondie, I’ve seen you douse burritos in ghost pepper sauce.” He rubs her back lightly.

“A weak stomach for this kind of thing,” she groans. “You know, that’s actually how I met Jer? Puked on his shoes at the crime scene the night Joker killed you.”

“Oh, yeah?” Jason huffs despite the morbidity.

“Yup, he was a gentleman and brought me a napkin and coffee after.”

“Alright, well when you two get hitched, I better be acknowledged for my part in introducing you.”

“Course, he didn’t know that was me, so I had to hunt him down and figure out his favorite coffee joint so I could ‘accidentally’ bump into him for real, y’know, but… Deal.” Blondie reaches out and Jason hops back a safe distance.

“Whooaa! Spit and shake is going to have to wait, Pukey McGee!” he scolds.

Blondie rolls her eyes. “I was reaching for the toilet paper, jackass.”

“Oh.” He rips off a row of squares, folds them together and hands them to her.

His comm pings. Red Robin. He stands and wanders back into the hall, giving Blondie space while she cleans herself up.

“Yah?” Jason drawls.

“Hood, I need you to come in.”

Tim’s voice is terse, causing Jason to prickle with unease.

“Uhh. When, where, and what for?” he asks, eyes cutting to the bathroom where Blondie is.

“Home. As soon as possible.”

“Whoa, slow down. Can I get a ‘why’ in the follow-up here?”

“Not over the comms,” Tim snaps nervously.
“Red, it’s a private line. You set it up yourself. We’re fine,” he tries to reason with him.

Tim sounds more hesitant than harsh in his reply, “No…it’s not—It’s just something I need to tell you in person.”

Jason frowns. He does not like the sound of that. “Do I need to be worried?”

“No, we’re fine. I’m fine. No one’s in danger or anything…But. I found something and you don’t want to hear over the line. Trust me?”

“Okay,” Jason answers.

Tim sounds surprised at his instant acceptance, “Okay?”

“Yeah okay. I trust you. I’ll… let BG know I’m heading out. Things are pretty much wrapped up here anyway. BG can deal with clueing in the PD on her own. ETA in fifteen” he says firmly, although his insides are writhing, “Yo! BG!”

Blondie appears in a whip of blond hair, “Yeah?”

“Red just pinged me, I’m gonna cut out of here. You good to take care of this here? Wrap up everything?”

“Yeah. Everything okay?”

“Yeah, everything’s fine. Just need to run home.”

Blondie cackles, “Ha, yeah. I bet you do.”

She raises a fist. Jason stares at it.

“Uh. I don’t think that’s um…”

He bumps her fist weakly anyways. It’s easier than explaining Tim’s vague insistence.

He flies through the streets on his way back to Robbinsville, glad the roads are finally clear enough to play with his new baby a little. He weaves through the maze of avenues and alleyways, pivoting around potholes and trash. It’s exhilarating even through the worry eating at him. What is it Tim needs to talk with him about? What is so important he refuses to do it over the comms? Did he actually find out something about Jason? Finally get the proof that confirms yes, he is, in fact, a monster? He hopes not. It’s too soon. He’s not ready for everything to change again. He’s only had five mornings of Tim waking him up with a kiss to his neck. Five is not nearly enough. Something glimmers ahead of him, stretched across the street.

“Shit!” Jason barks.

He throws his weight to the side trying to force the bike into a slide before he hits the trip line, but it’s too late and he gets lost in the sickening blur of motion that follows.

He can’t… he can’t tell which way is up. Blood swishes behind his teeth. He spits and it drips forward onto the face plate. Face down, then. He scrabbles weakly, gloved fingertips scratching at
concrete until he can curl onto his side. His head rolls heavily inside the helmet like a loose bowling ball. Something’s wrong with the hood’s vision. No matter how much he blinks it won’t clear. It takes him disturbingly long to realize the reason why: the transparent plexiglass lenses of the eye-holes have been scraped into opacity. He chokes when he tries to voice activate the comm and has to spit out another mouthful of blood before he tries again.


He cuts off, wincing at the sparks that ignite far too close to his skin as the helmet attempts to comply. Busted. No point keeping it on when he’s deaf and blind and mute like this. Jason tries to move his arms up and grits out a groan. His limbs don’t respond like they should. It takes a lot of fumbling to finally disengage the lock and push the helmet off with a gasp. He breathes heavily, pavement cool against his face. It hurts and he’s pretty sure he’s broken a rib, if not plural. He’s anxious about moving too much until he can assess how badly he’s hurt, doesn’t want to risk a lung, but… he needs to… He’s too helpless, too exposed like this.

The block is empty. Dark. He’s not sure if that’s a good thing or a bad thing. It depends on how he got here. He can’t remember though, mind is a jumbled mess. He was… he was with Tim. No. That was earlier. He was with… Blondie? And then he left. He doesn’t know why. And now he’s… his eyes aren’t coming into focus, but it feels familiar. He’s some place in Crime Alley, he knows that just from the smell. That’s not good. Crime Alley isn’t safe. Be safe, okay? Someone had said that to him and he fucked up, he… oh god, his bike. He crashed the bike.

He tries to push himself up to find it, only to fall back with a scream, pain lancing up through his back, his legs, his arms, his everything. He needs help. The sound of footsteps cuts through the haze. He tries desperately to tune his ears to track them as they approach, because he can’t quite get his head to turn and see. They grow louder, closer, but not quicker. Jason’s hope sinks. If they belonged to an ally, they’d no doubt be running forward to give aid. Not keep a steady sedate pace like a stalking beast. They certainly wouldn’t whistle calliope tunes. He squeezes his eyes shut.

The whistling stops.

Joker’s voice echoes between the abandoned buildings, “Oh, Lambchop. Did you really think a new set of threads would fool me? Did you think I wouldn’t know it was you? Kid, I know the way you move, the way you fight, the way you die. I’ve got your scent. You can’t hide from Uncle J. Say, I remembered you like poems, Birdie. I spent a long time trying to find the perfect one for you when we met again:

“It is not death
Without hereafter
To one in dearth
Of life and its laughter,”

A hand fists in his collar.

“Nor the sweet murder
Dealt slow and even
Unto the martyr
Smiling at heaven:”

He chokes when it cuts into his throat as he’s towed across the asphalt, heels dragging limply behind him.
“It is the smile
Faint as a (waning) myth,
Faint, and exceeding small
On a boy’s murdered mouth.”
I SHOULDN'T BE GIVING YOU THIS. I SHOULD AT LEAST BE MAKING YOU ALL WAIT ANOTHER WEEK BUT APPARENTLY I HAVE NO SELF CONTROL. SO HERE!!! HAVE IT!

You will notice some new tags. If squick is not your thing…I’m sorry? I don’t really know what to tell you, because you can’t really skip this chapter; it’s plot heavy. But, I mean I impaled one of the main characters with a blunt instrument in chapter 3 so what were you expecting at the climax?

Also, sorry guys, had to go back and make some very small edits to the comm convo between Jason and Tim last chapter for continuity sake with this one. Should’ve have caught that before I posted ch. 24. My apologies.

And again: heaps of thanks for Embleer_Frith0323 for all of the help with this chapter.

OKAY KIDDOS. BUCKLE UP AND GRAB YOUR TISSUES AND DISNEY MOVIES. HOPE YOU'RE READY FOR 12,000 WORDS OF EMOTIONAL MAIMING.

Chapter 25

Tim rifles through the fridge, enthusiastically grabbing a Tupperware of leftover puttanesca and a black and tan. He dumps the pasta into a bowl and reheats it in the microwave, popping the cap to his beer while his meal rotates on the glass dish. To think there was a time in his childhood when he thought leftovers were gross. If Jason was here, he’d fry it up fresh on the stovetop but Tim isn’t allowed to use the oven. He waits hungrily for the ding and shuffles back to the couch with his meal. He crosses his legs, sitting the bowl between them and balancing the laptop on his knees. Time to research.

He loves spending time with Jason, he really does, but it’s a small relief to have him out with Steph for the night. It’s been too long since he’s had a chance to work on Project Unicorn for more than ten minutes stolen here and there at a time. He’s even left the comm out of his ear tonight, trusting Barbara to see to Steph and Jason, so he won’t be distracted by their chatter.

Tim spins his fork in the pasta, gathering a good mouthful before stuffing it into his face. With his
free hand he pulls up where he had left off earlier, going through John Doe files from the OCME. When he gets bored of that he opens Jason’s birth certificate again to take a quick peek at the footprints. They’re just so tiny, and Jason is anything but. It’s hard to believe his feet were ever that small. Fracking adorable. Tim absentmindedly wonders if Jason gets his size from his mother or his father, or if he’s one of those genetic oddballs that shoots above them both—a bundle of recessive traits skipping erratically through generations. Tim takes after his mother; sharing the same coloring, bone structure, and slight build with Janet.

Thinking of mothers…He looks up Sheila Heywood curiously. When he finds her obituary photo in an issue of the Gotham Gazette, his first reaction is disgust. She’s beautiful. She’s beautiful in a classic old Hollywood style, like Jayne Mansfield (and okay, so he only knew who she was because Jason had made him watch Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?). He can see parts of Jason immediately in her. He’s got her thick curly hair and Adriatic blue eyes. He has her full lips. It seems unfair he should bear so many similarities to the woman who had betrayed him, to the woman who had sold him out to the Joker.

A mother responsible for her own son’s death. Tim’s chest clenches in anger at the thought, despite the fact she’s been dead for seven years. Or has she? Is it possible inextinguishable life was another trait she’d passed on to her son alongside cupid's-bow lips?

Tim manically starts scraping up whatever he can find on the woman: W2s, driver’s license renewals, address changes, even her high school and college transcripts. He sifts through the pieces and puts them together, reconstructing her life like a puzzle. She grew up outside of Newark. Her father Frank, and mother Cody, both worked at the Anheuser-Busch brewery there. She was the third of five children (and wasn’t that an odd thought; that Jason had aunts and uncles and maybe even cousins out there somewhere?). She was a straight-A student, salutatorian at Hillside High School, and homecoming queen. Her grades earned her a full-ride scholarship to Gotham University where she graduated with honors from their medical campus. From there she became one of the youngest doctors at Gotham General, specializing in Obstetrics and Gynecology. She was a golden child. Not only did she excel in her career, but she spent her spare time outside the hospital volunteering at health clinics in low-income areas.

Maybe that’s where she met Jason’s father. Her eventual fall from grace was total and spectacular. When the scandal broke that she had not only performed an illegal abortion on a teenage girl after clinic hours, but also botched it, resulting in the girl’s death—she fled the city, joining an overseas aid campaign desperate enough for anyone with medical training to overlook certain scruples, and leaving her infant son behind.

Tim sinks back into the couch, her death certificate glowing spectrally from his laptop screen. It’s a neat picture, so completely and tidily documented he can’t see a hole where a mystery as big as coming back from the dead could hide. Still, he uploads her photo to run through CODIS and NAMUS to be sure. If the facial recognition on either database flags a match from within the last seven years…then they’ll know.

Tim cracks his neck and knuckles. In the meantime, there’s another contestant to examine. Willis’ arrest record is just as extensive as Jason had insinuated. The charges however, are far less sordid than he had imagined. He had racked up a fair number of drunk and disorderlies, possession, and one intriguing count of public indecency. Interestingly, there’s a four-year gap in the records bookending Jason’s birth, as if Willis had at least attempted to get clean before starting a family. He opens the record at the top of the window and spit tanks a mouthful of beer all over the screen. He stays bent over his knees until the coughing subsides, but when he raises his head, the face looking back at him from the mugshot is still the same.
Fra—no. This deserves a full-on, *Fuck*.

He knows that face. He’s seen it often enough over the past few months that not even the ridiculous 90s porn-stache is enough to hide the truth. He curses a blue streak Jason would be proud of. As with Sheila, he can see hints of Jason clearly. It’s in the cut of his cheekbones and the perpetual dark circles under his eyes. In the dark gloss of his hair and tall frame. That fucker. That fucking fuckhead. All this time! Lingering on the edges of their life, the strangely intense focus on Jason…Tim is so angry, so livid that he didn’t recognize it before now, that it takes him an embarrassingly long time to notice something else—Willis Todd hasn’t aged a day in twenty years.

He gapes at his computer, unblinking and slack jawed. Holy shiitake mushrooms. Tim bursts into a flurry of activity. His fingers outpace his mind as they fly across the keyboard. He’s not sure if he should laugh or cry at what he finds. Willis Todd’s body went missing from the prison morgue in 1999 after he’d been shanked in the showers. The disappearance was attributed to employee error in record keeping. Of course it was, Tim rolls his eyes. He digs deeper, coming across a maddening mix of evidence. Willis Todd exists in fragments scattered across time and space. He has a tendency to disappear for a few decades before popping up again somewhere else.

Tim returns once more to Willis’ mugshot. This is big. He has to tell Jason. Now. He stretches his hand out for the comm sitting silent and unused on the table and nudges the earpiece in. A couple of flicks and he’s pinging Jason through the private line he installed just for them.

“*Yah?*” Jason drawls on the other end.

“Hood, I need you to come in.

“*Uhh. When, where, and what for?*”

“Home. As soon as possible.”

“*Whoa, slow down. Can I get a ‘why’ in the follow-up here?*”

“Not over the comms,” Tim snaps. Then winces. That came out sounding harsher than he meant it to.

“*Red, it’s a private line. You set it up yourself. We’re fine.*”

Tim swallows, realizing Jason thought he was afraid of eavesdroppers. “No…It’s just something I need to tell you in person.”

“*Do I need to be worried?*”

Tim can practically hear Jason’s frown. He shakes his head, wondering at what point Jason will realize Tim has absolutely no intentions of ending things with him.

“No, we’re fine,” he reassures the other man, “I’m fine. No one’s in danger or anything…But, I found something and you don’t want to hear it over the line. Trust me?”

He knows he’s upsetting Jason with his vagueness and causing him unnecessary anxiety, but he’s afraid of what Jason may do without him there – if he’ll try and go after Willis guns blazing. He waits for the protest, the demand for more information.

He’s shocked when he receives a simple, “*Okay.*”

“*Okay?*”
“Yeah okay. I trust you. I’ll… let BG know I’m heading out. Things are pretty much wrapped up here anyway. BG can deal with clueing in the PD on her own. ETA in fifteen.”

Trust. Jason trusts him. He’s known that for a while now, deduced it from the vulnerabilities Jason allows Tim to witness, but hearing it stated plainly is something else entirely. Tim bounces his knee. Seconds stretch into an eternity as he waits. He tries to spend the time productively, drafting what he’ll say to Jason when he arrives, but everything ends up sounding wrong; an unsettling mix of blunt and fantastical. He gives up on it after a while and goes back to investigating. Detective work has always been his most effective coping mechanism. In the next twenty minutes he comes across three social security numbers, two death certificates, a posthumously awarded Medal of Honor from 1947, and a Gotham Credit Union and Trust account that’s been used sporadically since it was opened in in 1897.

Tim’s eyes flick to the time display in the laptop menu bar. Jason told him he’d be there in fifteen minutes, twenty minutes ago. He sucks in a breath. Five minutes. Five minutes isn’t a big deal. There could be a closed road that forced him to take a detour. Or maybe he chatted with Stephanie a little longer before heading out. Or maybe he needed to top off his tank on the way back. Or any number of other small and perfectly harmless hindrances. It’s only that accurate time measurement and management is one of the first and most important skills Batman impressed upon them all...

Vigilantes feel the movement of time keenly, knowing mere seconds can mean the difference between life and death. He’s heard Bruce give an ETA of eleven minutes before, because rounding down to ten was sloppy. Tim will be darned if he didn’t make it in exactly eleven minutes too. He’ll give Jason five more minutes before he freaks out. He lasts four before he tries the private comm line again, pacing the living room.

“Hood? Hood, are you there?”

All he gets is static.

“Red Robin to Hood. Are you there? Hood, if you can hear me I need you to answer me, you asshole! Jason!”

He pushes the panic down. He needs to pursue this logically and methodically. Jumping to conclusions and letting his emotions dictate his actions isn’t going to help. There could be a malfunction in Jason’s comm unit. Step One: Call Steph and confirm that Jason left when he said he did, and whether he had mentioned any problems with his hood’s comm. Step Two: Call Barbara and see if she can get a hit on his location. Step Three: Call the one person Jason may have risked going dark to contact. Tim hopes it doesn’t come to Step Three. If Jason were going to meet with his father, he would already know what Tim found out tonight. It seems unlikely given Jason’s reticence to pursue his own past. If Jason did know, Tim is convinced he would have still spun a lie to explain his tardiness, rather than leave Tim waiting and worrying. Unless Jason didn’t meet with his father willingly. Tim shakes the thought away.

Step One: Call Steph.

“BG? Red here. I need a status update on Hood. Is he still there with you?”

He closes up his laptop and starts shutting down his workstation; multi-tasking.

“No. He left, uhh…twenty-four minutes ago. Said you had called him in. Why?”

“Because he never made it home and I can’t reach him on the comms. Did he mention having any difficulties with his hood tonight? Or can you think of anything that would have tied him up on the
way back?” Tim asks, sliding to his knees in front of the bed.

He reaches underneath and pulls out the duffle bag he’s started keeping here at Jason’s. It has a hidden pocket where he keeps a spare Red Robin suit neatly folded away.

“No, he was talking to you just fine on it before he left. It’s been a slow night. None of the big fish are biting. All we did was put the lid on a cold case. I just finished up briefing Gordon’s detectives and was about to head out on patrol again.”

Big fish. There is only one fish Tim is worried about when it comes to Jason, and he has been suspiciously quiet for too long. This would be just like Joker, waiting to strike for maximum effect… No. He’s leaping to conclusions again. The Red Hood hasn’t been seen since the Kane Bridge collapse and Jason hasn’t been making any waves yet in his new identity. Joker couldn’t know he was back. Could he?

“Alright, thanks. Keep an eye out. If you run across him tell him to contact me immediately.”

“Will do.”

“Oh, and one more thing: where were you two when I called him?”

Steph rattles off an address in Burnside. Tim swipes Redbird’s keys off the counter and zips a loose hoodie over his uniform to keep the suit hidden until he’s out of the neighborhood. He hails Oracle on his way towards Jason’s last known whereabouts.

“Red, how can I help you this fine evening?”

“Hey O, I need a check on Hood’s location.”

He’s met with a disapproving silence.

“It’s important, O,” he presses.

“Believe it or not but I don’t track Hood Red. We have an agreement. If he’s gone radio silent it means he wants to be left alone.”

Tim growls in frustration, “And last time he did that the Joker crucified him to a wall! He was supposed to meet me fifteen minutes ago and never showed up. Now I can’t get in touch with him over the comm. Look, I respect whatever arrangement you have, but we both know just because you don’t track him, doesn’t mean you can’t. Please, O. Something is wrong.”

Her distorted sigh sounds eerie in his ear, “Sorry, I’m used to running interference between Hood and the rest of you bats. Force of habit.”

Tim snorts, “Trust me, I’m starting to understand.”

“Alright, just give me a sec to pull everything up.”

Tim waits.

“Shit.”

That is not what he wanted to hear.

“O?”
“I can’t find him.”

“What do you mean?”

Tim has to pull over before he swerves and crashes. He steadies himself with one booted foot on the asphalt.

“I mean I can’t find him. Usually I can remotely access the comm in his helmet. He doesn’t like it, but I’ve done it before. I tried that and didn’t get any feedback. Even if he has the helmet turned off I could still hypothetically trace it—he’s got voice commands programmed into it as a safety protocol, meaning there’s a power source and energy signature. But I’ve tried that as well and there’s just nothing there to find.”

Tim gnaws on his lip, “What would that mean?”

“Most likely scenario? Unless he’s found a really ingenious way to avoid my detection, I’d guess the comm’s been destroyed.”

Tim forces a deep breath.

“Don’t freak out on me yet, Red. Where was he supposed to meet you? If I can map his potential route I can hack into traffic cams along the way and hopefully narrow down the point he deviated from.”

Tim squirms. Jason has already conceded his home location to Tim and Steph. He will not be happy about Tim letting more bats in on it. Jason is going to kill him, and Tim is pretty sure he doesn’t have the second Robin’s gift of coming back from the dead. But drastic times and all that…

“Robbinsville.”

“Oh, so at his house.”

“You know?”

“Red, I know everything. I just choose not to let you all know how much that really is. And it’s part of that running interference thing again. Hood is decent at tech, he comes up with some really creative designs, but cyber sleuthing isn’t his forte. There’s a reason B has never been able to pinpoint him when he goes to ground, and B owns satellites.”

Tim hears keys clicking in the pause.

“Okay, so if he took the quickest route back to Robbinsville, he’d follow this path.”

Seconds later an aerial map of Gotham washes over his windscreen.

“There’s twelve traffic lights along the way, seven of which have cameras installed. Running their footage now.”

Tim imagines Barbara on the other end, eyes flitting between seven windows, somehow managing to watch all seven simultaneously as they play in fast-forward.

“Got it. He passes through the intersection at Park Avenue and Harrison but not through the next camera at Park and Cordry. It’s a seven block stretch, but it’s a place to start.”

“Thanks, O. I appreciate it.”
“No problem. Let me know if you need anything else. I’ll keep my eyes peeled best I can from here. I’m going to send BG your coordinates. B is at the other end of town working a drug-ring bust, I don’t want to distract him right now but as soon as he’s done or you find conclusive evidence Hood is in trouble I’m bringing him in.”

Tim starts to protest, but O ends the conversation by tapping out. He groans and knocks his helmet against Redbird’s handlebars. Well, at least he has someplace to start now. There’s just one more call he needs to make. He needs his phone for this one. It rings twice before it’s picked up.

“Hey, Tim. It’s a bit late, I was about to head to bed. If you need a ride—“ the man on the other end answers drowsily.

“You son of a bitch.”

“Well that seems unfair. You’ve never even met my mother.”

Tim grits his teeth. He knows where Jason’s lackadaisical sarcasm comes from now.

“I don’t have time to screw around with you, smartass. I know who you are. And I know what you are. Or…not exactly what, but—you know what I mean! I know your secret. I know you’re the one who’s been stalking us. You’re the one who left that message in my mail. Now tell me, is Jason there with you?”

Will’s reply is quick and sober, “No. Why?”

“I swear to god, if you’re lying, or if you’ve done anything to him—“

Tim’s gloves squeak as he clenches Redbird’s handlebars.

“Tim, I haven’t seen Jason in over a week. I promise you. And if you know who I am, then you know I’d never do anything to harm him.”

“Yeah, well, I’m sure he thought the same thing about his mother,” Tim snaps spitefully.

There’s a sharp inhale, “What?”

“Didn’t you know? Sheila Heywood is the one who got him killed the first time around. She handed over her own son, your son, to a mass murderer!”

Will curses in a language Tim doesn’t recognize, “No, I didn’t know. All I knew was she was there and died as well. But I didn’t know she was involved. Tim, what’s going on? Is Jason in danger?”

Tim bites his lip, reluctant to share anything with their former chauffeur, “He’s missing. He was supposed to meet me and never showed. His communicator is offline, no one can get in touch with him.”

“His communicator? Are you serious? I told you to lay low! Not to let him go running around the city again! Waesucks, Tim! This is exactly why I sent you that note in the first place!”

There’s a muffled crash that Tim suspects is Will slamming his fist against something.

“Are you kidding me? I know you’re an absent father and all…but you have actually met Jason. What makes you think I could possibly keep him from doing something he wants to do?” Tim makes an aggravated noise in the back of his throat. “You know what? It doesn’t matter right now. I need to find him and if he’s not with you then I’m wasting my time playing the blame game here,” he snarls
into the phone.

He almost ends the call right there. It’s pure chance his thumb slips as he tries to swipe left.

“Where was he last?” Willis’ voice asks from the speaker scant inches away.

Tim glances around cursorily and sniffs. He needs to get moving again.

“Disappeared off traffic cams somewhere on Park between Harrison Street and Cordry. I’m heading there now to check it out.”

“No,” the word rings sharply in his ear, “Go home, Tim. Leave this to me, I will find him, I will take care of this.”

“Are you fricking crazy?” Tim shouts before he can tamp the outburst down, “He could be hurt out there, or worse…and you want me to turn around and go home? No. Not going to happen. I’m almost to Cordry now anyways.”

“Tim! You don’t know what you’re getting into. It could be a trap. For you or for one of the others. Sard, maybe even me. Don’t be reckless. I know he cares about you, he wouldn’t want anything to happen to you on his behalf.”

Tim swallows and it hurts.

“Too bad. Look,” he chuckles mirthlessly, “I know it’s probably a trap. I’m like 94% sure it is. But that means he’s already caught up in it, and if someone has him…I can’t let him go through it alone again. Do you remember the first night we met? You said you knew he’d be okay if I was taking care of him. Well, this is me taking care of him.”

Tim ends the call. He hangs his head, breathing heavily. He knows he’s acting recklessly. He’s doing exactly what he constantly warned everyone else not to do when he was with the Titans. Don’t rush in. Don’t let emotion overrule reason. Don’t go in without a plan. Don’t make a plan until you’ve got all the data. A plan isn’t complete without an exit strategy. He knows these things. But he also meant what he told Willis. Especially if it is the Joker who has Jason. They had been too late to save him before; they may not have time to strategize if they want to save him this time. So yes, he is being reckless, but not irrational. He’s weighed the risks and decided that in this case, a little recklessness is worth it.

He kicks the bike back into motion and hurtles through Gotham’s streets. The closer he gets to Cordry, the quieter and emptier the streets become. It’s unsettling. Tim can’t help but feel that the regular denizens sensed something was going to happen tonight and cleared out, the same way animals instinctively flee an area in the face of an oncoming storm. He spies the sign for the cross street and slows Redbird to a crawl. He scans the road and buildings looming up on either side as he approaches the area O had identified as the vanishing point. It’s dark here, unnaturally so for the city. The streetlights either burned out long ago or were busted on purpose.

He’s three blocks past Cordry when he spots it. His headlight illuminates the long black streak of a skid mark, and then a curling scar gouged into the asphalt past it. He stops, engine idling while his eyes follow the scrape to its end. There’s a glint of metal across the road, all the way up on the cracked sidewalk; the remains of Jason’s V-rod. Among the twisted wreckage he can just make out the shape of a boot sole and the dull gleam of a helmet. Jason. He wants to run forward. He shouldn’t (he may be reckless but he isn’t stupid), but he’s concerned with the dark patch pooling out beneath the horrifying tableau. It could be gas or motor oil. It could be something else.
He pings Oracle one more time, “O. I found the bike. I’m at the corner of Park and Williams. If you haven’t told B yet, now’s the time to do it.”

“Shit. How bad is it?” she replies tersely, voice thin with stress.

“Not sure yet. The streets are too empty. Pretty sure it’s a trap, otherwise someone would have heard the crash and called 911 by now. I think I see Jason. He’s either hurt or unconscious or both.”

“Noted. I’ve alerted B. He’s on his way but it will take him some time to get there. Wing is in Haven but I let him know too. BG will be there in thirteen to back you up. Can you wait til then?”

Tim chews on the inside of his cheek.

“I honestly don’t know. He…it looks like he could be bleeding out. I’ll have to get closer to tell. Besides, if anyone’s watching then they already know I’m here. I’m going to approach with caution.”

Tim’s eyes rove around the buildings surrounding him. The block has been blacked out. Most of the windows on the first two levels are boarded up so he can’t see if there’s any movement inside. He dismounts warily and walks forward at a slow, sure pace. He extends his staff and keeps it in front of him.

“Okay, Red. Stay on the line with me. I’m going to access your lens cam. You can do this. I’m right here with you.”

“Thanks, O,” he says sincerely.

He’s ten feet from the wreck when he can more confidently assess the sheen and viscosity of the substance staining the road.

“Yeah, O, that’s blood. We’re going to need something bigger than a medkit.”

“I’ll alert Agent A to prep the jet.”

Tim edges around the bike and lowers into a cautious crouch next to the body.

“How? Come on, Hood. You conscious?” He prods lightly at the chest plate with his staff, feeling a tad guilty for in essence poking Jason with a stick. “No response. Moving in to take off the helmet.”

Tim reaches forward with shaking hands as he feels for the hinge lock. His gaze darts nervously once more to the boarded up windows looking down on him. He turns his attention back to Jason, more disconcerted than before. Something’s not right. There’s something about the way the jacket and armor sits that’s setting him off. It could be the way the limbs are tangled in a heap of unnatural angles though. Or—

Realization strikes the moment his fingers find and release the catch. He throws himself backwards just in time to miss the swing of the hammer that had been concealed under the body.

“Hiya!”

Harley grins, her blonde pigtails tumbling out of Jason’s helmet. She surges forward, forcing Tim to backflip over the bike to get out of range. He watches as she slips off Jason’s jacket and shimmies out of his abraded pants with alarming alacrity. She hoists her hammer up over her shoulders with one hand and waggles the fingers of the other in a friendly wave. Her grin abruptly flips into comically exaggerated frown.
“What are you doing here, birdy? Mistah J wanted the Bats. He is not going to be happy about this” she pouts.

“Sorry to disappoint, guess you’re stuck with me,” he shrugs. “Where is he Harley? Where’s Hood?”

Harley laughs and toes at the discarded helmet. She scoops it off the ground and holds it before her dramatically. He almost expects her to start quoting Hamlet.

“Oh birdy, you know I can’t just tell you. Where’s the fun in that? Ya know, last time he had this, he made it go big-boom-bang! Wanna see if it still works?” She holds up a short-range remote transmitter between her fingers. “One potato, two potato, three potato, four. Five potato, six potato, seven potato more! Whoops! Hot potato! Catch, birdy!”

She lobs the helmet at him. Tim’s mind flashes back to the scorch mark in the alley all those months ago. He ducks and rolls, feels the heat lick over his suit.

*Explosives in his helmet?! If poison things don’t belong next to food things, then explosive things sure as hell don’t belong next to brain things, Jason!*  

He springs up and uses his staff to pole vault over the scrap metal, hoping to land a two-footed kick to Harley’s chest, but she’s seen that move before and sidesteps. He sticks the landing when he should have rolled again and stumbles a bit, his shins twinging at the shock. She winds up a powerful swing with her hammer. He brings the staff up in time to block it, but the jolt jars his shoulder. He grits his teeth, sinking to one knee to keep the motion from ripping the staff out of his hands. The new angle gives him an opening to sweep the staff behind her legs. Harley trips, staggering forward. He uses the opportunity to get back on his feet and reevaluate.

Usually, he’s more than a match for Harley. She’s got stamina and a savage arm, but is still untrained in comparison to him. He’s been out of the field for a month though, and his handicapped shoulder puts him at a disadvantage. Of course, he was never the intended target. The match was never meant to be fair. If Batman were here in his place, he would have wiped the floor with her in minutes. Harley had to know this was a fight she wasn’t meant to win. Which means she was left here as a calling card of sorts—Joker’s way of letting Batman know exactly who was yanking him around by dolling up one of his cronies in Jason’s gear—and as a distraction. The longer Batman fights Harley, the longer Joker has to play with Jason. Harley is also the only one Joker knows will never sell him out, even on threat of pain. Tim watched Harley let Batman break her wrist once, refusing to give Joker up. He can fight her all night, win, and still be unable to scare a location out of her. He needs to go about this differently.

Tim steps back and retracts his staff.

Harley straightens in surprise, hammerhead thudding casually against the ground.

“Whatcha doing, birdy?”

He tosses his staff away, “I’m surrendering.”

“You’re what?” her voice squeaks in disbelief.

“I’m surrendering. I’m handing myself over to you,” he repeats and clasps his hands behind his neck.

Oracle makes a choked metallic sound through the comm.

Harley squints at him, “Yeah, but…why?”
“I want you to take me to Joker.”

Harley glances over each shoulder before turning back to him, “Is this some kinda trick or something?”

“No,” he snorts, “It’s not a trick. Here, I’ll prove it. I’ll turn off my tracker and—”

“Red! What are you doing!” O screams in his ear.

He takes a shuriken out of his bandolier and makes a show of using it to crack and crush the device hidden in his belt (but not the one in his glove). He pulls the comm from his ear and stomps on it. Then he returns his hands behind his head and kneels.

“Kid, what are you doing that for?” Harley shakes her head, almost kindly, “Mistah J doesn’t want you.”

“He will,” Tim promises, “Think about it. Two Robins in one night; what else could break Batman more?”

He can see Harley turning it over in her head, not fully convinced. He needs her to go with this. If he takes too much longer, Stephanie will arrive and it will be game over. Steph hates Harley. He thinks it’s some kind of blonde rivalry. The two will either beat each other until one of them is incapacitated or GCPD arrives and forces them to hand Harley over for Arkham. Neither will get them closer to Jason.

He licks his lips, hating himself as he speaks, “Think of all the twisted games he could play with two of us. Trust me, he’ll love it. And he’ll be sure to be grateful to you for it.”

That sparks a gleam in her eye. He’s so close. He just needs one more hook.

“I still don’t get why ya want ta do this, birdy,” she says hefting her hammer up once again.

Tim leans forward, “I’ll tell you, but it’s a secret.”

“Oooh! I love secrets!”

“You can’t tell anyone, not even Joker, Harley. You have to promise first or I won’t tell.”

“No problem-o, Sugah! Patient-doctor confidentiality!”

She winks at him and mimes locking her lips and throwing away the key.

Tim lowers his voice, “Hood’s my Mistah J, Harley. He’s my Pudding. You get that, right? If someone was hurting Joker, you’d want to be there for him. Wouldn’t you?”

Harley’s eyes go perfectly round. She drops one hand over her heart.

“For real?” She squeals, “Oh, that’s too cute! How tragically romantic! I love it! Okay, Sugah. Your secret’s safe with me. But...you know I can’t let you know where we’re going.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know. I’ve got some sedatives in my belt,” Tim breathes out shakily, already patting at one of the pouches on his bandolier.

Harley has other plans. Hers are far more quick-acting. His head snaps to the side, vision whiting out and going dark before he ever sees her swing.
Oh Q, does he make bad decisions sometimes. His head, his poor broken head… What was he thinking? Clearly he hadn’t been. He probably never will again considering how much it hurts to. How hard had she hit him? He’s struck by the sudden fear that she cracked his skull and he is suffering brain damage, forever doomed to a body that won’t respond and that’s why everything is dark around him. Until he remembers he hasn’t actually attempted opening his eyes yet. He’s not thrilled with the prospect of trying. If mere consciousness is this agonizing, he’s not sure he’s ready for optical stimuli.

Stop.

Focus.

Breathe.

What are his other senses telling him?

What does he feel? Cool. Damp. The gritty surface of concrete under his cheek. It's possible he’s underground somewhere.

What does he smell? Mostly stale mildewed air. It’s not foul enough to be the sewers. Gotham is littered with other underground tunnels though. Among the municipal utility networks there are still pockets of the subway system that had never been reopened after the Quake.

What does he hear? An echoing rumble. That lends credence to his subway theory. The new light-rail had been built over the old subway lines, tracing their same routes. The near constant noise also has the added benefit of drowning out any screaming that might take place, making it hard to locate them. Him. He doesn’t even know if Harley kept her word and took him to where Joker is keeping Jason. The roar of a passing train fades and he catches snippets of the two bickering.

“What the hell did you bring him here for, Harl?’”

“Well, when he showed instead of Bats, I thought you might like anotha one. Two birds with one stone, ya know?’”

Joker grouses, “Gah, he’s not even the little one. Or the original Boy Blunder. Now that would have been fun! Still, even the boring one can be useful I guess.”

Tim bridles at that. Is that really what the Rogues think of him? Is he the boring Robin?

Fingers snag in his hair and drag him. His eyes snap open reflexively. Dimly flickering fluorescent lights sear his retinas. The pain is too much. He promptly vomits on himself. The scent sends another wave of nausea rolling down to his abdomen and back up with a fresh dose of bile. His inner ear fights to right itself, and fails when the world dives and bumps as he’s towed down a flight of stairs. The motion threatens his stomach again but there’s nothing left to spit up except acid and saliva, which dribbles down his chin. His arms are hoisted over his head, making his healing shoulder light up in red-hot agony as he’s hauled up into the air by a chain slung over an exposed I-beam. His bare toes brush the cold floor and he realizes they’ve taken his boots, gloves, and bandoliers. He wonders
if they found the tracker in the gloves and destroyed it. He hopes not. Best case scenario they dumped his gear nearby enough for O to track them down.

“Sorry, Shortpants. I know it’s rude to leave a guest waiting, but we had some unexpected company,” Joker apologizes.

Tim gets the feeling Joker isn’t talking to him. A harsh shove sends him swaying. He holds in a groan as his shoulder is stretched even more. Tim sags, splaying his toes and trying to get as much contact between them and the floor as possible to slow his spinning. Finally, he manages to get them under him and support his weight. He can’t balance on tiptoe forever though. Eventually his feet will cramp and give out, his full weight will hang from his wrists, cutting off the circulation to his hands and more than likely dislocating his bad shoulder. Enacting a successful escape after that point would be difficult.

“Don’t worry about him, Lambchop. No need to jealous, tonight is all about you. You’ve got Uncle J’s full attention.”


He knows that voice better than his own, the drawn out vowels and gravelly ‘r’s pronounced in a rough smoker’s bass. Jason. He tries to locate the speaker and the pain in his head triples. His vision swims in and out of focus. The hazy picture that finally presents itself reminds him of one of the paintings he had seen at the exhibit opening that fateful night in December. Jason is seated on a silver throne at the base of the stairs, a blinding halo of light wreathed round his head. Emphasis on blinding. He slits his eyes to try and make sense of what he’s seeing. The effort makes his stomach roil.

The silver throne is what looks to be a barber’s or a shoeshine chair - the old fashioned kind with a foot rest and a pump. Tim guesses it was taken from a caved-in station kiosk shop, as they are most definitely in an abandoned subway. Unadorned concrete walls and pillars extend in either direction, though a rusting subway car blocks the tunnel to the right. A light panel dangles precariously, directly over Jason’s restrained form. Cuffs glint at his wrists and ankles. He’s been stripped down to his undershirt and briefs. Tim blanches at the mangled mess of thigh, rubbed raw and bloody. Aside from that he’s covered in red swollen bruises that haven’t had time to purple, and dried blood flakes down his chin and stains his shirt collar.

“What we want and what we need are rarely one and the same,” Joker replies sagely.

His back is to Tim, bent over a janitor’s cart complete with an attached mopping bucket. Tim winces at the sound of metal items clinking against each other as Joker sorts through it. While the madman’s back is turned, Jason catches his eye. His brows are drawn tightly together, jaw clenched in a question. Tim gives a tiny nod and Jason eases back slightly in the chair. He rakes his eyes up and down Jason in return. Jason’s mouth parts but before he can convey anything about his condition, Joker’s squawking interrupts.

“Aha! Here it is! For instance, you may not want me to beat you with this crowbar again, but I know you really need to be!”

Joker spins, crowbar held triumphantly aloft. Jason doesn’t flinch. He doesn’t spit or curse like Tim is expecting. He gives the crowbar one look, raises an eyebrow, and laughs. It’s a Hades laugh, dark and full-bodied in counterpoint to Joker’s shrill giggles. It rolls through the space, echoing off the bare walls and magnifying. Tim shivers. He swears the shadows in the station deepen and writhe. Granted, that could also be a side effect from his concussion. Joker pauses in his approach. His head tilts to the side, as if unfamiliar with any laugh other than his own or one that’s forced out of a gas
“You pathetic sack of shit,” Jason drawls, “Is that meant to scare me? How many times does your joke have to fall flat before you accept it’s just not that funny? The only joke I see here is you. The makeup, the hair, the suit…You have to dress-up and paint yourself like a prostitute just to get noticed. Without it, you’re no one. Just another two-bit crook Batman wouldn’t think twice about. You’re not some clown prince psychopath, you’re an attention whore with a shtick. Anyone with fifteen dollars for some hair dye and a Goodwill suit can be you. Replaceable. Forgettable. Sad.”

Joker freezes. Pride bubbles up hysterically in Tim’s chest. There he is. There’s his Jason, wielding a tongue sharper than an obsidian blade and capable of slicing even the Joker down to size. It will probably get them both killed before dawn, but damn if Tim doesn’t love him for it in this moment. Frack, he doesn’t want to just bite his thighs and bury his fingers into those thick dark curls…he loves Jason. Every aspect of him, even the unpleasant ones. His self-deprecation and explosive anger are as much a part of him as his crooked grins and quiet compassion. Joker splutters and brings the crowbar down against Jason’s face in retaliation. Jason’s head knocks back and lolls lazily back into place. He spits blood through his smile.

“Go ahead, hit me again. Do it. Beat me to death like you did in that warehouse seven years ago. Shoot me, stab me, drown me. You can’t kill me. I’ll just keep coming back. Haunting you, driving you mad til you actually go insane, drooling in a room out of sight and out of mind while someone wipes the shit off your ass and shoves little blue pills down your throat til you die.”

Joker stares at him. He lowers the crowbar and taps it against his thigh, gaze calculating.

“We’ll see about that. I’ve been waiting for you to fly my way again, Little Bird. And I’ve had a lot of time to think about what I want to do with you. Anything dies if you break it into enough pieces. Even you.”

Tim goes rigid, cold fingers slide between his ribs and clutch at his lungs. Joker is going to take Jason apart in front of him and there’s not a gorram thing he can do but watch, trussed up as he is. Joker drops the crowbar with a clatter and digs through the cart. When he pulls his hand back, a blade flashes in his grasp. Joker circles the chair and rests the edge of a scalpel against Jason’s cheek.

“Leave a trail of breadcrumbs to catch a bird…leave a trail of birdcrumbs to catch a bat. I’m going to dice you up into itty-bitty pieces and scatter you throughout Gotham for Batman to find. Now where to begin? Nails, fingers, teeth, or toes?” he singsongs, “Catch a Robin, hold him close, til he hollers ‘let me go!’ Nails, fingers, teeth, or toes!” The blade jumps threateningly from one body part to the next with every word. “My mother told me to pick the very best one. And. You. Are. It.”

Joker taps the knife against Jason’s lips.

“Teeth it is.”

He grins and switches out the scalpel for a pair of pliers.

“Open wide and say, Ah!”

Jason’s jaw clicks shut, while Tim opens his to scream, “Get away from him you motherfucking piece of shit!”

Jason’s eyes widen in shock. Joker’s fingers flex, digging harder where they grip Jason’s chin before letting go.

“Excuse me, Lambchop. I’ll be right back,” Joker turns to Tim. “Look…Other Bird. I don’t even
know what to call you,” his voice drips with disdain, “Batman just has so many of you running around. Really, he should pin numbers to your backs. If there’s one thing that gets my goat—it’s interruptions. See, Shortpants and I are having a moment here, and you’re intruding. Be patient and I’ll deal with you later. There’s enough of Uncle J to go around. But until then, I need to you be quiet. Okay, Sweetums?”

He pats Tim’s cheek. Tim twists his head sharply to the left and bites, teeth catching on Joker’s thumb hard enough to break skin through his gloves. Joker reciprocates with a right hook, pliers still in his fist. Tim’s vision cuts out. When it flits back in, he’s swinging sickeningly in his chains, shoulder throbbing. His pendulum motion is halted by a hand on his throat. Joker delicately unfolds the handkerchief in his breast pocket, leaving the pliers in its place, and forces the cloth between Tim’s teeth, tying it off behind his head.

“There we go. Much better. Children are to be seen and not heard…Unless they’re screaming,” Joker amends. “Now where were we?”

He struts back to Jason brandishing the pliers. Jason does a good job, Tim thinks muzzily through the ache in his arms and head. He holds out for a long time. Longer than Tim could. He stays quiet in the beginning, refusing to give Joker the satisfaction of hearing him scream. At first, his groans are held in behind grinding teeth and bitten lips. When he can’t hold it in any longer, he shouts. His roars seem more a release for the anger and frustration of his own helplessness than out of pain or fear. He’s tiring though. The vitriol he spews Joker’s way between abuses is flagging in volume and creativity. Joker titters at his barbs like they are clumsy puns remembered off a child’s popsicle stick, rather than the crassly delivered expletives they are.

Tim watches as Joker pulls nails from their beds, teeth from gums, cuts two fingers from Jason’s right hand (moving inward; pinkie to thumb), and a toe. Joker must grow bored with the small pile of body parts he’s amassed because in the next refrain he switches out ‘nails, fingers, teeth, and toes’ for ‘ears, eyeballs, tongue, and nose.’ He taps long skeletal fingertips across the new features with deliberate, maddening leisure, reveling in how Jason now recoils with every touch as his composure breaks.

Not the eyes, not the eyes, not the eyes, Tim pleads silently.

Joker’s smile twitches downwards when his final tap ends the cycle at Jason’s ear. He flicks the shell unhappily a few times, pouting over the fact it isn’t the dismemberment he was hoping for. He makes up for that disappointment by swapping the scalpel out for a long serrated bread knife. Tim’s heart sinks into his stomach. Joker doesn’t make it quick. He saws through skin and cartilage. Jason howls and Tim recognizes the raw-edged cry from the nights he’s had to run in and shake Jason out of nightmares before he hurts himself. Tim screams with him into his gag. He tries to drown out Jason with his own voice so he doesn’t have to hear the other suffer. It goes on for what feels like an eternity and Tim finds himself objectively marveling at Jason’s lung capacity.

At last, Joker steps back with a flourish, holding the flesh like a choice cut of meat and adds it to the pile. Jason’s scream peters out into fast shallow pants. From the way his chest is rising and falling Tim thinks he may pass out from hyperventilation. Or blood loss. It’s streaking down his neck, pooling at his wrists, and still pulsing from the stumps of his missing fingers. Tim wishes Jason would pass out. The Joker however, has other plans.

“Oh, no. No no no. You’re doing so well, Lambchop. Making Uncle J so proud!”

He pinches Jason’s nose shut and slaps his hand over his mouth, forcing him to hold his breath. Jason struggles, eyes wild.
“Sh, sh, shhhh. On the count of three, breath in. One, two, three.”

Joker releases the pinch and Jason inhales automatically. The fingers squeeze down on the bridge of his nose again.

“Hold it, hold it! Don’t want you falling asleep and missing the show. We’re just starting to have fun. Okay, let it out now.”

Joker patiently repeats the exercise. Tim wonders where he learned this. Did he pick it up from Harley or is it some fragment of him from before he became Joker. The clown manipulates Jason’s breathing until it evens out against his will. Tear tracks cut through the blood on Jason’s face and Tim turns his head into his shoulder in shame. This is his fault. This is all his fault. What was he thinking? He should have listened to Willis. He should have waited for Bruce or at least Stephanie. He should have thought out his half-baked plan better. At least then maybe he could have helped in some way instead of hanging here uselessly like a hunk of meat. Useless.

*The boring, stupid, useless Robin. The Robin no one wanted. He’d forced his way into the bats and then in his naïveté had been surprised when they replaced him. That’s all he was, a replacement Robin until they could find one better. The Replacement.*

Then, amid the constant mocking monologue spilling from Joker, Tim hears Jason whimper. It cuts through his thoughts with the ferocity of a forest fire, and the anger that flares in his chest burns his despondency and self-pity to ash. No. He will not be useless. He is exactly where he needs to be. He’s with Jason, and even if he can’t save him like this, he can bear witness to everything he’s going through and let him know that he’s not alone this time. Tim raises his head once more when Joker picks up his song again. Jason shudders and pulls anxiously at his restraints, wrists and ankles slicked with blood where the cuffs have bitten into his skin. The knife travels across his face. When the tip teases the soft bruised skin under his left eye, Jason throws himself as far back into the chair as he can.

“You’ve got such big blue peepers there, Little Birdy. Real stunners. I think I’ll keep em in a jar on my desk—a memento of all the fun we’ve had together. Better than a postcard, heh?”

Tim snarls around the gag and kicks out, frantic and feral. He ignores the white lightning that tears through his shoulder as he flexes, hauling himself upward to look at the cuffs he’s dangling from. His fingers are swollen and full of pins and needles, but he may still have a chance to dislocate his thumb and slip one hand free if he does it right now.

“Well, huh. Lookit that. What’s put a bee up his butt, I wonder?” Joker’s knife hand drifts, distracted by Tim’s ruckus. “Hey! What do you think you’re doing? Get down from there!”

Joker stalks over agitatedly and yanks on his leg. Tim’s shoulder gives way with a pop, wrenching a shriek out of him. He almost chokes on his tongue. Joker watches him with narrowed eyes. This close Tim can see Joker’s blown pupils, hazel irises pressed into a thin ring at their far edge. He’s getting off on this. Tim shivers under the attention. When Joker seems assured that Tim isn’t about to make another attempt at something foolhardy, he advances on Jason once more.

“Where were we again? Oh yeah, those peepers,” he sighs wistfully and brings the knife up.

All three of them jump at the metallic clang that rings through the station.

“Mistah J!” Harley calls out, skipping down the steps.

“What is it now!?” Joker screeches, glaring at her over his shoulder. “Can’t you see that I’m busy?
Geez Louise! What does a man have to do to get a little peace and quiet in his secret subterranean lair?"

Harley’s enthusiastic bounce checks itself, “Oh Puddin, I’m sorry. But you told me to bring these when I found em so we could play Doctor.”

She holds up a pair of shears. They look thick, sturdy, and sharp-edged.

Joker straightens, “I did, didn’t I? Hahaha, whoops! Time really does fly when you’re having fun. Are you ready nurse?”

Harley beams and gives him a thumbs-up, “Ready, Doc!”

They close in and Tim loses sight of Jason. He can’t see what they’re doing to him. He can hear Jason’s accelerated wheezing breaths through his panic, though. There is a rip of fabric as they remove his shirt. Then a rattle as Jason fights the cuffs holding him in the chair.

“Aw, look! He already comes with instructions! Just cut along the dotted line!” Joker crows in delight.

Tim swears his heart stops. The noise that comes out of Jason is not something meant to come from a human throat. Even worse though, is when it dies into a wet waver gurgle and Tim can hear the _snikt_ of metal snipping through flesh. Tim moans and leans forward as far as he can, trying to get a glimpse of Jason. All he makes out is one leg as it twitches weakly in time to a sopping squelch.

“Good work, nurse. I think the operation was a success! Time to sew him up, and remember: let’s not accidentally leave anything behind. Wouldn’t want to get sued for malpractice!”

Joker bops Harley coyly on the nose, leaving a dot of crimson behind. She giggles and unravels a long length of thread off a spool for Joker to cut. Joker’s shoulder’s hunch forward. Tim still can’t see what he’s doing, but he can guess by the way his elbow tick up rhythmically. Then both of them are backing off with wide smiles on their faces at a job well done.

“Now that we’re done playing doctor, how do you fancy a little more role-play? I was thinking Hansel and Gretel. If you’d be so kind as to grab the birdcrumbs, Gretel,” Joker directs with a wave.

Harley rushes to obey, scooping severed bits of Jason into a plastic bag while Joker lingers over his body. He lays a hand on Jason’s cheek fondly.

“You’ve been a good sport, Zomboy. But it’s time to call your daddy to come pick you up. Think you can hold out that long for your Uncle J? I want him to see the lights go out in those baby-blues.”

Joker tilts his head to the side, as if waiting for a response. After a few seconds he nods and pets Jason again.

“Of course you will. Good boy.”

Joker bends and picks up the long-discarded crowbar. He twirls it carelessly as he ascends the stairs, humming and dancing up the steps like he’s starring in a vaudeville act. He doesn’t give Tim a second glance as he passes by. Harley does. She pauses just long enough to give Jason’s bloody form a lascivious once-over and shoot Tim an approving wink before spiriting away. As soon as the humming grows faint, Tim mashes his face against his good arm and rubs his jaw up and down, trying to dislodge the gag. His skin burns and peels from the friction but eventually he works it from between his teeth to catch on his chin, and then hang soggy around his neck.
“Hood!”

It comes out a rasp. His throat is dry. He’s dehydrated from all of the sweat, spit, and tears he’s shed. He licks his lips and tries again, taking a big breath. It isn’t easy. With the way he’s hanging, his chest can’t expand fully.

“Hood! Jay!”

He waits, afraid that if he keeps yelling he won’t be able to hear a reply. He still almost misses it, it’s so hushed.

“T’m?”

Jason’s eyes flicker, his head lists to one side.

Tim sobs in relief, “Yeah? You still with me?”

“Th…they put…som’thn inside me.”

“I know,” Tim’s voice cracks, “I couldn’t see what. Did you?”

Jason’s throat bobs and makes a clicking sound, “Th…think it’s a…a bomb.”

Tim squeezes his eyes shut and bites his lip until his mouth fills with the thick taste of salt and metal.

“I don’t…I don’t wanna die. Not now…Not like this,” the admission is so frail and weak, it doesn’t sound like Jason at all, “I’m scared.”

Tim blinks back tears. It takes effort to speak around the knot his larynx has twisted into, “What? You? No way! Pretty sure that’s impossible. The Red Hood—that guy’s not scared of anything. Except spending too much on name brand toothpaste and mouthwash.”

Jason huffs wetly. He probably shouldn’t be making that sound, but Tim would rather him be chuckling in pain than silent and frightened. Encouraged, he continues.

“He’s serious about savings. You know how everyone is always going on about what a crack shot he is? They should see him with a coupon book. Now that is terrifying. Kind of adorable, but also terrifying.”

Tim thinks he hears a light scoff.

“Oh, he’s totally adorable. Everyone agrees. Nightwing, Oracle, Batgirl…He’d probably hate that everyone thinks that, but it’s true. He can’t help it. He pouts in his sleep, and dances in the kitchen when he cooks. And sings classic rock songs when he cleans, just like his mom did. And, ha,” Tim laughs dizzily, it’s getting harder to talk, “He’s got no fracking clue how hot he is. You should, ah, appreciate this story. One time, when we first started hanging out, I dropped him in the bathtub. Apparently he thought it was because, well, he’s got some gnarly scars he’s real self conscious about. Scars. He thought I was grossed out by some scars! Had no idea it was because I’d popped a massive boner. Just rock-hard, on the spot.”

Tim giggles, a lonely thread note that’s soon swallowed up by silence. At some point Jason’s eyes slip closed, Tim realizes in dismay.


Tim flails, knowing it won’t do him any good. His hands are too bloated and numb to do anything.
with. Where the hell is Batman? What’s taking him and the others so long? The Great Detective should have found them by now, shouldn’t he? Oh god, is this how Jason felt the first time; all alone in a warehouse in Ethiopia waiting to die and wondering why Bruce wasn’t there yet? A grating jolt of pain sends his attention upward. He sees a flash of white and registers he’s actually scraped a patch of skin at his wrist down to the bone. He’d be willing to lose a hand at this point if it meant being able to cross the few feet to Jason. Or maybe just his finger…

He runs the math in his head. It takes around 1800 Newtons to cut through a finger bone. The number is reduced to around 1500 if you go through a knuckle instead, but even then you have to contend with the synovial sac, tendons, ligaments, and articular cartilage. The maximum human bite force can go as high as 770 Newtons. It would hurt like hell and Tim’s not sure if he’d actually be able to carry the act out to completion, but hypothetically he could take his own thumb off in three bites. Once it’s gone he could slide that hand free and then…his other hand would still be stuck. But his reach would be extended, possibly far enough to grab hold of the cart. There has to be a tool in there somewhere he could use to get out of these chains. The cart becomes his new focus. He may not even have to resort to self-amputation to get it.

He bucks his hips forward and pushes off his toes the best he can into a swing. Pain shoots through his body, radiating from the torn joint in his bad shoulder. He grunts and pushes it to the back of his mind. Nothing matters now but building his momentum. Every swing sends fresh sweat rolling down his back, but it also takes him closer to his goal. He curls his abdominals and brings his legs up as high as he can, toes pointed like a ballet dancer. Just a few more oscillations and his toes will brush the cart. One more inch and he can hook them over its edge—

A deafening crash startles him. He wails in outrage when it causes him to accidentally kick the cart further away.

“Red Robin?”

Gruff, brusque, and such a relief to his ears Tim almost starts crying again.

“Batman?”

He contorts awkwardly to look back past his shoulder to where a dark-clad figure is descending the stairs. One foot hovers, poised over the bottom step as it takes the scene in.

“Oracle, Nightwing, I’ve found them. The abandoned subway platform under 5th and Main. Have Alfred send the jet.”

The toe touches down and time starts back up again. Batman stands before him, one arm wraps around his waist to alleviate the strain of hanging while the other brings a lock pick up to his cuffs. His arms don’t immediately fall to his sides, joints frozen. When they do, he swears he can hear the bones and tendons creak. He buries his face in Batman’s armored chest to muffle his cry. He lets Bruce hold him for a second and wishes he had longer to lean on the man he secretly considers more of a father than Jack ever was. As soon as his feet are lowered to the ground though, he blinks up at the stern mouth and unforgiving cowl.

“B, you gotta,” he sucks in a breath, “You’ve got to help, Jay. It’s a—”

“A trap. I know. Get to safety. I’ll get him and deal with Joker. Get up to Main and Nightwing will meet you any minute.”

Tim shakes his head, “No! No, you don’t understand—Jay, they—Joker put a—”
A squeal of rusted metal drowns him out.

“Red, go,” Batman orders and shoves Tim behind him.

Tim stumbles, knees cracking on the cement. He stretches his hands out to catch himself but his injured arms crumple under him and his chin strikes the ground.

Joker saunters out of the front doors of the decommissioned rail car.

“Well, isn’t this heartwarming. You know, at first I thought I’d make you choose between the two of them. Which one lives, which one dies: Bird Two or Bird Three? But that’d be too easy. Poor little Zomboy wouldn’t have a chance though would he? You didn’t even hesitate to free Bird Three first.” He strides behind Jason and threads gloved fingers through sweat-matted hair, “He’s never going to be Batman’s first priority. Not with those pesky little habits of his like putting bad guys down and refusing to stay down himself. So in the spirit of fair competition, I’m going to make you choose between two homicidal creations of yours instead.”

Batman’s mouth opens.

“Nah-ah-ah!” Joker scolds, “Don’t deny it. You made us both into what we are.”

He pulls a pair of handguns from his jacket. Tim recognizes them instantly as Jason’s own. Joker sets one on the ground and kicks it towards Batman. Then he crouches behind the chair and rests his chin on Jason’s shoulder. He puts the barrel of the gun he kept to Jason’s temple.

“Now this is familiar isn’t it?”

“Joker,” Batman growls, ignoring the pistol at his feet.

Tim eyes it warily as Batman and Joker face off.

“So here’s the deal Bats, all you’ve got is a headshot. I’m going to blow his addled, deranged brains out, and if you want to stop it…you’re going to have to—what was it? You’re going to have to shoot me. Right in my face. Did I get that line right, Shortpants?” Joker asks, nuzzling against Jason’s neck, below his ear.

Jason’s eyes crack open and blood bubbles on his lips.

“Let him go,” Batman commands, stance tensing.

“It’s him or me, you have to decide,” Joker croons, “No option C this time, Batsy. No handy-dandy pipes to rebound your toys off of.”

Batman’s head tics minutely side to side and Tim knows he’s looking for anything to refute Joker’s declaration, but all there is is smooth expanses of concrete. The stairs are behind him and the cart is made of plastic, anything thrown its way will just lodge in it.

“Come on, Bats. I don’t have all day,” Joker chuckles.

“You know I can’t. Let him go, please.”

Joker sighs in irritation. “Puhhleaze. Batsy, if there’s one thing the kid and I can agree on it’s how passé your no-killing line is. Besides,” he wheedles, “it’s not like it’s stopped you before.”

Joker uses his grip in Jason’s hair to tilt his head back, exposing the pale column of his throat. He rubs a thumb left of Jason’s chin, where the line of a scar cuts.
“You’re lying,” Batman hisses.

“Oh, I don’t lie, I only joke,” Joker shakes his head with a smile, “Now I’ll count to three.”

“Put the gun down, Joker!” Batman barks refusing to make a move towards the gun at his feet.

“One.”

Tim stares up at Batman in horror. He’s not going to let Joker kill Jason is he? Surely not. Jason is supposed to be his son. Bruce had confessed that to him that night in the Cave - *I wanted to be that one person he could count on. Not just his guardian or mentor, but his father. I can’t do it, Tim. I can’t bury my son again.* Isn’t that more important than his code? So why isn’t he moving? He’s always respected and accepted Bruce’s conviction on the subject, but hearing it in a lecture versus seeing it enacted to extremity before his eyes...

“Shoot him!” Tim screams.

“Two.”

Tim throws himself forward, scrabbling for the gun.

“Red—No!”

His fingers catch the grip.

“Thr—”

Joker gasps. The gun clatters from his hand, which he now presses to the red stain blooming over his ribs, under his arm. Batman glares down at him, but Tim’s fingers are still barely brushing the backstrap. They turn twin gazes upward. At first Tim sees nothing, until a shadow down the long stretch of empty tunnel to the left detaches itself from a column. A man in a jean jacket and a baseball cap lowers his arm, pistol held loosely in one hand. A blade gleams in the other. He locks eyes with Tim and nods.

“Will,” Tim whispers.

He isn’t sure how he could have ever seen the man as anything less than lethal. Restrained violence is writ in every inch in his frame, bitter indifference in the line of his mouth.

“Who?” Batman grunts.

Willis Todd hides the gun under his jacket in a shoulder holster and stalks forward, heedless of Batman’s intimidating glare. He pauses at Jason’s side, taking in his son’s condition. One hand strays outward to stroke the curved crest of bone over Jason’s eye.

“Get away from him!” Bruce rushes forward.

Will sneers at Batman and the hand diverts from its path to grab Joker by the tie and haul him away from his son.

“Who? Who are you?” Joker stammers.

Will looks down at him dispassionately, “Doesn’t matter. There’s a bullet in your lung. It tore through some important muscles and your pleural sac on the way in. You’re suffocating and bleeding out at the same time. You won’t last ten more minutes. And I’m going to make every one of them count. Everything you did to my boy, I’m returning on you seventy times seven-fold.”
“But, who?” Joker insists.

Will casually stabs the point of his sword into Joker’s hand and the question ends in an ear-piercing yelp.

“I can’t let you do that,” Batman protests, “He needs to be taken to the auth—”

Will growls and swings the blade up towards Batman’s vulnerable chin, “Stop right there. You have a choice, the same one you keep fucking up over and over. You can save that boy or you can try to take this yaldson from me. But I guarantee you, that’s a fight you won’t win.”

Batman’s shoulders curl forward at the challenge; his heels rise slightly off the ground. Tim pushes up to his knees and latches onto Batman’s elbow, halting the motion.

“B, don’t! Leave him, please. There’s a bomb!”

That has the desired effect. Batman’s head snaps back to him.

Joker’s mouth stretches wide in glee, “And everyone still loses!” He dissolves into a fit of choking laughter.

Will’s eyebrows furrow and he stabs down with his sword again, into the hole he’d left earlier. He twists the blade and Joker’s laugh morphs into a scream. Will tightens his grip on Joker’s tie and slides further out of Batman’s reach. Once he’s out of immediate range, he turns his back on them, as if Batman is not a threat worthy of his regard. Joker’s blood drips from tip of his sword as he drags his prize deeper down the tunnel. Batman bristles at Tim's side.

“Joker put something in Jay! I think it’s a bomb!” Tim shouts, competing for Batman’s attention.

“What?”

“Joker put a bomb in Jay!”

He shoves himself away from Bruce, tripping in his haste to get to Jason. He chokes on a cry. Large careless stitches zig-zag up Jason’s chest, sewn so tightly they’re ripping holes into the very tissues they’re seaming together. Something flashes, catching his eye and he looks over the gore-smearred flesh in confusion. Then it goes off again and he lets out a low moan. A red light blinks at him from Jason’s belly, through the skin where it’s stretched thin and distended over a harsh geometric shape.

“Oh god, Jason. Jason.”

He shuffles forward, flinching at the sight of the shortened stubs of Jason’s fingers until he’s by Jason’s head. Jason’s eyes are wide and sightless, bruised lips parted in a slack jaw. Tim curls his fingers into Jason’s blood-stiff strands of hair and drops his forehead to rest against Jason’s. He jerks back at the barely-there rasp of air, not even a real breath.

“Jason?”

Heavy lids blink, hazy blue sliding slowly from one corner to the other.

“Jason,” he tries again.

“Ti’?”

Tim squeezes his eyes closed. They burn at the corners. He opens them and forces a smile.
“Yeah, Jay.”

“Br’ss?” Jason croaks.

“Yes. Bruce too,” Tim answers, “He’s right here with me. We’re both here.”

Jason’s lips spasm to one side, trying to grin, “Made it th’s time. S’ved me.”

Bruce pushes the cowl back. With the Bat gone, he looks human. Too shaken to hide the emotions on his face so that even Tim can read them: fear, guilt, doubt, and love. He brushes his thumb over a busted cheekbone.

“ ‘m cold.”

Fine tremors wrack Jason’s body.

“I know, son. I know,” Bruce lowers his voice to a soothing rumble, “Don’t worry, it’s just for a little bit. We’ll be here when you get back, alright? Tim and I will be waiting for you.”

Jason’s head tips down ever-so-slightly in what might be a nod. Bruce swallows. When he speaks again the gentleness has been replaced with steel.

“Tim, hold him down.”

Tim leans forward, his forearms pressed into Jason’s shoulders. He buries his face in Jason’s neck. He feels the convulsions when Bruce starts cutting stitches open and pulling thread. He feels the suck when Bruce tugs the device out of his thoracic cavity. Feels it when the last remaining tension in Jason’s body smoothes out.
Hello lovely friends and readers. Wow. It has been a journey. I'm sorry for all the pain I put you through last chapter. I know I promised fluff to soothe it all away...but you'll have to keep waiting I'm afraid. This chapter however does answer a lot of the questions that have been raised throughout. I say a lot rather than all, because that would require just way too dialogue exposition to be fun to read. Small questions/headcanons I'll answer in the comments, others will be answered later in the story. Gah, I hope y'all like it and lives up to the speculative hype.

Also, can I say 1500+ kudos and 1500+ comments? LIKE HOLY SHITSNACKS GUYS! <3

I didn't put this through as many edits as usual, if you see an error, point it out and I'll fix it, thanks.

Chapter 26

“Tim,” Dick’s voice drifts in from the doorway, kind yet subdued, “It’s time for dinner. Alfred made macaroni and cheese, your favorite.”

Tim purses his lips.

“Will he be there?” he asks sourly.

Dick sighs, “You’re going to have to talk to him eventually.”

“No. I won’t,” he replies and his voice is steel.

“Tim, I know you don’t want to hear this but Bru—”

Tim whirls his head around to face his brother and snarls, “No I don’t. You weren’t there, Dick! You have no idea what it was like.”

“I saw his body when Bruce carried him onto the jet, Tim. I saw what they did,” Dick reminds him gently, moving closer.

“Tim chokes on a bitter laugh, “Oh, you saw the body? And you think that gives you some idea? You don’t know anything, Dick. You didn’t see them cutting him open, tearing bits of him off! You didn’t hear him screaming or crying. You didn’t hear him when—” Tim stops. He takes a breath and
licks his lips, “Maybe…maybe if Joker had just gone a few rounds with the crowbar before putting a
gun to his head…maybe then I could forgive Bruce. But not after what they did to him. He was
scared Dick, he was so scared.”

Tim’s voice cracks. He rolls his lips between his teeth and tongues the stitches there so he won’t let
out a sob. He hadn’t even noticed he’d bitten through his lip until Dick pulled him aside back in the
cave to check him over while Alfred saw to Jason’s remains. A hand touches his face and he startles
when he sees Dick crouched in front of him.

“You wouldn’t be able to forgive him either Dick, not if you had been there,” Tim states quietly with
conviction.

Dick’s shoulders sag, “I don’t know. But Tim, it’s been nine days. You can’t stay in here forever.”

Tim shakes his head in denial, even as he registers that the only part of him that’s warm is the corners
of his eyes where unshed tears burn. He looks down at the cold stiff hand clutched between his
gloves.

“I can’t leave him. What if he wakes up?” Tim asks, wryly aware of the fact that five months ago it
had been him trying to lure Dick away from Jason’s bedside while he asked the same question.

He brushes his thumb over scarred knuckles. Dick oozes onto the seat with him, slipping into the
non-existent space between Tim and the armrest of the recliner they’d replaced the folding chairs
with. He pulls Tim into a hug.

“Tim, you’ve already rigged this place with more cameras and alarms than I can shake a stick at.
Please, just come up with me and eat something. You haven’t been eating or sleeping and I’m
worried about you,” Dick pleads.

“I—I can’t, I…”

“Tim, please. Just for an hour. Eat something, take a nap and you can come back,” Dick begs.

His fingers cramp. He wants to trace them over Jason’s still face; his brow, his cheek, his eyelashes,
the curve of his lips. But with one arm trapped in a sling that would mean letting go of his hand, and
he’s not ready to do that.

“Drake, I will watch Todd until you return. Grayson is right. If you don’t nourish your body, you
will fall ill and then you won’t be able to continue your presence here at all,” a clipped terse voice
sounds from the doorway.

Tim’s eyes snap to where Damian stands, bundled up thoroughly against the icy temperature of the
freezer. His lips almost crook up at the book tucked under one arm. He’s not quite sure how or why,
but in the past week he and Damian have come to a truce. Much to his surprise, when the others
eventually had to relinquish some of their watch shifts to return to the obligations of their real lives,
Damian had stepped up and volunteered to take their places. When Tim could be cajoled into breaks
to shower, eat, and make some attempt to sleep, without fail when he returned he’d find Damian
curled up in the recliner reading from one of the books Jason had set aside for him. Damian strides
forward and forcibly breaks Tim’s grasp on Jason’s hand, uncurling one frozen finger at a time. Tim
doesn’t miss the look of gratitude Dick shoots the boy as he takes the opportunity to manhandle Tim
up and out of the chair.

As they walk out, Tim’s gaze sweeps the refrigerated room. Steph and Alfred had tried hard to make
it appear more welcoming and less sterile. Tim had been adamant that it was important for Jason to
know, as soon as he woke up that he was in a safe space. Even Damian had pitched in with his artistic talents. Photos and posters line the walls, and they’d cleared one of the shelves to make room for cards and gifts.

There was the stuffed purple bear Stephanie had brought, holding a heart embroidered with “Get Well Soon!” It was tacky and cheap, but something Jason would love without ever admitting because it screamed Steph. It sat propped against a box of recipe cards Jeremy had dutifully copied his grandmother’s recipes down on. Next to those was a bouquet of now wilting multi-colored daisies from Miss Lucille. Motorcycle accident, coma, they had told them. A couple other gifts had been delivered directly to Tim’s apartment as well. He’d hesitated to bring them over to the manor to put on display before ultimately deciding, fuck it: a delicate gold and green glass Turkish tea set, and an 1854 bottle of Glenavon Whiskey.

Dick leads him out into the hall and helps him start to unwrap his many layers. When they manage to get the gloves peeled off, he’s mildly shocked that his fingers are blue under the fabric. Maybe he had been in there too long. He shambles through the sprawling manor, Dick’s hand on his shoulder as they make their way towards the heart of the house. He’s not sure if it’s the change of scenery or his brain thawing, but the further they get from the freezer the more he starts to come back to himself. It’s been nine days. Maybe Dick is right and it’s time to transition from holding a beside vigil to a more sustainable long-term plan.

Some part of him protests that, screeching that’s giving up and moving on, but the greater part knows Jason wouldn’t want him to fall apart and fade away either. Suck it up, put on your big-boy britches and go be a bad-ass, I’ll see ya when I get back, Babybird. And Jason will come back to him, he believes steadfastly. He’s just taking longer than last time.

They reach the kitchen and Tim stumbles to a stop. Instead of taking his meal to his office or the dining room, Bruce is seated at the oversized marble-topped island. Alfred stands at his back, hand on his shoulder mirroring him and Dick, while Bruce stares forlornly into a bowl of macaroni and cheese. Tim takes a step back, treading on Dick’s toes.

“I can’t,” he garbles apologetically.

Both of the men in the kitchen turn to look at the sound.

“Tim,” Dick’s face falls, begging.

“No.”

How can he explain that the thought of his favorite food makes him nauseous now? That the scent reminds him of a night spent on the couch with Jason with only Cat between them while they marathoned his favorite movies, quoting iconic lines back and forth to each other.

“Jason baked his with Ritz crackers and bacon on top,” he explains nonsensically.

He pushes past Dick and heads to the garage, his brother following hot on his heels.

“Wait!” Dick calls out.

Tim snags a set of keys to the only automatic car in the garage. It’s one of Alfred’s town cars. He doesn’t care if it’s lo-jacked or not. Dick catches up to him as he opens the driver’s side door, and grabs at the panel so he can’t close it.
“Where are you going?”

Tim tilts his head back against the headrest. “Out. Look, I’m not going off the deep end I swear. I’m just going out to grab something because I can’t eat that, and I can’t eat here with him like everything is okay between us. I,” he pauses thoughtfully, “I think I feel like having a burger, actually.”

He drops into the stool next to the man in the jean jacket nursing a beer at the bar.

“Hey Tim,” Will intones without looking away from the ballgame playing on the screen mounted above the taps.

“Willis,” Tim acknowledges acidly.

Maybe it’s not the best approach to take towards an imperishable being with centuries worth of fighting skills, but for at least now Tim knows he’s safe. Will’s eyes flick to him at the noticeable edge to his name.

“Is he back yet?”

“No,” Tim shakes his head and Will let’s out a burdened breath.

He regards the brown bottle in his hands disinterestedly and waves the bartender over.

“Black Label, please. Leave the bottle. Want anything kid?”

Tim’s stomach growls. “Whatever’s good,” he shrugs.

“And a Sal’s Special,” Will tacks on to the order, pouring out a shot.

The bartender walks off with a nod. Once his back is turned to put the food order in at the kitchen window, Will slides the shotglass towards Tim. Tim scrutinizes it skeptically.

“C’mon kid,” Will groans, “If we’re gonna have this conversation, I’m not doing it without a little whiskey in me and I hate being the only one drinking. Now drink that before he turns around because I’ll bet my undying ass you’re not legal yet.”

Tim glares at him and downs the shot. All the Daedric princes, that burns. Tim splutters. Will slaps him on the back and offers him a swig of his beer to chase the caustic taste down with. Tim finishes almost half the bottle before handing it back, wishing there was more. He breathes heavily, fingertips braced on the lacquered wood. He should have waited until after eating, he can already feel the alcohol flushing through his system. Will takes the glass from his grip and pours himself a shot. He knocks it back effortlessly, throat working smoothly as he swallows.

“That’s better,” he remarks, drawing a hand over his mouth and clinking the glass back down on the counter.
He fills it again with a steady hand then leaves it where it is. He takes his hat off and rakes his fingers back through his hair, Tim recognizes the movement as one of Jason’s, but instead of standing on end, Will’s simply flops back into place.

“So, how is he?”

“I told you, he’s not back yet. It’s taking longer than before. Should…should I be worried?” Tim does his best to keep his anxiety from showing.

Will shakes his head dismissively and Tim takes comfort in that.

“I didn’t get the best look at him while I was there. Had some other things competing for my attention at the time. What’s the damage?”

Will picks up a sugar packet and dumps it on the counter, then another. Once he has a sizable pile of the powder he starts drawing patterns in it, symbols. Tim doesn’t recognize any of them but the shapes are too distinct to be random swirls.

“Four broken ribs. A broken wrist and a fractured femur. Doctor was able to reattach his ear but the fingers and toes weren’t salvageable. Any chance those will grow back?” Tim inquires.

Will shakes his head minutely, studiously avoiding Tim’s gaze as he concentrates on pushing the crystals around, “Doubtful. Anything else?”

“Multiple lacerations to his intestines and a punctured stomach. Probably, you know, from when Joker cut him open with a pair of scissors and shoved a bomb in him,” Tim lists, “Oh, and missing two molars.”

Will’s eyes squeeze shut, mouth contorted in a grimace.

“Right before he died, he thanked Bruce for saving him I don’t think he even knew you were there,” Tim lowers his voice cruelly.

Will draws a hand across the sugar, erasing the designs. He takes the shot he poured earlier.

“Are you going to tell him otherwise?”

“I don’t know. It shouldn’t be my responsibility to, it should be up to you or Bruce. It won’t take him long to figure out it wasn’t Bruce who killed the Joker though. Especially not after your…” Tim struggles to find an appropriate adjective for the carnage. Joker’s body had appeared the next day spiked upside down to a wall in Crime Alley, beaten, disemboweled, hands and feet cut off at the wrists and ankles. “Ostentatious display,” is what he settles for.

Will’s lips curl up brutishly. Tim shivers at the ruthless grin of the otherwise unassuming man sitting next to him. He doesn’t feel any remorse for what happened to Joker, but knowing the savagery Will is not only capable of but gleeful to dole out, sends an undercurrent of something close to fear thrumming through him at their close proximity. The bartender returns, setting a plate with big hearty burger in front of him. Tim unfolds the napkin onto his lap, buying time for his stomach to unclench.

He turns the plate and studies the burger, trying to figure out the logistics for attacking this behemoth.

“So why are you here, Tim? I take it you’re here for more than a guilt trip,” Will guesses tiredly, the vicious fire from the moment before snuffed out.

Tim goes for a bite. He chews for a while, distracted from the question by the sheer deliciousness of the juicy grilled beef, crisp lettuce, tangy pickles and a sauce that lights up his tastebuds like the
fourth of July. No wonder Jason was always eager to jet out here to watch a game.

“Questions,” Tim mumbles through a mouthful. “I’ve got questions for you,” he tries to say sternly with cheeks packed like a chipmunk’s.

“Do you kids never eat?” Will’s staid voice asks in amusement.

“Mmm,” Tim makes a face and swallows, “Haven’t had much an appetite lately. Think I had a banana yesterday and maybe a granola bar the day before—Oh god this burger is so good…” He sets it down and wipes his fingers on his napkin. “Tell me everything. Who are you? What are you? How old are you? Why are you in Gotham and why now?” Tim picks up speed as his anger grows, “Where were you when he was living on the streets? Or when he died the first time?”

Will raises a hand, palm out, “Hold on, hold on. One at a time okay?”

Tim frowns, “Fine. Something easy, how old are you? Farthest back I could find anything concrete was 1897.”

“Concrete, huh?”

“Well there was a Robart Todd who sailed to Hampton, Virginia in 1622 but I didn’t think a surname was enough evidence to…”

Will’s focus surreptitiously slides to the empty facet-cut shot glass. He tilts it around its bottom rim, throwing rings of sunlight over the bar top.

“Oh my god, are you serious?” Tim groans in disbelief, “How old are you?”

Will lifts a shoulder.

Tim mimics him, “What is that supposed to mean? You don’t know?”

“We weren’t quite as methodical about keeping track back then, well aside from the clerics I suppose,” Will scratches his head, “But when I was about your age, I went under the banner of the Earl of Norfolk to join the King they called Lionheart to march on Arsur.”

“Wait. Like. Richard the Lionheart? Are you…are you telling me you were a knight?”

“A knight?” Will snorts and pours himself a third. He swirls the amber liquid around. “Sard, no. Just an idiot bastard who bought into the call to take back the Holy Land from the infidel and get rich along the way. I never even made it to Arsur. I was captured at Acre and when the Lionheart killed all of the Moslem prisoners during the siege, I was executed with all those taken with me in turn. That was my first death,” he adds quietly and drinks.

“How…how many times have you died?” Tim queries in hushed awe.

Will rolls his shoulders back, expression closing off, “I’m sure you have other things you’d rather know Tim. Ask those.”

It is not a request.

“Okay, moving on: what are you?” Tim tries.

“Human,” Will answers mildly.

Tim rolls his eyes, “You know what I mean.”
“It’s complicated. Are you going to finish that?” Will points to Tim’s long-forgotten burger.

It really is the best burger he’s ever had, but the conversation is more immediately significant and Will seems disinclined to continue it here. Tim takes a hurried bite. He could use the protein. His stomach isn’t used to so much food at once after the past week though and he feels uncomfortably full after only a few more bites. He shoves the plate away from himself. Will raises a hand, beckoning the bartender and gets their check. When he’s done paying, Tim follows him outside.

“Let’s take a walk.”

It’s not really a suggestion since Will is already heading down the sidewalk. His gait stays relaxed despite his fast pace. Tim has to take two steps to keep up with each long stride.

Will talks as he walks, “I mean it Tim. We’re not aliens or gods…we still need to eat, sleep, and fuck. We still bleed and can be killed.”

“But, but what are you?”

Will looks at Tim slyly from the corner of his eye, “Would giving it a name make you feel better? I’ve heard Children of Prometheus most commonly, but also the Living Ones, the Blessed Dead, and the Seed of Hun Hunaphu, among others. Some believe we’re supposed to be stewards of mankind. Protecting and guiding our shorter lived brothers, as Prometheus brought fire to humanity. Only accepted into death once we fulfill our roles here on earth.”

“Some believe? Do you?”

Will shoves his hands in the pockets of his jacket and makes his way across the road to the manicured green lot of Grant Park, rather than answer him. They sit at one of the benches looking out across the duck pond.

“Best I figure is it’s something magical that passes through bloodlines cropping up every once in awhile like a redhead in a family of blondes,” Will states, propping an ankle up on the opposite knee.

Tim pops an eyebrow up at him.

“I know it’s not the neat clean answer you want Tim, but it’s all I’ve got.”

They don’t speak for a while after that. The sky is gray but it’s warm out, all in all it’s a nice day in Gotham. A young man helps a little boy on the footbridge break bread into pieces to throw to the ducks nearby. A pair of female joggers in athletic gear lap the perimeter of the park. A businessman in a suit and tie occupies the next bench down, trying to eat a hotdog and hold a conference call without dripping mustard on his shirt. Tim’s attention keeps returning to the man and his son, both of their faces wreathed in smiles.

“Why did you leave him?” Tim wonders aloud, “Not that it’d make it okay that you left regardless; but if there was even the slightest chance he was like you, didn’t you think he might need to know?”

Will scrubs at his face then digs through his pockets, retrieving a pack of cigarettes.

“Honestly, Tim,” Will mutters around the filter between his lips as he continues to search for a lighter, “I didn’t even think he was mine. Sheila was…She was smart and beautiful and one of the most manipulative self-centered people I have ever met. And I’ve met a lot of people over the years. At first I figured she was just dropping him on me so her life wouldn’t be inconvenienced by taking care of a baby—with the added bonus of throwing a wrench in things between me and Cathy. Cathy though, she didn’t get angry or bitter she just…she loved that little baby. Christ, he was such a tiny
thing. Could carry him around in one hand. Pretty too, looked just like Sheila except for his hair. Had a wicked set of lungs on him though, sure could scream up a ruckus.”

Will chuckles softly, his washed-out eyes crinkling up at the corners.

“I don’t understand. If you were happy then why leave?” Tim persists.

Will pulls the still unlit cigarette from his mouth and every line in his body droops.

“I don’t expect you to understand Tim, as it’s a situation somewhat unique to our ilk—but I’m over eight hundred years old. Do you know how many friends and lovers and sons and daughters I’ve watched die? I still don’t know which is worse, seeing them culled before their time or slowly fade away before your eyes…but it is an exquisite agony watching your loved ones age. Leaving you behind. I couldn’t deal with going through that again. The more I grew to care about them, the more I tried to distance myself. Drugs were an escape at first and then…well, getting killed in prison was an easy way out.”

The unlit cigarette falls from between Will’s fingers. He hangs his head and stares at it on the pebbled pavement between his shoes.

“God, do you have any idea what happened after you left? What Jay went through?”

“I did come back,” Will defends weakly, “When I heard Cathy had died, I came back, but by then Jason had already been adopted. By Bruce Wayne no less. Reckoned he was in better hands with him than he would be with me so I set out again.”

Tim growls, more angry than he can ever recall being, “You came back? You—Jay had already been living on the streets for over a year when Bruce found him, you pathetic excuse for a fa—shit.”

Will’s head whips up, “You okay?”

“It’s nothing. I tore open my lip again,” Tim mutters through a mouthful of blood.

“Here,” Will hands him what looks like an old-time handkerchief with monogrammed initials embroidered at the corner.

Usually Tim would politely decline, bloodstains are hard to get out of white cloth, but he’s in no mood to be polite. He takes the square of fabric and holds it to his lip.

“Again, I don’t expect you to understand but,” Will flicks the lighter open and closed in agitation, “when you’re as old as I am, time is…a year is so short. It’s easy to lose track.”

“That’s a crappy excuse,” Tim snaps, heedless of the twinge in his lip.

“I didn’t say it wasn’t!” Will barks, cool demeanor breaking, “I know I was a shite father, I don’t need some wet-behind-the-ears whelp to tell me that. Look, I’m not asking you to forgive me—I’m just telling you what happened.”

Tim flinches back and angles himself defensively. Will may have a better cap on his anger than Jason, but apparently can still be goaded into an outburst just like his son. Combined with the fact he has centuries more bloodshed on his hands than Jason, Tim is not reassured. They sit in tense silence, shoulders hunched. The little boy on the bridge giggles when his dad sweeps him up onto his shoulders. Tim pulls the handkerchief away from his lip. The bleeding has slowed to a light spotting. He doesn’t pass it back to Will, but keeps it clutched in his fist.
He asks his next question far more carefully, “So why now? And if you were back in Gotham, where were you the last two times he died?”

Will pockets his lighter so he can grind the heels of his hands into his eyes.

“I only found out Jason was one of you after he died. I should have come back then just in case, but I’ve sat at enough graves waiting and hoping in vain before that it seemed pointless,” his voice steadily fades, until he gives himself a shake. “Anyway I came back to Gotham oh, seven months or…ten?” Will waves his hand vaguely, “A little less than a year ago on some other business. Started hearing the rumors that Red Hood was the second Robin returned with a vengeance, something worth looking into. And then Joker killed him. Imagine my surprise when a few weeks later I get a kid who needs a ride to Wayne manor and end up toting him and someone who looks suspiciously like Jason Todd all over Gotham.”

“Are you telling me that you being our Uber ride was total coincidence?” Tim lifts his eyebrows skeptically.

Will huffs with laughter, “Swear to god. Almost shat my pants when he rolled out to the car. Ah, life never ceases to surprise. As to the bridge…” Will purses his lips, “I should have been there, but I was out of town.”

“Doing what?” Tim narrows his eyes.

“Atlantic City, trying my luck at the tables. I’m very good at poker,” Will hedges.

Tim sucks in a sharp breath. Atlantic City. Rowan Richardson gutted like a fish, estimated time of death: four weeks prior. A phone call made four weeks ago requesting a ride, answered by a breathless Will and interrupted by a moan. The figure in a jean jacket and hat that had been staking out the same building he and Steph had…Not a moan of pleasure apparently.

“You weren’t having sex,” Tim mumbles to himself.

“Uh, excuse me?”

“You—you killed him. Stephanie’s organ snatcher case. Oh my god, that was you we chased through the sewers that night wasn’t it?”

“You’re a very astute boy,” Will credits him, “Actually I should thank you. It’d caught onto your friend tailing it. She flushed it out into the open for me. Been hunting that one all across the Americas the last couple of years. It needed to be put down.”

“It?”

“I’m sure it won’t surprise you to find that there are other anomalies in the world, considering some of your…associates. Not all of them are as well-adjusted as I am. Some of them have developed rather nasty appetites. I was taking care of some business for a friend. Godswounds, if you think I’m old you should see her. Old hag certainly looks the 3,000 years she claims to be,” Will mutters.

Tim leans back on the bench, oblivious to the how the hard slats of wood press uncomfortably into his back and rump. It’s too much to take in all at once. The information rolls chaotically around in his head, instead of sorting itself into the neat stacks of cross-referenced data he prefers. He’s going to have a splitting headache after this, he just knows. The father and son duo have finished feeding the ducks and he watches as they leave the park with matching grins, the boy’s little feet bouncing off his father’s chest with each step.
“So. Anything else you want to ask, or are we done for now?”

“Is Jason the only child you’ve had that was one of you?”

Will’s face takes on a pinched expression.

“No.”

“How man—”

“Just two. That I knew of.”

Knew . Tim doesn’t fail to pick on the past tense.

“I’m sorry,” Tim dips his head respectfully.

“I told you, Tim. We’re hard to destroy, but it’s not impossible. Jason is special, one of a very rare breed. The media has already covered two of his deaths – in Crime Alley and on the bridge. Even if most people think it was a fluke or copycat, you and I both know there are others out there who will notice. What happened with Joker is evidence enough, but more than that…Immortality is a coveted thing. People will come after him if they know. Now I need to ask you something; will you keep watching over my son as you have?”

“Of course,” Tim vows without hesitation.

He’d been willing to kill for Jason, and when the expected guilt for that never came, he knew he’d be willing to do it again if came down to it.

“Even if…” Tim swallows in embarrassment, “Even if he decides he doesn’t want to be… friends, anymore. Even if we have a falling out and hate each other, I promise I’ll still watch after him and do my best to keep him safe.”

Will’s eyes flutter closed and he takes a solemn breath, “Thank you, Tim.”

Will pushes up off the bench and stands, he looks around the park and plants his hands on his hips.

“Well, if that’s it. I’m off to find a place to piss. If you need anything, you have my number,” he states, his demeanor changing like the flick of a switch.

Tim’s hand shoots out and grabs a handful of denim before the man can take a step away.

“Wait! … wait. How am I? If you’re over eight-hundred years old, does that mean Jason will age like you too? How am I supposed to look after him when I’m eighty and he’s still…” Tim trails off in dawning horror, “He’s going to be so lonely.”

Will cocks his head to the side, studying Tim. “He doesn’t have to go through it all alone. You’re smart Tim, you know there are ways around that. If you’re willing to go that far.”

Tim’s eyes go wide at what he thinks Will is suggesting.

“You don’t mean—”

He gives a full-body jump up from the bench when his phone goes off. He claws at his back pocket, accidentally throwing the phone to the ground in his haste to answer.

“Yes?” He yelps into the speaker.
To his dismay Tim sees the alert notifications he’d missed, engrossed as he was with getting his answers from Will.

“I’m on my way! I’ll be right there!” he hangs up, cutting Damian off.

He leaps over the park bench and takes off out of the park the way they’d came, heading back to the car.

“What’s going on?” Will shouts after him.

“He’s awake!” Tim yells over his shoulder.

Tim’s feet thud loudly as he jogs up the stairs two steps at a time, bat-training be damned. He races down the hall at speeds even an Allen wouldn’t sneer at. He shoves through the cracked door into Jason’s room and plows into a broad back. Bruce makes a small sound of surprise at the impact, quickly snuffed as he leans down to help Tim up. Tim scowls at the extended hand and ignores it, pushing back up to his feet with his free arm. He shoulders past Bruce callously, ignoring him completely to address Alfred instead. The old butler stands beside the bed, inserting tubing into the catheter hub of the IV in Jason’s outstretched arm.

“How is he, Alfred?” he asks, moving towards the bed and its occupant on autopilot.

They’ve covered him in layers of blankets right up to his chin. There’s fresh gauze around his head covering his ear, wrapped around his wrists, and bandaging the stubs of his right hand. The bruises on his face stand out even more now that he’s starting to warm and losing the bluish cast to his skin. Tim wishes he could see his eyes, wishes he had been there when they first opened. Jealousy flashes briefly through him that Bruce had been there to see them while he hadn’t.

“I’m afraid he’s in quite a bit of pain, Master Tim. He’ll be on intravenous medication for the pain for the next few days. He’ll be most happy to see you when he wakes.”

Tim reaches out a hand to stroke down the side of Jason’s neck. His fingers tremble at the hollow of Jason’s throat. He diverts them to curl into the blankets bunched there. Without thinking he begins to peel back the mountain of blankets. He crawls up on the bed and slides under the covers, slotting himself into the space at Jason’s left side. It’s difficult, trying to find where he can touch Jason without fear of hurting him more. He lets his head sink down on Jason’s shoulder and splays a hand over his heart. He shivers and closes his eyes. Jason’s skin is still cold to the touch, but he can feel and hear the sluggish tempo of his heart.

It’s enough that he forgets the two other men in the room until he hears the scrape of something heavy over the floor. He opens his eyes to see Bruce dragging the arm chair up next to the right side of the bed while Alfred packs up his cart of supplies. Tim glares at Bruce and raises his chin in a challenge, but Bruce doesn’t seem particularly surprised or troubled at Tim’s positioning. He just looks tired as he settles into the chair and tentatively reaches for Jason’s gauze-wrapped hand.
“You don’t deserve to be here,” Tim reminds him flatly before letting the world narrow to just him and Jason.

And he knows. This is how it’s meant to be; the two of them, together. Until the end, whenever that is. He’s not going to leave Jason wandering the earth alone while everyone grows old and dies around him. Not when he doesn’t have to.

“I love you,” Tim murmurs against miraculously living flesh.

All he needs is a way to extend his own life to keep Jason company through the ages…All he needs is a Lazarus pit.

He’s faced tougher challenges before.
Fin.

PLEASE READ (like the whole thing)
So here we are at the end of things. I would like to thank all of you, old readers and new for all of your help, encouragement, and contributions over the past year+. I cannot convey how much it means to me. When I posted the first chapter back in January of 2016, I had no idea how this was going to go, especially as my first piece of fan fiction ever. It has been the most amazing journey and I could not have asked for better readers. It has been a joy to entertain you and to get so much in-depth, well-thought feedback. I am a very lucky writer. If you have never commented before, I would encourage you to do so now, just so I can thank you one-on-one for giving this fic a shot.

I would also like to go ahead and offer some special thanks to particular individuals who have either been instrumental in helping me get this fic up and posted, or have been with it since the very beginning. Thank you: Cerusee, ForceMage56, bunnyloverXIV, Embleer_Frith0323, OldMythologies, daemoninwhite, Azamiko, BerserkerRage, evagouel, Careamorran, thejillyfish, rpglady76, pornyplothead, and so many others and I can’t fit you all in without sounding like a bad Oscar’s speech...oh, and Kiyomisa, this is for you: <3

I’m sure many of you will notice there are some loose ends, and before you get too disappointed at not seeing something you wanted wrapped up - please before grousing about it, understand there is supposed to be a second part to this and it is very likely that what you are missing is because it is the impetus for the next sequence of events. That said, it will be awhile before part 2 starts to post because I need to go out and buy/read more comics for research before I begin. Those of you who know your canon and your comics I humbly ask your help: What issues do you believe are the must-reads in regards to Ra’s Al Ghul?

UPDATE: Check out the first peek of the sequel called the New Prometheus, freshly posted!

Chapter Notes

Chapter 27

It feels like it takes longer this time. Not that time exists here, and even if it did he has no way to
measure its passing… But it *feels* like it takes longer this time. Like there were more pieces of himself
dredge up from the deep and congeal before becoming…*aware*? What is there to be aware of? Of
himself. Of this place (non-place?) Of how weary he is. He rests in the void. He’s not capable of
anything more than that at the moment. Tenuous and translucent. A wisp of early morning fog on the
surface of a glass-smooth lake. He floats without thought, without worry. Recuperating until the
whispers and nudges come for him.

Slowly, so *slowly*, he coalesces until he’s more than fogged breath on a mirror. He’s mildly surprised
to find himself here again. Maybe he shouldn’t be, considering it’s become something of a habit - but
he really thought it’d be straight past gray and into forever black this time. He’s a little relieved to be
here. Because if he’s *here*, he knows he can cross back over. He’s not sure why he’d want to, but
having the option is nice. Reassuring. He drifts. He drifts and dozes, gathering strength and waiting
for the push-pull back into life.

It doesn’t come. That’s okay. It will. He sinks into comfortable blankness and waits.

Just a bit longer…

Nothing happens. No sibilant urgings slide into his thoughts. No ghostly hands poke and prod at
him. The lack nags at him like an itch, and he’s uncertain whether it’s out of boredom or irritation.
But *why*? He’s never wanted to leave before. He’d fought each time they’d come for him. Wanted to
stay in the tranquil state of non-existence. He’s confused by his own agitation and it makes
something in him twist unhappily. Where are they?

Hesitantly, he experiments with testing the parameters of the endless space around him. He doesn’t
*move*, not without a body, but he cautiously extends his consciousness, probing outward. As far as
he goes however, the empty astral plane continues to expand before him, endless and unchanging. Is
he alone in infinity for eternity? If he had a pulse it would be racing. He spreads further and further,
until he’s stretched so thin he’s afraid he’ll tear… *Come on you fucks, where are you?*

And then he feels it. Out on the far edge of his limits. He funnels all of his attention in that direction,
and—suddenly he’s there. Snapped into place like a rubber band. The presences regard him in
puzzlement. It’s awkward. He gets the feeling they are taking every aspect of him in; every virtue
and every flaw in his soul. Meanwhile, he’s left guessing at formless shadows.

“Well?” he asks.

He’d shrug his shoulders if he had any.

“What are you waiting for?”

They jostle and huddle together, communing, then still again.

‘*What are you waiting for?*’ they repeat back to him.

“What do you mean? I’m waiting for you guys to take me back!”

‘*What do you mean?’

Jason riles up in annoyance, “Stop repeating me! You know, cross over! Back to the other side!
Let’s go, c’mon!”

They ripple and sway until one detaches itself from the group. Jason shivers as it presses up close to
him for a long moment. Finally it pulls back and weaves side to side.
‘No.’

“No? What do you mean ‘no’?” He burns angrily, “Why the fuck not? Why not now? Every other time you’ve been more than happy to drag my ass back!”

The thing retreats, joining ranks with the group once again. He shoots forward desperately to stop it.

“No! Don’t go. You don’t understand! I have to go back, I need to!”

They pause in their undulating susurrations.

‘Why?’

“Wh—”

He freezes. Why *does* he want to go back? He doesn’t know. He can’t quite remember what happened except that he’d been hurt there. Badly. Enough that he’s struck with sudden trepidation at returning. So why? Why? Whywhywhywhywhywhy? He vibrates in frustration. Something good. Something worth going back for. The pieces are there. They’re fuzzy and their edges don’t fit and they keep sliding out of his grasp but they’re there. Something more important than the pain. Worth the pain. Bone deep contentedness. Purring under his chin. Feather light touch between his shoulder blades.

Oh god.

Him.

He remembers *him*. Not his name or even his face but…snapshots. A cat-like grin. A smudge of grease. A pencil tucked behind an ear. The sun shining down on country roads and crisp lettuce and bacon. A smear of mayo. He remembers the tickle of someone laughing into his side and telling him stories until he falls asleep. He remembers being happy.

“Because five isn’t enough…” he breathes.

That catches their curiosity and they swarm around him gently, brushing against him like silk on the breeze. He feels the distinct impression of hands on his face, phantasmal and kind.

‘You don’t need our help anymore, Little Brother.’

They disappear before he responds, water swirling down a drain. He’s left turning in circles, gaping at the deserted ether around him. He whips around frantically.

“Wait! *Little Brother*? Come back! Where did you go? I don’t know how to get there! Please!” he pleads.

He tries sending out feelers of consciousness again. On and on and on and on until he’s dizzy. Nothing. He curls in on himself, exhausted and defeated.

It’s not fair. He has to get back. He needs to make sure that—that—what was their name? He shakes the question off; the name isn’t important. He just needs to make sure they’re okay. He finally has a reason to want to leave and he’s stuck here. It’s not fair. It’s not fair!

He rages. Fuck them. Fuck them and their stupid cryptic comments. Fuck this place. They’re right. He doesn’t need them or their ‘help.’ He clawed his way out of a coffin and six feet of dirt, he can claw his way out of this. He’ll find the fucking barrier on his own. He’ll tear the veil between life
and death to pieces if he has to. He’s getting out of here.

“They were teaching us how to read. The symbols under the picture were the letters R-A-T. But the idea did not become clear to me, nor to any of us, for quite a long time. Because of course, we didn’t know what reading was —”

The voice is high, young, and he can’t place it immediately. It’s both foreign and familiar, words lightly accented and aristocratic. His back arches with the agony of his first strangled breath. He struggles to pull air into his frozen lungs. They flutter weakly, only facilitating shallow gasps. His senses are closed off and muted while his body struggles to get back on line. The reader cuts off midsentence.

“Todd? Are you awake? Todd!” There’s the sound of something dropping to the floor followed by a shout of, “Father! Father! Todd is back!”

He aches in a way that promises to turn into excruciating pain as he thaws. Fine tremors work their way up to full body shakes that knock his teeth together. While the vibrations stimulate and warm his muscles enough that he can at least start to comprehend the idea of conscious movement, it’s painful, tearing at and irritating a thousand different hurts.

His eyelids roll back slowly to a soft golden blur. It’s nice, waking up somewhere that’s neither pitchblack nor searing fluorescent light. He blinks and tries to orient himself. Amidst the welcoming glow a darker shape hovers overhead. He blinks until the image sharpens enough for him to make sense of it. It’s a poster. A black rectangle hung on the ceiling directly above him. He squints. *Don’t Panic* is painted in large friendly letters over a fist with its thumb sticking up. *Don’t Panic?*

Oh.

That’s funny.

He twists his neck to take in his surroundings. To his left is a sheet metal wall that may have stolen the breath from his lungs if it wasn’t dotted with photographs. Some of them are sharp-edged and glossy: him and Steph sitting cross-legged on the floor with a box of pizza between them, him laughing hysterically while shoving a slice of bread over Cat’s face, a selfie of Tim grinning wickedly while he’s bent over a bike in the background. He snorts fondly and immediately winces at the sharp twinge that lances up his stomach.

There are older photos as well, with faded colors and dog-eared corners. Him as Robin trying frantically to escape a noogie from a determined Batgirl. Standing on a stool helping Alfred in the kitchen. Him and Bruce at the Gotham Knights diamond with chili-dogs in their fists. And one of him and Dick bundled up in snow gear, tattered and creased like it’s been carried around in a pocket for years. Pictures of him with the family. There’s even what looks like a school photo of Damian, sullen-faced in his Gotham Academy uniform.

He swallows thickly and turns his head to the other side. Across the room is more metal paneled walls. The shelves that line them spark a hazy memory: a deep rumbling voice telling him he was safe and a pair of large arms lifting him like a child. He’s in the walk-in freezer at the manor again,
but this time someone’s attempted to make it…cozy.

There’s a comfortable looking recliner he thinks came out of the library in the middle of the floor with a standing lamp beside it on a small square rug. A battered copy of *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of Nimh* is laying spine-up where it’s been tossed. More books and magazines stack the shelves, boxes of frozen goods pushed aside to make room. There’s even a stuffed purple bear holding a heart with *Get Well Soon* embroidered on it. His lips twitch up. Definitely Blondie. Past the homely display towards the door is—Jason squints; a white erase board on the door with ‘*It has been 9 days since J. Todd died,*’ written on it in block letters.

Nine days?

He doesn’t have time to think on that further before the door swings inward with a *whoosh* of air. Jason’s chest goes tight at the blue-eyed man that hurries over the threshold.

“Jason!” There’s a hiccup in his voice when he sinks to his knees next to the cot. “You came back to us.”

Warm hands cup his face, large calloused fingers brush over his cheeks. Tears track down the man’s face and fall onto Jason’s chin even as he smiles. Jason tries to smile back through stiff lips.

“Damian, go let Alfred know to prepare his room. And find Tim!” Bruce calls over his shoulder to the boy standing in the doorway, bundled up in hat, coat, and scarf.

Jason’s smile grows. *Tim*. Bruce is here and Tim is on his way and everything is going to be okay.

“Hey there, Jay-lad.” Bruce says softly and slides his arms under Jason’s back and knees. When he lifts, the slight bow of Jason’s body has him whimpering.

“I know. I know it hurts, son,” Bruce presses dry lips to his forehead. “Once you’re settled in bed, Alfred will give you something for the pain.”

The slight bob of the world around him with each step makes his head spin and the blood rush in his ears. He turns his head into Bruce’s shoulder. He made it back. To his father. To his family. To Tim. He’d made it.

He feels *heavy*. Maybe he should be more concerned about not being able to move any of his limbs in more than a twitch, but the weight is comforting. Like the weight of a wool coat protecting him from the cold in winter, or…a warm hand resting on his chest. He slits his eyes open and looks down his nose at the long fingers splayed over his heart. There’s a dark head tucked under his chin and he cant his head until he can nose the silky strands and breathe in the scent of coffee and aftershave. *Tim*. Jason wants to pull him closer, wrap Tim around him like a blanket. He tries to raise the arm Tim’s not laying against but it’s weighed down as well. He tilts his head to the side.

There’s an IV in his right arm and it’s heavily bandaged from his wrist to fingers. Not as many as there were. One, two, three. There’s a hand conscientiously holding the remaining digits, keeping him from moving. Only one person he knows has hands that big. Bruce has an armchair pulled flush to the bedside. He’s slouched inelegantly to one side. There are deep lines etched into the corners of
his mouth and between his brows. His eyes are open but fixed motionlessly on the far wall, lost in deep and disturbing thought. Jason squeezes his thumb and forefinger together as hard as he can. It isn’t much, but it has Bruce jolting out of his trance, spine straightening.

“Jason?”

Jason tries to answer but his mouth is dryer than the Atacama salt flats and all that pushes past his lips is a pitiful wheeze. Bruce is on his feet in an instant, retrieving a glass of water from on top of the bookshelf. Jason frowns. That’s not a good place for a glass of water. If it spilled over it might drip on the books below. But he accepts the hand that cradles the back of his head and tips it enough to sip from the glass pressed to his lips. He’s thirsty, but it hurts to swallow and he only manages to finish a little less than half the glass. He licks his lips and raises his eyes to meet Bruce’s.

“Thank you,” he mouths.

“Let me know when you want more, or if you need anything else,” Bruce insists.

Jason nods, already tiring. He flicks his gaze to Tim.

“Is he okay?” he rasps.

“Aside from his shoulder, yes. He’s just tired. I don’t think he’s gotten more than fifteen hours of sleep in the past week. He’s been waiting up for you,” Bruce informs him, taking his place in the chair once again.

“Didn’t mean to take so long,” Jason mumbles.

Bruce shakes his head. “Don’t apologize. I don’t imagine it’s something you have much control over. Besides, I’m sure he’d be willing to wait however long it took. He has almost as much patience as Alfred,” Bruce says wryly. “At least regarding some things,” he amends, voice going tense.

Jason opens his mouth to ask what he means by that but is interrupted by something streaking into the room and up onto the bed with a chirp.

“Cat?” He observes the feline with surprise as she tiptoes he way up his body to nestle against the side of his neck Tim isn’t occupying.

“You named your cat, Cat?” Bruce asks, one eyebrow raised.

Jason does the best he can to shrug without dislodging any of his bedmates, “Nah. Just never got around to naming her. Probably should. She’s a good cat. Practically family now,” Jason muses sleepily. “Alfred let her in?”

“He did. It’s the first time there’s ever been a cat in the manor. There was a very thorough PowerPoint presentation involved. I believe Tim finally convinced him with the scientific argument that cat purrs between 20 to 140 Hertz promote the healing of bone and soft tissue.”

Jason grins until his face splits with a yawn.

Bruce tousles his hair, “Go back to sleep Jay-lad. Tim and I will be here with you.”

Jason’s eyes close at the command. Before he slips fully back into unconsciousness though he remembers something he needs to tell his adopted father. His recollection of the events preceding his death are limited, brain already scrambled from the crash before degrading with shock and blood loss...but he remembers the challenge of a cool metal of a gun barrel pressed against his temple.
falling away with the deafening ring of shot fired, a thumb stroking over his cheek, and Bruce’s voice soothing him.

“Bruce?”

“Yes, Jason?”

“Thank you. For coming for us. For trying to save me,” his voice catches on the last word.

Bruce doesn’t answer, he just runs his fingers through Jason’s curls. Jason falls asleep to the calming caress over his scalp.

When he wakes, he’s alone. The chair is abandoned and the space next to him on the bed is cold and empty. Even Cat is gone. The lights are off but there’s enough wan gloomy light seeping through the window to illuminate the room. Bruce lied. Jason’s humiliation at his gullibility leaves him feeling carved out and hollow. He should have known better than to trust Bruce, but Tim’s absence… That strikes him like a fist to the gut.

Maybe… Maybe they just went downstairs for dinner? Surely they’ll be back soon.

He waits.

No one comes.

He doesn’t even hear footsteps or voices echoing in the hall. It’s like the manor itself has been vacated. Everyone except him. Fear digs its fangs into his throat and has him crawling to the edge of the bed. He grimaces, sits up and stretches his bare toes to the floor. He bites his lip when he pushes off to stand. He has to hunch over the armchair, one hand poised over his gutted stomach while he catches his breath and collects himself. He eyes the door and straightens as much as he can before shuffling forward. He turns his head when he enters the hall, looking both ways, but only sees the long dimly lit corridor extending to either side.

He hobbles to the top of the grand staircase, ears straining for any sign of life: the sound of Dick humming loudly and out of tune, or the wheels of Barbie’s chair on the hardwood floors. Hell, he’d even take something as mundane as the hum of the washing machine. Anything to break the silence. But all he hears is the pad of his own feet. His knuckles turn white where he grips the bannister. The stairs seem to stretch for far more than the twenty-two steps he knows there to be. He steels himself and starts his descent, clinging desperately to the railing to keep from falling. When he makes it to the final step he stops and leans heavily on the post.

“Tim? Bruce?”

He stumbles towards the kitchen, calling out, “Alfred? Dick? Damian? Is—is anyone here?”

His heart races, hands gripping the doorframe as he wobbles into the kitchen. Empty. He surges on into the dining hall. Empty. His feet trip over themselves in his haste as he makes his way through the manor room by room. He’s frantic now, throwing open linen and coat closets, pulling their
contents out like he’ll find the Demon Brat hidden behind Martha’s old sable furs.

“Alfred! Bruce!” he shouts, his voice returned to him as it echoes down uninhabited halls, “Dick! Tim!”

They’ve gone. They’ve all gone and left him behind. After all of the pizza nights and tentative touches and heart-to-hearts and promises…None of that meant a thing and fuck…he’s alone all over again. Jason shoves his fist in his mouth, choking on the sobs that want to tear out of him. He collapses against the wall, wide-eyed, rolling the skin of his knuckles between his teeth when he hears it,

Snikt, snikt, snikt.

Ice washes over him. His head jerks towards the sound. A door is ajar. A wedge of light spills into the hall from Bruce’s study. He ambles towards it woodenly, footfalls thudding loud and obscene as he’s drawn towards it in horrified fascination. The door swings inward soundlessly with the barest press of his fingers to the paneling. He can see the two chairs for visitors set to face Bruce’s desk from here but not the desk itself. He has to leave his cover and creep inside past the angle of the door before it comes into view.

Bruce’s chair is turned to the wall, the high back concealing its occupant. The urge to spin them around and know wars with his instinct to flee. Flight or fight. Fight or flight. Flightorfightorflightorfightor—he reaches an arm out over the desk but stops before his fingertips reach the chair back, paralyzed at the sight of the jar sitting on the corner of the mahogany.

“No!”

He takes a step back, knees coming up against one of the guest chairs.

“Oh Zomboy, what’s wrong?” Joker asks, spinning around. He picks up the jar and watches its contents roll around with a delighted grin. “What, you don’t like these? But I got em just for you, still farm fresh!” He slams the jar down with one hand and points to the second guest chair next to Jason.

Tim’s body slumps over one of the armrests, still in his Red Robin uniform, intestines uncoiling in his lap from a jagged cut up his torso. His mask is gone, blood dripping down his cheeks from gaping sockets. Jason wails and Joker leaps over the desk, plowing into him. The clown kneels on his thighs and fists one hand in his hair, wrenching his head back. The other hand he holds centimeters from Jason’s face, fingers shaped into talons.

“You know what I’d like even better? A matching set!”

Sharp nails spear towards his eyes. He screams and throws up an arm to block the incoming strike.

“No! Stop!”

“He’s having a nightmare, we should wake him.”

“I know! But if you wake him up like that he’ll—”

Something grabs his shoulder and Jason lashes out blindly with his fist. There’s a crunch, followed by a surprised grunt of pain.

“—do that…I tried to tell you.”

A different set of hands curls under his neck and ribs and turns him carefully onto his side. The one
at his ribs slides up and starts smoothing up and down his spine.

“Jason. Jay, listen to me. It’s Tim. Everything is okay. I’ve got you. I’m not going to let anything happen to you. You can open your eyes, Jay. It’s okay.”

Jason shakes his head, keeping them squeezed tightly shut. The image of Tim’s corpse with its gauged out eyes still haunts him.

“Really, everything is fine. You were having a nightmare. You’re safe at the manor in your old room here with me…Oh. And Bruce is here, too. It’s a little dark in here because we closed the curtains to let you sleep, but Bruce is going to open them right now.” There’s a creak of leather and then wood. “There we go. It’s a gorgeous day outside. Blue skies and everything, like when we took the bikes up into the mountains. You should open your eyes and take a look…No? Okay. Um. It’s um…I think you broke Bruce’s nose. I’m sure you’d want to see that.”

Jason cracks an eye. When Tim’s narrative isn’t immediately revealed to be false he risks opening the other one as well.

“Hey, Sundance,” Tim smiles down at him.

His hair falls in his face limply like he hasn’t washed it in a few days and his eyes are red-rimmed with deep bags beneath them—but they’re there. Bruce looms behind him, hand held to his nose trying to stem the flow of blood oozing over his lip. Hot tears prickle at the corners of Jason’s eyes in relief.

“You’re okay,” he lifts his hand to circle a finger over Tim’s orbital ridge. “Your eyes…”

“Yes?” Tim’s smile droops in confusion.

“They’re still there,” Jason croaks, “I woke up and everyone was gone and I thought…I thought—you’d left me behind, “But Joker was there and he’d taken…”

“Oh god, no! Jay, no I’m fine. My arm’s a little screwed up and I’ve got a knot on my head but I’m fine. I’ve been here the whole time, Bruce as well. We never left you. That was just a nightmare, really. Frack, I would never leave you like that. And Joker, he’s gone. He’s gone and he’s never coming back and is never going to hurt anyone else ever again,” Tim’s voice goes pointed at the end, his eyes sharp.

Bruce shifts uncomfortably in the background and Jason knows he’s missing something but Tim is rubbing his back and he’s too enervated to think. He maneuvers his head onto Tim’s lap with help and turns his face into his belly. It doesn’t completely muffle the sound of his crying but it at least hides his tears from where Bruce can see. Practiced fingers work at the flesh just under his skull forcing the muscles loosen. A tiny kiss pinned to his temple. God, this is all he wanted. He didn’t think he’d ever get to have this again, and the thought that he almost didn’t proves to be too much. He starts crying harder, twisting the fingers of his good hand into Tim’s overpriced graphic t-shirt.

“It’s okay, really. You’re safe, you’re alive. Just focus on breathing. Use one of your breathing patterns or you’ll get the hiccups and that’s going to pull on your stitches, okay? In for one-two-three-four, and out… And in for one-two-three-four, and out—”

Jason goes stock still.

A hand over his mouth, fingers pinching his nose shut, “Oh, no. No no no. You’re doing so well, Lambchop. Making Uncle J so proud! Sh, sh, shhhh. On the count of three, breath in. One, two, three. Hold it, hold it! Don’t want you falling asleep and missing the show. We’re just starting to
have fun. Okay, let it out now.”

He opens his mouth but nothing happens. Voices whirl around him.

“What’s going on? What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know! He just—he just seized up and—oh frack.”

“What is it, Tim?”

“Joker. When Jason started to hyperventilate Joker, uh ma-manipulated his breathing so he wouldn’t pass out. Shit, shit, shit! I didn’t mean to. I was just trying to calm him down, he uses breathing exercises all the time when he gets worked up. I don’t know what to do! I don’t—Bruce, what are you doing? Don’t touch hi—”

“I have an idea. Tim, I know you loathe me right now, but please let me help.”

Someone takes hold of his left hand and guides it upwards, pressing it against something warm and firm under a layer of cloth. Woven. Shirt fabric. He can feel their muscled chest under his fingers and palms. Can feel it rise and fall. Steady. Deep.

“Jay-lad? I want you to listen to me. Feel what I’m doing. See if you can copy me. I’m not making you do anything, I’m just here to help. You need to breathe son, but you have to do it on your own.”

…Steady…Deep…Up…Down… He makes his lungs expand with gargantuan effort and blows the air back out like a bellows. It’s uneven and haphazard for long torturous minutes but slowly he’s able to sync up with the rise and fall of the chest under his hand. He leaves it there even after his breaths have stopped faltering. Only lets it drop to push himself up on his elbows into a sitting position when he feels sure enough to try and recover some of his pride. He has to scoot back until he can sag against the headboard though to stay upright without falling over. He wipes a hand over his face and it comes back wet. He stares at the tear-stained gauze wrapping his right hand instead of the faces of the two men nearby.

Finally he twists his gaze up to meet Bruce’s and forces a grin, “Sorry about the nose.”

Bruce waves him off.

“It’s nothing. In fact, it’s overdue. It’s been years since someone’s actually managed to land a hit there,” he replies nasally.

“You should have Alfred see to it,” Tim suggests.

Jason wonders how Tim can lace such an innocuous statement with so much ice. Something is going on between the two of them. The hostility is impossible for Jason to not pick up on and it worries him. He’ll need to get to the bottom of that quickly, but as soon as Bruce is out of the door Tim is slipping under the covers and fitting himself into Jason’s side.

“I’m sorry,” Tim apologizes softly.

“For what?” Jason mumbles into his hair.

“For everything. I shouldn’t have let you go out. Should’ve monitored you more closely. Should’ve waited for help before running in full-tilt. I was there and I couldn’t do a thing to help you, I’m sorry.”
Jason closes his eyes. He had wondered how Tim got there, had been sick with worry when Joker first dragged him down the subway steps. He understands how Tim feels. He had felt the exact same way watching Joker string Tim up from the ceiling, helpless to intervene, strapped down to that damn chair. That’s something they’re going to have to discuss and he doesn’t kid himself with the fairytale notion the conversation will end without any exchange of shouts laden with misplaced anger. Again though, it’s not something he wants to deal with until later. When he’s not so tired and broken.

Broken.

Christ, he really is now. And while he shudders to think of what he looks like under all of the gauze wrappings, he can’t help but feel that he’s missing more than just a few fingers and teeth.

“I don’t think I can keep going like this,” he confesses after a long silence, “The nightmares, the… fits. I…I think I need help.”

There’s a beat before Tim responds.

“Okay. Then you’ll have it,” Tim promises, “Whatever you need.”

Jason believes him. He lets his head rest against Tim’s, and for right now it’s enough just having him there beside him.

“Do you want to try and sleep again?” Tim asks.

Jason shakes his head, “No. I didn’t think I was going to see you again, you know. I had to fight to get back. Can…can you just talk to me for a while? Like before?”

He feels Tim smile into the skin at his neck.

“Of course. Did you like how we set up the freezer? It was my idea but I can’t really take credit, Alfred and Steph did most of the work. Even Damian helped. You probably noticed the sign. That was his idea. Alfred thought it was in bad taste but I thought you would appreciate it, and it would help give you some context waking back up. Miss Lucille stopped by and brought you flowers. She also brought pies but we uh…well we kind of ate those. Blame Steph and Dick, they called it ‘grief-eating.’ She made a peanut-butter chocolate pie, a strawberry pie, and a peach bourbon pie. Oh my god, I don’t even know how to choose a favorite. Alfred was trying to charm the recipe for the peach bourbon pie out of her. I think he was a little disappointed when she didn’t cave. She promised to make one just for you when you woke up though. We told her and Jeremy you were in a coma after a motorcycle accident. They were really worried about you. We all were. Things are getting really serious between Steph and Jeremy, I mean I guess they’ve been dating for over six months now. I apologized to him, by the way, for the dinner party. Ends up he’s actually a pretty decent guy. I think she’s wanting to tell him about being Batgirl. We haven’t had much of a chance to talk about it though, I’ve been a bit preoccupied. Bruce would hate it of course but…well. Fuck him. Anyway…”

Jason doesn’t mean to fall asleep again. He really doesn’t. But he can’t escape the pull of fatigue and morphine and Tim’s ramblings.
There are hushed voices around him. Several, in conversation.

“Oh my god! Look how cute they are!”

Then a round of smothered giggles.

“So cute! I wish Little Wing would let me cuddle with him like that.”

"Adorable! Hold this—I have to take a picture."

Not this shit again. Jason’s eyes snap open focusing on the trio huddled in the doorway: Blondie, Barbie, and Dickhead. He groans. Next to him Tim stirs, and sits up.

“What are you guys doing?” he asks, muzzy from sleep.

Apparently Jason wasn’t the only one who needed an extended nap. The three make their way inside.

“Hey there Hot Stuff, glad to see ya back from the dead again,” Blondie steps forward and plonks down on the foot of the bed.

She has the bear from the freezer in her hands and sets it in his lap.

“Thanks, Blondie. You know I’m not five right?” But he smiles while he strokes the synthetic fur.

Barbie rolls in next and leans forward so she can give him a kiss on the cheek.

“I’m so happy you’re alive,” she beams. “Now if you could just stop dying for like a year because you’re giving me heart problems. Please.”

He grins back crookedly, “Not sure that’s a promise I can keep, but I’ll do my best.”

“You better. I really may just lock you up in the Clock Tower this time,” she warns him. “And you too, Tim! You’re not getting out of this scot-free, either.”

Tim rolls his lips between his teeth and looks contrite.

“Aww, no, Barbie! Now look what you’re done. He looks like a kicked puppy!” Dick chides. He gives Tim a quick hug then circles the bed and looks expectantly at Jason. Jason rolls his eyes. At least Dick’s sort of asking this time instead of latching on without permission. He huffs a bit and beckons Dick forward. Dick’s face almost breaks in half, he’s smiling so widely when he hugs Jason. It’s Tim who ends up pushing him off.

“Okay, okay. That’s enough Dick. You’re going to suffocate him. Now, not trying to be rude, but did you guys want something?” Tim queries.

Dick glances at the two women who give encouraging nods before answering, “Well, it’s dinner time. And we know Jason’s not really up for moving yet. We were wondering if it would be okay if we all came up and picnicked it up here with you guys?”

Tim looks to Jason. Jason’s mouth opens before he knows what he’s going to say and hangs there stupidly. The last time he’d been convalescing at the manor, dinner had been a quiet affair. Meals brought up to him and shared only with Alfred. He didn’t think anyone but Tim and Alfred would want to. He’s having a hard time breathing or thinking again and it’s not because of a terror-fueled
flashback.

“I…uh. Yeah? I don’t see why not?”

As soon as the words are out of his mouth Dick is throwing two thumbs-up. “Awesome!”

He jogs out of the room and returns with an armful of folding chairs he starts to set up in a semi-circle around the bed. Once he’s done he sticks his head out in the hall and shouts, “He said yes!”

A few minutes later Alfred appears, rolling in a cart heaped with bowls, silverware, glasses, and pitchers of water and tea. Bruce comes in behind him, carrying a large stew pot in one arm and balancing several covered trays on the other. Alfred passes out the bowls.

“While I was unable to appropriate Madame Washington’s pie recipe, Mister Poole was kind enough to lend me his grandmother’s pho recipe. Despite my disappointment at the former, the broth should be quite restorative and a great deal easier for your digestion anyways, Master Jason,” the butler notifies him.

“Thank you, Alfie,” Jason tells him sincerely.

Everyone settles in, even Alfred takes a seat to dine and Jason can’t help but notice one chair is still unoccupied. He looks at it, a tad confused and let-down. He and Damian aren’t particularly close, but still he had thought they were on relatively good terms. Maybe he had miscalculated.

Bruce’s youngest struts into the room abruptly. He has Cat gathered in his arms, purring merrily against his chest.

“Father,” he announces, “I have decided I like this feline. I want one.”

Bruce’s head snaps up, eyes wide.

To Jason’s right, Stephanie erupts in a fit of giggles. To his left, Tim snorts broth out of his nose and coughs until Dick slaps him on the back. Barbie starts to snicker at his plight and soon all of them all are in the throes of laughter. Even Alfred is shaking slightly behind a politely raised hand. It’s absolutely befuddling, sitting in the middle of the batclan while they lose it. Jason raises a hand to his chest and tries to keep himself to shallow amused pants that won’t hurt as badly. A warm palm settles on the back of his neck.

Tim leans close and puts his mouth close to his ear, “Are you okay?”

Jason looks around the room. He curls the fingers of his good hand around Tim’s.

“Yeah. Yeah, I think I am.”

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Hypocrite by blackamberwolf

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