Wing Beats in Reverse

by firefright

Summary

Jason Todd is the third Robin, not the second, growing up in shadow of Tim Drake's death. Despite this, he still manages to form strong bonds with his new family. Especially Damian, who wishes to atone for his past mistakes with Jason's predecessor. But when he's fifteen a mysterious red hooded figure kidnaps Jason from the rooftops of Gotham, and after that his life will never be the same again.

Notes

So I finally got a free weekend entirely for myself for the first time in about a month, and rather than using it to work on existing things I churned out 14K of an age-reversal AU instead, because that seems to be a thing you end up doing when you've been writing in this fandom long enough XD And I also got really fixated on the idea of how Damian and Jason's relationship would work in such a universe, as well as just how much better in general Jason's life would be.

Couple notes: Steph never took on the role of Robin or Batgirl in this 'verse, she's always been Spoiler; Jason's Robin costume is a mix of the one he's shown wearing in his Young Justice hologram and Damian's, since it makes sense that with Damian being the first all
the subsequent Robin's uniforms would take inspiration from his initial look (hence the hooded cape sticking around, at least until Dick takes on the role).

That's all, thanks for reading! The next part of 'And Then There's You' will be up on Friday.
Chapter 1

Jason comes late to the Wayne family, the third Robin, six months after the second's career ended in a burning warehouse on the Gotham riverside.

Unlike his predecessors his arrival isn't sought out by his own hand. He's not Damian Wayne, born to be Robin and then Nightwing, and he's not Timothy Drake either, whose ambition to be like his childhood heroes had eventually been his undoing. Jason is just Jason, a boy who'd taken a stupid risk so that he could eat for another week and wound up with more than he could ever dream of.

"What were you thinking bringing another boy into this, Father?!"

But apparently others disagree.

Jason huddles down next to the doorway of Bruce's study, hugging the wall as he makes himself as small and quiet as he possibly can to eavesdrop on the conversation happening inside. The guy in there shouting at Bruce is Damian Wayne, also known as Damian al Ghul, Bruce's actual real son, and he sounds pretty damn furious to have found out about Jason.

"Jason can handle it. He's capable."

"He's twelve. Younger even than Dra-than Timothy was."

"Older than you were."

"That is not the point!" There's a thud, which Jason takes as Damian having slammed his fist down on Bruce's desk. "I was raised to this, Father. From the moment I first drew breath, Mother and Grandfather were preparing me. That's the difference you don't get! This new boy -"

"Jason."

"Jason." Damian corrects himself grudgingly. He has a deep voice, heavy and powerful, just like Bruce's, and it gives Jason the shivers to hear it wrap around the syllables of his name. "He's just as raw as his predecessor was."

"Jason has potential, and you'd realise that if you took some time to meet him."

"I don't have to take time to meet him. He's not ready for this, and he-"

"He needs Robin." Bruce's voice drops a few octaves in warning, so quiet that Jason has to strain to hear what he says next, "Just the same as you did."

Damian breathes in sharply, or at least Jason thinks he does. "I see. This is about you trying to save him."

"It won't bring Timothy back, Father."

That's not - that can't be all it is. That can't be all that Jason is here for, to be some substitute for a dead boy, one that Bruce can keep alive. He knows Bruce offered to let him be Robin so he wouldn't have to be a criminal anymore, and Jason's fine with that, he never wanted to have to steal and debase himself to survive, but he doesn't want to be the replacement goldfish for the
family either.

"I know that, Damian." Bruce says, voice a low dangerous growl to begin with. Then it softens, "Just give him a chance, please. That's all I'm asking. A better one than you gave Tim."

"Tt."

Jason has no idea what that sound is supposed to mean, but then he hears footsteps heading his way and panics, realising that he's still wedged up against the wall with no time to make himself scarce before the door opens. The resulting scramble to get himself stood up and looking like he just so happened to be walking down the corridor at this particular time fails spectacularly as Damian opens the door and takes in his all too casual stance.

Sighing heavily, he reaches up to press his fingers against his brow. "Well, I suppose you have that part of being Robin down already."

Jason glares up at the older man, before folding his arms over his chest. "I got everything about being Robin down already." he says defensively.

Damian closes the door so that Bruce can't see or hear them. He looks quietly appraising as he takes Jason in, and from what Jason can tell finds him wanting. "We'll see."

He turns to walk away and Jason follows him, having to take two strides for Damian's every one in order to keep up. Just the same as he does when he's out with Bruce on patrol.

"I ain't him, y'know."

"Not. You're not him."

"Whatever." Jason rolls his eyes, pushing down the stab of inadequacy because apparently he can't even talk right for this guy. "I'm not him then. And I'm not gonna be like him either."

"No, you won't be."

"What?" Jason almost loses the rhythm of his stride at the unexpected answer. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Damian stops in the entrance hall. He seems to be bracing himself for something as he turns around and slowly sinks down into a crouch in front of Jason. "It means," he takes a breath, looking uncomfortable if determined, "That Father has refused to stop you from being Robin, and so I won't let you be like Timothy, whatever that takes."

"I don't need you to protect me." Jason glares up at him at the insinuation, acting braver than he feels. "I can do it myself, been doing it a long time."

"No, you need me to train you."

Jason's mouth falls open a little. Okay a lot. His jaw damn near touches his chest at freaking Nightwing offering to train him. It's way too late to play it cool but he tries anyway. "R -Really?"

"Really." Damian bows his head slightly in assent.

"Well, uh," Jason fumbles, not sure if there's some kind of proper procedure he should be following here. The way Damian's knelt looks awfully formal. "That'd be cool. I guess. I mean if you want."
Maybe he's seeing things, but for a moment it looks like the corner of Damian's mouth tilts up into a smile. He reaches into his pocket, pulling out a piece of paper and a pen, and writes down a number before offering it out to Jason. "The next time Father has a mission where you can't follow him, call me. Then I'll show you what it really means to be Robin."

"Yessir." Jason takes the number reverently, all his earlier anger forgotten as he stuffs it into his back pocket for safekeeping alongside a pack of gum and some rubber bands. "So, I uh, see you around?"

Damian nods and stands back up. He came in civilian garb and leaves the same way, by the front door with a gracious nod to Alfred. Jason scrambles to a window to watch him drive away on his bike.

_Cool._

He's going to get trained by Batman and Nightwing. He must be the luckiest kid in the whole damn world.

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It takes almost two months for the promise to come to fruition, with many things happening in-between, including Jason's thirteenth birthday. But finally Bruce has to leave for a Justice League mission that is "Too dangerous for you, Robin." and he's left in the manor on his own, lost for what to do until he remembers the number sitting on his bedside table.

Jason scrambles to punch the numbers into the house phone and finds himself disappointed when Damian doesn't immediately pick up on the first try. There's not even so much as a voicemail option for him to leave a message by, and it occurs to Jason that maybe Damian's too busy for him too. He has a whole city to look after by himself, doesn't he? And with no Robin to help him he probably can't afford to take the time off to come to Gotham.

Or worse, maybe he's even changed his mind on the offer now that he's had some time to think about it, realising that he doesn't want to have to deal with another kid tarnishing the legacy of the suit that was his invention.

With a scowl Jason retreats to the library (his favourite spot in the whole manor other than the attic), telling himself that it's no big deal as Alfred brings him a plate of cookies and gently ruffles his hair in unspoken commiseration.

_The Swiss Family Robinson_ and their adventures on their jungle island have almost put him to sleep by the time the door opens again. Jason looks up drearily, expecting Alfred, and almost loses his shit when he realises that Damian is stood in the doorway watching him instead.

"Well?" Damian says, arching a thick eyebrow up towards his hairline, "Are you coming?"

Jason has never moved faster in his _life._

Damian instructs him to pack for the weekend, and Jason does so unthinkingly, grabbing whatever clothes are nearest to hand in his bedroom and stuffing them into a backpack. Half of them probably need washing, but whatever, he's worn a lot worse in his time, up to and including outfits pulled out of a dumpster.
The most important thing is that he has his Robin suit and tools, which means a quick detour down to the cave.

Damian breaks off from talking to Alfred when Jason comes haring back up the stairs, scuffing his shoes across the hardwood floor to the sound of the butler's exasperated sigh. "Ready!"

He's not even bothering to hide his excitement at this point.

"I expect you are." Alfred says dryly, coming over to adjust the straps of Jason's backpack while he fidgets. "Please be sure to bring him back in one piece and early enough on Sunday that he will be well rested for school, Master Damian."

"Of course, Pennyworth. You have my word on it."

Pennyworth. Jason bites down on a snigger at the address, shifting his weight from foot to foot.

The idea of Jason being well rested for school is a riot as well. He gets what amounts for a decent amount of sleep among normal people only once in a blue moon now that he's a crime fighter.

"How come you talk like that?" He asks as soon as they're walking down the stone steps at the front of the house onto the gravel driveway. "You've been here way longer than me and I call 'im Alfie. He doesn't mind."

"Why do you talk the way you do?" Damian reaches his bike and picks up a spare helmet, tossing it back at Jason who catches it automatically. "It's the way I was raised."

"You sound like how a dictionary would talk." Up this close to the beast of a machine Jason can't help ogling the bike. Back when he was on the streets even the smallest piece of it would have fetched a hefty price from any of the fencers Jason knew. "Can I drive?"

"No."

"I know how."

Damian does a small double-take before rolling his eyes and slipping his own helmet over his head as he straddles the bike. "No."

It's right at the moment where Jason has to climb on behind Damian that he finally hesitates, just a little, glancing back at the imposing size of Wayne Manor behind him. The house has become his home, and it's a little weird how much he's prepared to miss it now at the thought of staying somewhere else, even for just a couple days. Pushing the feeling away, Jason takes a breath and slides onto the back of the bike, holding as tight as he dares to Damian's waist when he guns the engine and takes off driving without another word.

Crap, he left his cigarettes up in the attic.

Jason doesn't ask where they're going. He already has suspicions that are proven correct as soon as they leave the Gotham City limits. Instead he tries to enjoy the ride, watching a whole lot of unfamiliar roads and sights pass him by, because leaving Gotham is still a novelty to him even though he's been Bruce's partner for almost a year now.

Bludhaven on the other hand is almost a disappointment when they get there. It's a shorter, squatter city than Gotham is, like the ugly baby sister she never asked for. But while it's hard to get a clear view with the constraints of the helmet on his head, as well as the speed at which Damian is going, at least the street level looks about the same as the place of Jason's birth. Dank and dirty, with miserable people going about their miserable lives.
He hangs on tighter as Damian whizzes them around tight bends, heading steadily into a part of the city filled with high rise flats. A large steel door rolls up before them, probably at some signal from a button Damian hits, and then they're inside what looks like a swanky private garage. It's here that Damian parks the bike and kills the engine.

Taking off a helmet after such a long ride does not do good things to Jason's already unruly curls, so the first thing he tries to do after removing it is smooth them down before anybody can laugh at him. "Is this all yours?"

"The top floor is." Damian replies, and his short spiky hair hasn't fared much better, so that makes Jason feel all right.

Still, rich people. Jason doesn't think he'll ever get used to being around them. It's like Damian doesn't even think it's of note that he owns the entire top floor of a building, the same way Bruce never seems to think twice about drinking from a thousand dollar bottle of champagne.

In such situations all Jason can think about is how many people could be fed on the street if that kind of extravagant spending was turned to more practical matters instead.

"Jason."

He looks round and sees Damian waiting impatiently next to the open elevator leading out of the garage and scrambles to join him. "Sorry, just... you own the entire floor?"

"It makes our lives a lot easier when there are no neighbours to ask questions."

Well, okay. Jason guesses that makes a practical sort of sense when you're a vigilante. But he also suspects that Damian is the kind of guy who's accustomed to a certain standard of living as well. Not that he'll say it to his face, he wants Damian to like him too badly to do that. "Cool."

He can feel Damian watching him as the elevator climbs up and up to the top of the building, doubtlessly reading the discomfort he's trying so hard not to show in his posture.

When the elevator doors open Jason can't help gaping. He expected something like the manor, but Damian's penthouse is not at all like that.

It's still rich, still opulent, but it's more... Jason struggles to think of the words, more practical? Or spartan, maybe. It could be put down to a lack of age compared to the manor, which has generations worth of personality and possessions built into its halls, but more likely it's just Damian's own nature on show. There's such a lack of clutter that it almost feels empty, like a show home rather than something actually lived in.

Jason likes that more than he thought he would.

Without waiting for permission he strides out ahead of Damian, curiosity driving him to study the sparse decor. There are hangings on the walls; tapestries, painted with words that Jason recognises as Arabic and... Chinese, or is it Japanese? One of those anyway. He can't read any of it, but it looks real pretty to him all the same.

Even more exciting are the honest-to-God swords hanging on the walls. He automatically reaches up to try and touch one but doesn't even come close before Damian snags his wrist in a tight grip.

"No."

"But I just want-" Jason tenses up at the restraining hold, biting his lip hard.
"No."

"I'm sorry. I just... I wasn't gonna do nothin' with it." It's not meant to be harmful, it's not. Damian's not even hurting him. It's okay. He pushes back against the visceral reaction that threatens to rise.

Damian suddenly lets go of him as if he's been burned, withdrawing his hand with regret in his eyes, and Jason thinks he's right about how good the guy is at reading him. "They're not toys, Jason."

"Duh, they're swords. You use 'em to fight bad guys." Jason tucks his arms in close to him, making himself a smaller target. "I know that."

"Well then, do you know how to use one?"

"... no."

"Tt." Damian makes that noise again, the weird one that has no clear meaning that Jason can sense. "Then until you do you'll refrain from touching them, or I'll take you straight back to Gotham. Understood?"

Jason huffs but nods, scuffing his foot across the floor and under the corner of an ornate Persian rug.

He follows Damian round on a short tour of the penthouse, only half-listening as he points out the four bathrooms, small library, gym and then the kitchen, as well as some other rooms Damian doesn't let Jason look in on. On the kitchen floor something stands out from the rest of the penthouse, a couple small dishes with little paw-prints impressed on their sides in dark brown. There's even a matching mat underneath, and it's so polar opposite to everything else Jason's seen so far that he snorts immediately.

"You got a cat?"

"Yes, I have a cat. Pennyworth."

"Penny--you named it after Alfred?" Jason sniggers as he starts to look round, suddenly beyond amused and eager to take a look at the moggie wherever it's hiding. "Where is it?"

Damian sighs at his laughter, Jason suspects it's probably not the first time someone's found that fact amusing, and shrugs. "He is likely sleeping somewhere. And you'll meet him soon enough, I'm sure. He usually claims the spare bedroom where you'll be staying when I'm not here."

"Awesome, I get the cat's room."

"An honour you should not dismiss." Damian drawls. It takes a couple moments for Jason to decipher whether or not this is meant to be a joke, but when he does he starts snickering all over again. Damian even smiles back at him this time.

The bedroom where he'll be sleeping turns out to be just as big as his one at the manor. Though it's even plainer than the rest of the penthouse. Probably because Damian doesn't use it much, but there's a futon for Jason to sleep on (covered in small black cat hairs) and that's all he needs. Damian looks like he expects Jason to protest at the lack of a proper bed, but why should he? It's still better than the floor.

He drops his backpack next to it with a thud before looking at Damian self-consciously. Until this point everything has been pretty self-explanatory. "So uh, what now?"
"Dinner will be ready in an hour. You can amuse yourself until then."

"And after that?"

"Then we go out, and you show me exactly how good a Robin you are."

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Dinner is surprisingly good, which forces Jason to conclude that an inability to cook isn't completely genetic after all. He devours his rice and fish, polishing the bowl clean of even the sauce like he always does at home no matter how full he feels, before rushing to get into costume.

When he comes back Damian is still in the kitchen, looking at the empty bowl with an odd look on his face. It seems to take an eternity for him to say, "Wait here." and go to put on his own uniform.

Jason feels something small and warm nudge against his leg as he lingers there, waiting for Damian to come back.

"Whoa, hey." A small prim looking black and white cat with brilliant green eyes is sat by his feet, tail neatly curled around its paws. "Kinda thought you'd show up for dinner since we ate fish."

With a smile Jason kneels down, holding out a hand for the cat to sniff first before trying to pet it. He has enough experience with strays on the street to know that stroking them without getting their approval first is a fast way to end up with your hand in tatters. Gotham breeds cats mean, as Batman would be able to attest, and it's probably the same in Bludhaven.

The cat, Pennyworth apparently, touches his soft wet nose to his gloved fingers, then a moment later butts his head against Jason's hand. Jason takes that as permission to slide his fingers under Pennyworth's chin and scratch, eliciting a happy purr from his newfound companion.

"Well, you're seem more friendly than Damian is anyway." Jason murmurs softly. "Can you tell me if he actually likes me? Because I'm kinda drawing a blank here."

Pennyworth of course says nothing, just pushes harder against Jason's hand until he eventually relents and sits down cross legged on the floor so that the cat can climb into his lap. They're still like that by the time Damian returns ten minutes later.

"I see you're making friends."

By himself Damian is imposing enough because of his size and stature, but now dressed in the tight black and red armour of the Nightwing suit he's transformed into something else entirely. Just like Batman, Nightwing is an intimidating force, a wall of strength and power that Jason feels inconsequentially small against.

He suddenly wants very badly to tug up the hood of his costume so that he can hide underneath it.

"We're getting on okay." Jason shrugs instead, pulling on a layer of disinterest like a second skin before bopping Pennyworth playfully on the nose and lifting the cat from his lap to set him gently down onto the floor. "He's pretty cool, just like the other Alfred is. Though probably not as good a butler."
Brushing cat fur off the black legs of his costume Jason stands up, looking to Damian expectantly while Pennyworth stalks off in disgust at being dismissed. "So we going?"

"You're impatient."

"I'm ready. There's bad guys whose butts need whuppin' waiting for us out there." Jason smacks his right fist into the palm of his other hand for emphasis. "Don't tell me you're not looking forward to it."

The smile creeps onto Damian's face again, cautious, as if he's wary of letting too much of himself slip out around Jason but can't quite help it. "I am, but that's no excuse. Impatience will make you sloppy."

"Just so you know, I've had that speech from Bruce already. Multiple times. If you're gonna teach me anything new you'll have to up your game."

Damian snorts and reaches over, shoving Jason roughly by the shoulder towards the huge sliding glass door to the outside balcony. It's amiable as much as it is forceful. "We'll see about that, Robin."

Running through Bludhaven turns out to be not much different from running through Gotham, except that they're often closer to the ground and there's a lot more smog to choke on. Jason pushes bravely through it and doesn't let himself complain even though he has to work twice as hard to keep up with Damian as he would Bruce. It takes a while, but eventually Damian notices him struggling to match the pace and stops on the corrugated steel roof of a meat packing factory to let Jason catch up.

"You should have said something." Damian says accusingly, once Jason's touched down and is bent over, breathing hard.

"M'fine." He wheezes between breathes, "I was... keeping up... don't worry."

"No, you weren't. You were falling behind. It's dangerous here, Bludhaven isn't like Gotham, it's..." Damian cuts himself off, frustrated, before he wipes his hand over his jaw. "They're still learning to be afraid of me."

"Good thing I'm here then, I'll scare the shit out of 'em for you." Jason straightens back up, folding his arms defensively now that he's got his breath back. "Don't worry about taking it easy on me."

Damian shakes his head, visibly angry with himself. He's clearly not used to having to work with anyone who isn't Bruce, and certainly not used to having to account for that person being smaller and slower than him. Jason wishes he could say he knew the feeling but no, he's always the one struggling to keep up because he's only barely made the larger side of five feet tall.

If that growth spurt Alfred keeps promising him doesn't show up soon, then Jason's going to have to have words with somebody.

Finally Jason takes pity on Damian, amusing as it is to see big bad Nightwing looking like a hedgehog with its spines ruffled. "It'd probably help if you'd tell me where we're going."

"The train yard, we're going to the train yard."

Jason huffs, because that really wasn't so hard, was it? "Then lead the way, oh fearless leader."

The there and gone again smile makes another brief appearance, right before Damian takes off again, this time at more of a light jog than a full on sprint. This time Jason keeps up with him
"So what's goin' on here?" he asks, as he balances along a steel beam over the tracks after Damian. "Drug bust? Gang war? Hot chick tied to the tracks by an ugly dude with a moustache?"

"You tell me." Nightwing jumps onto the roof of one of the sheds where they keep the engines when they're not using them and Robin follows, crouching down beside the elder vigilante as soon as he lowers himself down at the edge.

Fine, it's a test then.

There's light flickering in the shadows between the train carriages, narrow beams that indicate flashlights. Then voices, pitched that kind of low where someone thinks they're being quiet except they're really not. Whoever these guys are they're amateurs at what they're doing, Jason decides, experienced crooks know better than this.

He keeps listening, and finally picks up on the sound of metal working against metal, as well what sounds like a power drill at work. "They're..." Jason pauses before barrelling on with his conclusion, just the same as he'd do with Bruce. "They're stealing track?"

"Cuz' it's valuable. They can sell the metal for a whole lotta money cash in hand to scrapyards, an' the scrapyards don't ask questions so long as it's good steel." His frown deepens. "But they're not thinking about the trains that're gonna come through in the morning, or the people that're gonna get hurt."

"Exactly." Damian stands up, pulling two heavy weighted sticks out from the harness on his back. There's a different sort of smile on his face now than the one he wore earlier. "Are you ready?"

Jason matches that smile, bouncing back up to his feet as he throws out the old cliche. "Me? I was born ready."

He takes off before Damian can, jumping from the roof to the nearest stationary railway carriage, then another. Over and over until he reaches the main train line running through the yard. Here the voices are louder, and Jason can actually get a clear look at the dumb fucks trying to pull this off.

"How many?" Damian's voice whispers in his ear, and Jason almost falls from his perch at how close he is. Jesus, no one that big should ever be that quiet.

"Seven." He mutters back out of the corner of his mouth. "Lotsa tools, can't see any guns though."

Which doesn't mean they're not there.

Damian taps him on the shoulder before pointing right with one of his sticks. Escrima, if Jason remembers the name correctly. He does as he's told, going right while Damian goes left, and together they pull off the perfect pincer movement. It's something he's done dozens of times with Batman before.

"Wow." Jason says a minute later when it's all over, stood on top of one man's chest while Damian's zip-tying the others to one of the carriages. "That was kind of embarrassing for you guys. I mean, I've broke worse sweats rescuing cats from trees."

"Robin." Damian says from the side, but it's not quite the same disapproving tone that Bruce would use. It's more like Damian's saying it because he thinks he should, rather than because he actually disapproves.
Given the stories Alf's told Jason of the little hellion Damian used to be, that Jason can believe.

"What? It was!" He pulls out one of his own zip ties and snaps together the wrists of the guy he's standing on before hopping off and jogging to Damian's side. He's buzzing with energy now, ready for more. "Should I call the cops?"

"Already done."

"Then what's next?"

Next is foiling a bank robbery, followed by a mugging, and finally they round off the night by stopping some drunk college kids from laying into a prostitute who's off shift and just wants to get home to her kids. Jason maybe goes a little harder on these guys than anyone else they've stopped tonight, bashing his fist into the face of one asshole until Damian grabs his wrist to make him stop.

"Oh sorry," He says with false cheer, "Got carried away." and then he's pulling himself free, going to do the job he'd assigned himself as Robin by talking to the frightened woman, reassuring her that "No, Nightwing's really not that scary." and "Yes, it's safe for you to go home now." before Damian's nudging him back towards his place.

In the penthouse, Jason pulls down his hood and strips off his gloves. Pennyworth is waiting expectantly for them on the arm of the couch, and Jason pauses just long enough to check that they're still okay with one another before picking the cat up and cuddling him in his arms. Damian looks somewhat put-off by this, like he's supposed to be the one with dibs on post-patrol cat snuggles.

And maybe he is since Pennyworth is technically his cat, as much as cats belong to anybody, but whatever, Jason got there first.

"So, did I pass your dumb test?" He asks, scratching behind Pennyworth's ears.

"You were... adequate." Damian replies grudgingly, mask off as he goes to make tea in the kitchen. "But you still need refinement. Just because you can throw a punch doesn't make you a good Robin."

Jason shrugs. As far as he's concerned throwing punches has made him a pretty awesome Robin so far. "I know. I'm not bad at the detective stuff either."

"Tt."

He whips his head round at the noise as the kettle starts to boil. "What's that even mean, anyway?"

"What does what mean?" Damian asks him impatiently, pulling what looks like chai down from the cupboard.

"That noise you keep making. That Tt... tsst... tut... whatever it is. You sound like a snake. Or an angry badger."

"I do not - I do not sound like a snake." Damian grumbles now, back still to Jason. "And how would you even know what a badger sounds like?"

"We got TV at the manor, duh." Jason sinks down onto the couch, still holding Pennyworth smugly. "So what is it?"

Damian sighs heavily. "I don't know. It's just... I've done it since I was a boy. Usually when I have nothing else to say."
"Weirdo."

Damian glares at him and Jason smirks back. "Are you always this obnoxious?"

"Only with people who are easy to annoy."

Whatever Damian says next is in Arabic, but Jason would bet on his life that it's a swear. "Go get cleaned up," he orders finally in English, "It's time you were in bed."

"I'm thirteen, not ten."

"Bed."

"Spoilsport." Jason rolls his eyes but gets back up off the couch, stopping to set Pennyworth down on one of the cushions. "Has he always been this much of a stick in the mud?" He asks the cat before going to head down the hall. Damian ignores him.

Once he's showered Jason settles down in the room he's been given, curling up under the warm blanket on the futon. He's still energised, but the softness of the blanket starts to ease him out of that jittery state. A feeling that's helped along when he reaches into his bag and tugs out an old stuffed bear with a Superman crest on its chest.

Jason found it with some blankets and a pillow in the manor, tucked down behind some of the boxes in the attic when he went to smoke up there shortly after moving in. Though clearly old, the bear was only a little dusty, and it smells good now, warm and musty when he presses its soft fur up against his nose. He never asked Bruce and Alfred about who it belonged to, afraid of losing the soft toy or being called a baby for keeping it, and it's one of the few secret comforts he has other than his cigarettes.

Now it feels like a piece of home in a strange place, and Jason sighs as he snuggles the bear closer under the blanket. Good or bad, there's still two more days of the weekend to go.

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The next day Damian wakes Jason up earlier than he'd like, feeds him breakfast, then drags him straight into the gym.

"Keep your guard up." He growls as he circles round Jason for the third time, bo staff in hand as he searches for weak spots in his defence. It's a little bit like being in Hell so early on a Saturday morning, but pretty fun also.

"My guard is already up." Jason complains, raising his own staff higher. "C'mon, stop pussy-footing around-"

_Crack._ Jason yelps as his fingers sting and his staff goes flying. He wastes no time in flipping backwards, trying to get out of the range of Damian's assault. He's like a machine, like Bruce, yet more aggressive. Bruce is powerful for sure, but there's always a sense that he's holding back when he faces off with Jason on the mats; not so with Damian.

"I said, keep it up!" The staff in Damian's hands spins, cracks down where Jason's foot was only moments before. He keeps scrambling back, darting and weaving as he looks for an opening.
"You've lost your primary weapon, now your enemy has the advantage."

"I'm trying!" Jason bursts out, jumping over the pommel horse to give himself some time to think. Damian's bigger and stronger than he is, but still lethally fast. He's using his size as an advantage, but that doesn't mean that Jason can't do the same.

He waits for Damian to come leaping at him over the pommel horse before sliding back through underneath it, keeping them on opposite sides from each other. It's going to take a few seconds for Damian to turn round and come after him again, which gives Jason time to run back to his fallen bo staff and recover it. "Ha!" he yells triumphantly as his hand closes around the wood, only for a shadow to fall over him from behind.

Jason twists round on his knees, just barely fast enough to block Damian's strike. His arms strain against the powerful downward force that Damian's exerting against him, and Jason's just starting to think about how to get out of the contest of strength he'll surely lose when a foot impacts with his chest and sends him sliding backwards across the mats.

A second later he feels the tip of Damian's staff press against his throat. "Not bad."

"Not bad?" Jason repeats, surprised. He'd lost by a landslide, again, but here was Damian, kind of complimenting him.

Damian nods, keeping Jason pressed against the floor. "You used your head and the environment around you to recover your weapon. Against a normal opponent you might have won."

"But you're not normal."

Something passes over Damian's face before he shakes his head, finally taking the staff away. "No, I'm not."

Jason gets back up to his feet and follows him over to where there's a couple water bottles waiting for them. He takes the one Damian hands him with a smile and remembers to sip, not gulp, the water down. "I uh... overheard you with Bruce before."

"I remember." Damian looks down at him, waiting for Jason to continue with whatever it is he has to say.

He scuffs his bare feet on the tatami floor. "You said you'd been trained for this since birth."

"I was." Damian takes a seat down on the floor, and after a second Jason joins him. "Do you know who my mother is?"

"Talia al Ghul, Ra's al Ghul's daughter. He's the leader of the League of Assassins."

"That's right. Grandfather is obsessive, and that is putting it mildly. His goal is to cleanse the world of those he considers unworthy of living in it; criminals, degenerates and the like, and for that purpose he believes he needs to have the perfect heir." Damian isn't looking at Jason as he talks. "When my father came to him for training, he and my mother fell passionately in love for a time. Grandfather saw this as an opportunity to finally get what he wanted, and my mother wasn't opposed either."

Jason pulls a face, "What about her? Wasn't she a perfect heir?"

"No." Smiling sadly, Damian shakes his head. "She's a woman, and to Grandfather that is not good enough."
He sounds like a real asshole. We should introduce him to Steph, she can kick anyone's butt.

Damian chuckles quietly at the mention of Spoiler. "I think Mother would like you."

Jason shrugs, because what else is he supposed to do with that comment. "So... they had you?"

"So they had me. Only Father did not know of my existence for many years. I was hidden, trained to be the perfect heir. The one who would one day rule Grandfather's perfect world."

"So how come you're here rather than there?" Jason presses, leaning towards Damian slightly. "How'd you end up with Bruce?"

"My mother tried to use me as a weapon against him, but in exposing me to Father she made a grave error. Even a few short weeks living with him were enough for me to discover that I liked his way of living better."

There's a whole lot of details missing from that story, Jason can tell, but if Damian didn't say them outright it probably means he shouldn't ask. "Yeah," he says instead, "Bruce is kinda like that, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is."

Jason rubs his foot against the tatami. "I tried to steal the tires off the Batmobile."

"The way I heard it you almost succeeded." The smile is back, curving over Damian's dark lips. Jason laughs.

"Yeah, but I got greedy. Wanted the whole set. If I'd just gone for two I woulda gotten away with it."

"I think there's a lesson in there somewhere." Damian stands back up and offers Jason a hand to his feet. "Ready for another round?"

Grinning, Jason nods. "Always."

*

The rest of the weekend goes okay after that. They patrol Saturday night, and this time Damian takes him to do more than a little petty crime. It's like a tour of his city, learning about the rogues and the worst spots on the map, as well as the places where Damian does much of his fist to face fact-finding. The show of trust makes Jason feel pretty good about himself, and by the time Sunday afternoon rolls around he's almost reluctant to go home.

He's actually starting to think Damian might like him after all.

"Jason, you cannot take Pennyworth with you."

Almost.

Jason scowls as he sets the cat back down. "He likes me better."

"That's because you give into his every demand for attention. You're spoiling him." Damian rolls his eyes. "Come along, the other Pennyworth will have my hide if I don't have you back in
Yeah right, Jason bets that whenever no one else is around Damian does nothing but cuddle his cat.

Following behind him obediently, Jason gives the penthouse one last fond look before stepping inside the elevator. He rocks back and forth on his heels, humming a few bars of Poison Idea's latest single as he works himself up to what he wants to say next. "So, can I come back?"

He's caught Damian by surprise he can tell. "You want to?" The older boy asks slowly as they walk over to his bike.

"Well, um. Yeah." Jason takes the helmet when it's offered, holding it tightly between his hands as he talks. "I had fun." Then to cover the small admittance of what could be called affection he carries on, "And you said you'd train me. I don't think one weekend covers that."

"You're right." Damian says after a moment. "It doesn't. I'll speak to Father about it when I see him again." He climbs onto the bike and this time Jason slides on behind him without hesitation, pulling the helmet down over his head and hanging onto Damian's waist as they roar off along Bludhaven's roads and back to Gotham.

* 

Back at the manor, Bruce has yet to return home.

Damian hangs around just long enough to have a cup of tea with Alfred before disappearing off again and that's great, because it leaves plenty of time for Jason to do his thing with no one else watching him while the butler's busy making dinner. He runs up to his bedroom, dropping off his backpack to be dealt with later before heading up for the attic.

The attic, without a doubt, is Jason's favourite place in the manor. Even more so than the Bat Cave.

For a start no one else ever comes up here, so it's like his own private adventure playground, piled high with mystery boxes and curious old objects covered in white dust sheets. Sometimes when he's bored he'll pick one at random to take a look in, and so far he's discovered everything from toys and old newspapers, to discarded family portraits, stuffed animal heads and even a disassembled Winchester rifle. It's creepy, but fun, and he wouldn't be surprised if one day his excavations turn up a whole human skeleton.

Pushing open the window to the roof, Jason liberates his cigarettes from their hiding spot and swings one leg out over the sill as he lights one up. Damn, but it feels good after going two whole days without even a single smoke. Bruce would kill him if he knew, but he can't really expect Jason to go completely cold turkey, can he? It's not like he smokes even half as much now as he used to when he lived on the streets.

But still he hides it. Mostly because he loves Bruce and his new life here, and the thought of seeing the disappointment on the man's face if he finds Jason still smoking is more than he thinks he'll be able to handle.

He's so wrapped up in that thought that he completely misses the invader to his private sanctuary creeping up on him.
"BOO!"

Jason squawks, drops his cigarette, and it's only because Stephanie's reflexes are completely insane that he doesn't go tumbling down out onto the roof. He can't even yell at her for it; he's too busy coughing from inhaling smoke the wrong way.

"Whoa! Whoa. Oops." Steph has the decency to look sheepish about her mistake as she rights him and rubs his back through the duration of the coughing fit. "Sorry squirt. Are you okay?"

"You're awful. You're awful and I hate you." He wheezes as soon as he possibly can, hitting himself on the chest for good measure until he can see straight. "What the hell."

"Aw, c'mon. You have to admit it would have been pretty funny if you didn't try to choke yourself to death." She squeezes herself onto the ledge next to him. "Still smoking, I see."

"Still annoying, I see." Jason counters, not even bothering to try and deny it around Steph. She knows and has known for a while, and he doesn't care because she'll never rat him out about it either.

It's part of why Jason could say he's been half in love with Spoiler since the first day they met. There's no other word for it, Steph is just cool. She's like him, a kid from the East End who became a hero, and she gets so much about him without having to ask for any explanation; including why it is that he keeps clinging to his smoking vice like the security blanket it is.

If it weren't for the fact she and Cass have their thing he probably would have asked her out by now.

Steph laughs, hooking her leg around his ankle. She's taller than him by a lot of inches, the same as everybody else is, and for a moment they have a comfortable silence before she starts asking him questions. "I hear you went to Bludhaven for the weekend."

"Might have done." Jason shrugs. Steph's made no secret of her distaste for Damian before. "What of it?"

"Did he treat you okay?"

"Um, yeah." He thinks about lighting another cigarette but refrains, playing with the lighter instead. "It was cool. We hung out, had dinner, kicked bad guy butt. Got my ass handed to me by him in training a bunch of times."

Steph's lips twist in what can only be bitterness. Still, she looks relieved. "I'm glad."

Jason knows what she's thinking. She's thinking of him, Tim, the one Jason replaced. The one Damian never gave a chance to. "Are you?"

"Yeah, squirt. I am." Steph sighs. "I don't like the guy for the way he treated Tim, but it's nice to hear that he learned his lesson about not being a dick to kids."

"Was he really that bad?"

Stephanie snorts, leaning back against her side of the window frame. "Oh yeah, he was. Complete entitled shithead back then, not that he's much better now, always whining about how Robin was his and how dare this imposter come in and wear his uniform! Blah, blah, blah." Her lips curl. "Tim didn't deserve it, he was just..." Her voice turns rougher, "He was just trying to do the right thing. He didn't set out to steal anything from Damian, and Damian was too stuck up his own ass..."
to realise that until it was too late."

Jason shifts uncomfortably. He has no idea how to respond most of the time when people talk about Tim Drake, except to shout out that he isn't him. Tim Drake had been the rich kid next door, a certified genius, and Jason... Jason is a street rat and worse. He already knows most of the society people Bruce associates with look down their noses at him, thinking that he got adopted by exploiting Bruce's grief at losing Tim - which made it so much more of a relief when Steph had accepted him at once.

She'd been Tim's girlfriend for a while, and if anyone should have resented him for taking his place it was her.

"I don't think he's bad." Jason blurts out, holding his breath when Steph looks at him. He doesn't want her to think he's stupid and naive or anything, but it's the truth. "I think he's actually kind of a dork. You won't believe the stash of cat toys I found in one of the closets in his house."

The smile starts to come back onto Steph's face as he talks. "I don't actually, but tell me more. For science."

She curls her arms around Jason's shoulders while he goes into depth about his weekend with Damian, sometimes asking questions but mostly just listening. It's dark by the time he's done and Alfred's calling upstairs for them to come down for dinner. Steph shouts back an affirmative before giving Jason one last careful look.

"Okay, baby bird, I believe you. Just... just take it easy with him, all right? You're kind of important to me. And you know I'm here if you ever need to talk."

"Yeah, yeah, I got it, Princess Eggplant. Don't worry, you're still my favourite." She shoves him for that one, before kissing his forehead. They clamber back inside the house and head downstairs, where dinner is a thick meaty stew ladled inside giant baked batter bowls that Alfred calls Yorkshire Puddings. It's delicious, and after a weekend of only rice dishes with fish and various vegetables it's exactly what Jason was craving.

Steph goes out for patrol as Spoiler while Jason concentrates on finishing up the last of his homework before bedtime. Bruce still isn't back when he falls asleep, but sometime in the night Jason rolls over, feeling a broad hand gently cupping the back of his head as his fallen arm is lifted and tucked back inside the blankets.

Bruce, he thinks with sleepy delight, snuggling into his pillow before falling back into deeper dreams with a smile on his face.

*

Autumn arrives, and Jason's playing on the rooftops when he notices Damian stood nearby watching him.

"Hey," he says happily to Nightwing, grinning at him upside down while his hood and cape pool down the brickwork behind him, getting covered in decades old soot. He's performing handstands on top of chimneys just for the heck of it, just to prove he can.

"You look like an idiot." Damian sighs.
Jason laughs as he flips himself forwards, off the chimney and onto the steep sloped roof beside the other vigilante. "Nice to see you too. How's Pennyworth? How come you're here? Have you said hi to Bruce yet?"

"Pennyworth is fine. Because I feel like it, and..." Broad shoulders hunch up in a shrug, "Not yet."

Jason rolls his eyes at the last part. "You wanna?"

"I suppose."

He leads Damian along, leaping lightly from rooftop to rooftop in the brand new boots he'd just worn in last week, because it finally looks like he's starting to grow some. They're steel-capped, just like the ones Damian wore when he was Robin, but black instead of green. He has a shorter cape too than the one Damian, and even Tim wore, liking the quicker range of movement it gives him to not be so weighed down by cloth.

Bruce waits for them up ahead, a brooding shadow like one of the gargoyles on the corner of the GCPD building that rises up once they get closer. "Nightwing." He greets Damian stoically, while Jason steps instantly into place at his side. "I'm glad you're here."

"You asked me to be here." Damian grunts, equally stoic, and Jason rolls his eyes again because really? This is what passes for father-son banter these days?

"How come you didn't tell me you were asking N here, B?" He complains loudly, just to remind them both that he's still around. "What's going on, what are we doing? Is it Two-Face? Because I've been wanting to put my boot in his ugly mug ever since - mmf!"

Bruce smirks at him as Jason tries to talk through the hand over his mouth. Across from them Damian lets out what sounds like an involuntary snicker. "You certainly picked a mouthy one this time, Father."

"Yes, he reminds me of you." And Jason bursts out laughing behind Bruce's hand while Damian looks indignant.

"I was hardly that bad!"

Bruce winks at Jason as he takes away his hand, or at least Jason thinks he does. It's hard to tell through the cowl. "No, you were worse."

With a groan Damian drags his hand across his face. "Did you invite me here to insult me, or is there actually something going on for us to take care of tonight?"

That's all it takes for the lighthearted moment to vanish. Bruce's expression turns serious again, and from there on out it's all plans and tactics and hashing out exactly how they're going to go about hunting down Croc through the sewers. And oh boy, does Damian ever get this savage expression on his face as soon as the name is mentioned. If he was still in range of one of those swords he keeps on the wall Jason could bet he would be sharpening it.

The trip down into the sewers doesn't take long. They split up, keeping in radio contact the whole time, with Jason under strict instruction to lead Croc to Bruce and Damian rather than try to fight him alone should he find the cannibalistic creep first. Jason entertains himself while they search by attempting to wheedle an answer out of Damian about why he apparently hates Croc so much, but Damian refuses to say a word about it. Eventually Bruce snaps at both of them to shut up, though not quite soon enough.
Jason's foot comes down on what might have once been someone's tibia. The bone snaps under his weight, and he doesn't have much time to regret his mistake before cold yellow eyes are staring hungrily out at him through the darkness. Jason doesn't think too hard before lobbing two batarangs in Croc's general direction and then running for his life.

An angry roar follows him down the tunnels, followed by the splashing of deep water. "So, uh," he laughs breathlessly, kind of terrified as much as he's exhilarated, "I think I found him!"

"Get back here now!" Bruce growls in his ear, echoed by Damian, and Jason rolls his eyes because really, what else do they think he's gonna do? Try and take on Croc himself? He might have guts, but Jason's not that stupid to think they count against taking on an opponent of Croc's size alone.

This is the plan, Jason huffs as he runs, find Croc and then draw him out of his lair, down into a pool of deep water where Bruce has laid some very powerful electric charges to knock him out. Easier said than done, especially when your opponent has a longer leg span than you do, but Jason's not Robin for nothing.

He leaps and bounds, running across walls and narrow walkways, dipping under the swipes of gargantuan arms, and it's all going swimmingly (hah) up until the point Croc gets frustrated enough to rip some of the brickwork off the wall and hurl it after Jason instead.

"Gonna eat you, birdie! Gonna pluck you bare!"

A chunk of brick clocks him in the shoulder, sending Jason spinning. He trips over an exposed pipe and yelps when his face makes contact with the grimy floor. Crap, he thinks. His nose is bleeding, and his ankle might be twisted, both of which are really the least of his problems when Croc's hand wraps around both his legs and hauls him up through the air.

"Get offa me, ugly!" Jason swings out, his fist connecting with Croc's flat reptilian face and doing dick all to hurt him.

Croc snarls. "Not much meat on you." He seizes that hand, bends it hard until Jason feels tears of pain spring involuntarily into his eyes, "But I'll still peel the flesh from your bones and wrap them up nice for your daddy."

His jaws open wide, revealing a row of teeth filed to sharp points, and that's really all the opportunity Jason needs to throw the smoke pellet he's concealed in his other palm inside Croc's mouth. Croc howls, and Jason echoes him as his wrist snaps, right before he's suddenly thrown across the other side of the tunnel. The wall's coming up fast, and Jason braces himself for it to hurt right before a red and black blur intercepts him.

"Robin!" He crashes into Damian instead, who wraps his arms around Jason and uses his body to shield him from most of the impact. "Are you-"

"I'm fine, get him!"

Jason cradles his arm, refusing to meet Damian's eyes before he's off and running, going to launch himself feet first at Croc, who's still stumbling and roaring as he belches and bellows smoke like a dragon. Damn, Jason thinks with a strained grin, but he got him good.

The next thirty seconds are chaos as Nightwing slams into Croc again and again, forcing the wheezing reptile back under a relentless assault. Batman gets there a moment later, bringing a pair of electro-shock gauntlets into the mix. It's amazing to watch them work together, even though they've had to abandon the best-laid plan and improvise instead.
Whenever Bruce moves in, Damian instantly covers him and vice versa. It's like clockwork, like they're one being, or two parts of the same organism that are beautifully in sync. Jason can only hope that he and Bruce look even remotely like that when they fight together.

Finally Croc topples to the ground, and suddenly it's Jason who's the centre of attention again as Bruce crouches down in front of him. "Robin?"

"I'm okay. It's just my arm. I'm fine."

"You are not fine." Damian growls from behind Bruce, "Father, it's broken."

"I can see that."

Jason winces when Bruce takes hold of his arm, it's already too swollen for him to be able to pull the glove off and take a better look. "I'm taking you home."

"What about Croc? You can't just leave 'im." Jason protests, wincing as he curls in on himself.

"The police and the Arkham guards are on their way, Nightwing can wait for them here."

"No."

Bruce turns his head to look at Damian, surprised. "No?"

"I'll take Robin home. You wait here for the police to show." Damian says grudgingly. "You deal better with them than I do."

He comes forwards and scoops Jason up off the ground like he weighs nothing before Bruce can say another word, which is good because Jason's starting to feel cold and real shaky right about now. Sick with the waves of pain coming up through his broken limb mixed with the familiar taste of his own blood in his mouth.

Bruce sighs but doesn't argue. "All right." He looks at Jason for a moment, "I'll see you soon, Robin, don't worry."

"I never worry, B." Jason mumbles, blushing at being carried out like a child. He's thirteen, he's fine. No one should have to do this for him. He waits until they're far enough away from Bruce that he can't hear them to tell Damian that. "I can walk y'know."

"I'm sure you can."

Jason shivers. "I... I didn't mess it up, okay? I got him. We got him. So it's all good, all right?"

"I didn't say anything different." Damian frowns down at him. "Robin..."

He shakes his head and doesn't say anything else all the way home. Not until Alfred's there, tutting disapprovingly as he hooks Jason up with painkillers and x-rays so he can reset his broken wrist and put it in a cast. Damian stays with Jason the whole time, even letting him grip his hand through the pain as the bone is put back into place.

"Is this the first time you've broken something?" He asks quietly, when they're alone for a moment.

Numbly Jason shakes his head again.

"What else?"
"Nothing big. It was all before I came here." Jason admits shamefully. "Coupla fingers." he holds up his left hand so that Damian can see. His little and ring fingers are kind of crooked compared to the rest, thanks to the doc at the free clinic he'd managed to walk into not setting them back completely right.

Damian's jaw tightens. "How?"

"None of your business."

Jason earns himself a hard look for that answer. He withdraws his hand, glaring back at Damian. "What? It ain't. I don't have to tell you everything about me, you know. Some stuff's private."

Private now and forever. Bruce knows which is bad enough, Jason doesn't want Damian hearing about more of his sordid past either. If Steph asked, maybe, she'd understand, but not Damian.

Eventually Damian sits back, finally reaching to peel off his mask like he's forgotten that it was still on his face until now. His heavy eyebrows are drawn together in a mighty frown, even as he agrees with Jason. "You're right, it is. You don't have to tell me, Jason."

"Glad we agree." Jason mutters, laying back on the bed. The plaster's still setting, but already his arm is starting to itch under the cast.

Damian stands up, but hesitates before actually leaving. "Jason..."

"What?"

"You did good today."

His eyes fly open wide as he sits back up to stare at Damian, not sure he heard that right. "Huh?"

"You did good. Father will likely say different, that your method was too risky both to yourself and Killer Croc since they'll probably have to put him on a ventilator for a day or two, but as far as I'm concerned you did the right thing in the situation you found yourself in." Risky to Croc? Yeah right, sure the smoke bomb could've suffocated the monster but what else was Jason supposed to do? It was that or get eaten, and he'll take living another day over being reptile chow anytime.

Jason thinks he's been quiet for too long, because Damian presses his lips together and goes to step out through the curtain.

"Wait! I uh," He fumbles, a little high on painkillers but finally finding the word he's looking for. "Thanks."

Damian smiles back at him then, tight but genuine, and after he leaves Jason collapses back onto the bed with a wide grin splitting his own face open. That settles it, he's going to call this night a success no matter what Bruce says.

*

Autumn turns to winter, and by the time Christmas rolls around Jason's been cleared for field duty again. Which is great, because sitting around at the computer, advising and watching B and Nightwing work through various security cameras, got real old real fast. Jason's just not cut out for a desk job.
But as a bonus to the fiasco, Damian starts to make more of an effort to visit Gotham. First to make sure Jason's all right even though he denies it, and then more to just spend time with him and help Batman out while Robin's benched. If he's going to stay for more than a couple days he also brings Pennyworth, citing that the cat would get lonely without him and that's crap, because it's clearly the other way around. Damian's the one who can't stand to be without his pet, and when Jason passes that information on to Steph she laughs until she cries before telling him stories about the dumb dog Damian had back when he was Robin.

Steph doesn't come round as much when Damian's at the manor, and definitely excuses herself from Christmas dinner, but as much as Jason's unhappy about that he makes do. He likes feeling like he has a family on all sides too much to complain.

After a while he even begins to call Damian his brother in his head. Especially in the quiet moments, when Damian's sketching in one of his art pads while Jason reads from one of his books. Sometimes he even lets Jason take a look at what it is he's drawing.

The next few months are spent working alternately with Batman or Nightwing, and sometimes at Spoiler and Black Bat's sides. They all train him and he gets taller, stronger, though still not nearly as tall as any of them except Cassandra, and then only just as his fourteenth birthday passes and Bruce finally clears him for real solo missions and patrol, which is fantastic. Jason feels like all his hard work is starting to pay off.

He's becoming a real hero in his own right, not just a sidekick, and even though the job has its ups and downs, plenty of blood, sweat and tears, Jason doesn't regret a minute of it. He loves helping people too much to ever think about backing out.

He even meets the Titans once with Damian backing him up, a group of young heroes just like Jason. They all seem friendly enough except for one, the clone of Superman who calls himself Superboy, Kon-El or Conner. He glares at Jason and Damian the whole mission through.

"Jeez," Jason mutters as he follows Damian back onto their plane, "What bug crawled up that guys ass and died. He's way less fun than big blue is."

He means it as a rhetorical question, but one look at Damian makes him realise that maybe he should have picked his words more carefully. "Damian?"

"He was Timothy's best friend, back when he was alive."

Oh. Oh well that's... that's kind of shit, actually. Jason slides down in his seat, kicking his feet out towards the controls. "Let me guess, he resents me for wearing his dead pal's suit, and he's mad at you cuz you were a jerk back then."

Damian shoots him a look, but after all this time of knowing each other Jason's no longer intimidated by his glares, not when he knows there's no real threat behind them.

"What? It's true, right?"

"You talk to Spoiler too much."

"Steph's the coolest girl I know!" Jason defends automatically. "Are you denying it?"

Damian sighs. "No. Superboy has never liked me for the way I treated Timothy."

Jason bites his lip. "It's not fair, you know."

"A lot of things aren't."
"No, I mean." Jason turns in his seat, frustrated. "You couldn't have known what was going to happen to Tim. No one did, not even B. The Joker's a whackjob, always has been, and yeah, you should've been nicer to him, and maybe he'd have stood a better chance with more training, but from what I know you weren't even near Gotham when it happened. How were you supposed to stop it? It's just... it's just wrong that they look at you that way."

The plane is put into autopilot as Damian leans back in his seat. He looks distant and defeated, like Atlas with the world on his shoulders. Finally he swallows, "You're the first person other than Alfred to tell me that."

Jason doesn't know how to take that. "... really?"

"Even Father blamed me at first when I came home to find out what had happened. I was angry, the same way I was when I learned he'd taken you on. I told him he should never have allowed another boy to be Robin. Then," Damian's mouth curves up into a bitter smile, "He yelled at me. Told me I had no business accusing him of anything, not when I'd never liked Tim in the first place. He wasn't wrong."

Jesus... "You blame yourself too, don't you?"

Damian doesn't answer him, but the look on his face tells Jason all he needs to know.

Suddenly angry, he takes off his seatbelt and stalks over to his big brother, leaning in close enough that Damian's eyebrows raise above his mask. "Bullshit." Jason tells him, shoving his finger into Damian's chest. "It's bullshit."

"You weren't there, Jason. You don't-"

"So what if I wasn't! I've lived under it every day ever since Bruce took me in!" He really is pissed now, on both his and Damian's behalf. "No one ever says it, but I have to walk past that case in the cave every day the same as the rest of you! I have to match up to a ghost and it's messed up is what it is. Same as you and B blaming yourselves for something neither of you could have seen coming. God!"

He throws up his hands, then wraps his arms around himself as he leans back against the plane's control console. "I'm sick of it, Dami. Everyone in this family's so amped up on blaming themselves."

Damian doesn't protest the shortening of his name the way he usually does. He reaches for Jason's arm instead, wrapping his hand around his bicep and squeezing it in a comforting grip. "So am I."

"So can we stop?" Jason mutters, shaking his head. "Can we just..."

"I don't know, Jason. I think if it were so easy we would have done it by now, but Timothy's death is always going to be a weight on all of us. Particularly for Father."

Jason squeezes his eyes shut, then slides cautiously closer to Damian. When his brother doesn't protest he leans himself against him, resting his head against Damian's shoulder. It's not really a hug, but it's close enough.

"So, " Damian says eventually, when both of them are feeling a little calmer, "What did you think to the rest of the Titans?"

"They're okay, I guess." Jason shrugs as he thinks back to the previous six hours of fighting aliens
and killer robots. "Speedy and Starfire seem cool."

"The alien and the archer?"

Jason nods. They're a couple kids a year or two younger than Jason is, though with Starfire it was hard to tell for certain. Speedy especially had made Jason's stomach do something funny when he smiled, the freckles on his cheeks crinkling up under the corners of his mask as he showed him his bow.

"We'll see about you working with them again in the future, if you want to."

"Maybe. I dunno. Probably won't be much fun if Superbitch is there giving me the evil eye."

"I'll have words with him." Damian starts to say, but Jason pulls back and shakes his head at once, scowling.

"No! I... no. It'll be fine, I can fight my own battles. I'm not scared of him or nothing."

Damian grins in approval. "Good. Because you are Robin, a son of Batman, and we are not afraid of anything."

"Damn right we're not." Jason flashes a smile back and holds out his fist until Damian relents and bumps his own back against it. "I'm the best damn Robin the world's ever seen."

"I wouldn't go that far."

"First doesn't make you best. Just sit back and watch me, old man."

Damian rolls his eyes, then shoves Jason back into his seat and returns to the controls of the plane. They're home where they belong in no time and Jason puts all thoughts of the Teen Titans out of his head for at least a couple of months. He's happy enough here with his family, he doesn't need another team.

*

Over the course of the rest of the year bad things happen. That's a fact of life, tested and true. Jason would never argue otherwise, especially in Gotham where when it rains it really does pour.

It's not even the big villains sometimes. It can just be the small things, the ordinary everyday occurrences that hit too close to home and crawl under your skin, refusing to leave no matter how many hot showers you take.

The one Jason takes tonight is scalding.

He didn't mean to, he keeps thinking. He didn't mean to do it, the same as he didn't mean to beat that pimp half-to-death last week when he caught him smacking around one of his girls. Or maybe he did, maybe Jason did mean to let it happen and that's the worst part, he's just not sure anymore. Not of himself and not of Bruce's belief in him.

The trip back to the manor from the city had been made in silence. Bruce stewed in the drivers seat, while Jason did everything he could not to let his hands shake as he'd pulled up his hood and hidden underneath it, keeping his eyes fixated on the window. The weight of what happened feels
like it's crushing his chest, bound by a hanging rope and the effects of gravity.

*This is it, he thinks. This is the day I get fired.*

This is the day that Bruce realises taking in a good for nothing street kid as his partner was a giant mistake.

Maybe he should just... just get it over with now. Leave before Bruce can fire him. Maybe that would be better for his already cracked self-esteem. Jason can't say sorry, he just can't, not when he's happy that rapist piece of scum is dead and Bruce will know it the moment he opens his mouth. He'll see through Jason the way he always can.

Jason turns off the shower, and when he reaches up to rub his face clean with a towel not everything that comes away on it is pure water.

In his room he gets dressed before sinking down onto his bed. Impulse has him reaching for his cell phone and scrawling between the very few numbers on there. He calls both Damian and Steph a couple times but always hangs up before either of them can answer. He doesn't even know what he'd say to them, especially Damian who has high standards that are almost equal to Bruce's, even though he's always been more forgiving of Jason being brutal during combat than his father is.

He turns off the phone so he won't have to hear it if they try to call him back. Packs a go bag just in case, then tries and fails to sleep for a couple hours before giving up and heading up into the attic. It's been at least six months since the last time he smoked a cigarette, but tonight seems as good a time to start again as any.

*"Jason." Someone shakes him awake by the shoulder. On instinct Jason tries to lash out at them, but his clumsy elbow attack is easily caught and turned aside by strong hands.*

Damian's knelt behind him, with Steph watching over his shoulder. The concern on her face is as openly bright as the eggplant purple shirt she's wearing. "Squirt?"

"What're you guys doing here?" He grumbles, rubbing his face and blinking at the feeling of cold ashes smeared on his fingers and now his nose. It's unnervingly bright in the attic, and Jason doesn't understand why that is until he realises it's the middle of the day and the brightness is coming from the sun shining through the open window he's curled up against.

"Tt. You called us."

Oh. Jason swallows as he remembers. "I didn't mean to."

Steph raises her eyebrows, clearly disbelieving. "You didn't mean to call us both twice and then hang up each time? Oh, and then turn off your phone so neither of us could call you back? Gosh! What a strange and unusual series of accidents."

"Stephanie." Damian growls.

"What?" She glares back at him before looking more gently at Jason. "C'mon, baby bird, what's with the hiding out? You just about gave Bruce a heart attack when he woke up this morning and
realised you weren't in your room."

Jason shakes his head, looking at his bare toes instead. "I doubt that."

Steph and Damian exchange a look, then she's forcing her way forwards, dragging both Jason and Damian around despite their matching protests until all three of them are sat together in a cramped row with Jason squashed between the elder two. Steph's arm wraps around his neck as she pulls Jason into a tighter hug her way and uses her thumb to clean the ash off his face. "Okay, I get it now. It's a pity party, but what's the cause we're commiserating? Did you have a fight with Bruce? Because believe me, kid, Damian and I can both tell you some stories about how that's not unusual."

"This isn't like that. It's not like anything before." Jason tries to bite back the words but fails. "I messed up. I really, really messed up."

"Is it to do with the case you two were working on?" Damian asks astutely, his bulk a solid reassuring wall to Jason's right.

Slowly, Jason nods.

"The one with the rapist." Stephanie fills in on the other side, suddenly sounding less sure of herself. "The, uh... the victim, the girl. She killed herself. I heard about it this morning. I'm so sorry, Jay."

The reminder makes him wince as it brings back to mind with horrible clarity the grotesque picture that Gloria's body made as she swung from the ceiling of her apartment. She shouldn't have felt like she had to do that to escape her abuser. She should have felt like she was safe with Batman and Robin watching over her, but instead she'd killed herself. Jason's never felt worse about anything except his mother's death before.

"I went after him." Jason confesses. "The guy... Felipe. I went after him without Bruce."

The two of them exchange another look over his head.

"Then what happened?" Damian tones his words like he's asking for a report from Robin, which helps Jason talk actually.

"He was on the balcony." Pulling further into himself, Jason just lets the words come out. "I... I spooked him. He, uh... he was real close to the edge."

"He fell?"

Jason nods to confirm Stephanie's guess. The scream is primed in his ears, as is Jason's own sense of satisfaction in the moment, right before Bruce appeared and the shame hit him. "I could've done something to stop it, but I didn't."

The silence that follows makes him feel even smaller.

"Oh squirt..."

"Stephanie. Can you give us a moment?"

"Really?" She hisses over Jason's head at Damian, "You think you're the best one to-"
Whatever look Damian gives her, it must work, because Jason feels Steph kiss the top of his head a moment later before she stands. "Be right back, Jay. I'm going to go have a talk with Bruce about some things."

Ordinarily Jason would start to feel bad for Bruce right about now, but honestly he's so miserable that it's hard to think about anyone other than himself.

Damian waits until it's clear Steph's out of hearing range before talking. "You didn't kill him."

"I did!" Jason's head shoots up, and he's biting back further tears. "I could've saved him! I chose not to. That's as good as killing him, isn't it?! Bruce saw it, he knows. He thinks I killed him and now he's going to hate me. He's going to kick me out. I'm no good to be Robin anymore. That's all there is to it."

Strong hands seize him about the shoulders as Damian gives Jason a light shake. He's angry, teeth clenched as he growls. "No, that's not true. Don't you dare think that. I won't allow it."

"It doesn't matter what you will or won't allow!" Jason bites back, "I'm a failure!"

"Then so am I! And Father better fire both of us."

Jason stares, unable to comprehend the meaning behind that unexpected statement. "What?"

Damian grimaces as he pulls back. "If you're a failure at Robin because you didn't save one man, then I should never have been allowed to put on the uniform in the first place."

"Damian, you... you killed someone?"

"People." Damian corrects softly, "I killed a lot of people."

It feels like the earth has been swept out from under Jason's feet and he's in free fall. That can't be right. Damian is Nightwing, he was Robin, and Bruce would never allow someone who killed to fight alongside him. "I don't understand."

"I'm a child of assassins, Jason." Damian says as if it should be obvious, and maybe it should have been right from the start, except that Jason never thought Damian could be anything other than a hero. "I was trained from birth, not just to fight but to kill. For my mother and grandfather that meant spilling blood as soon as I was able to prove that I was worthy of my heritage."

"Christ." Jason mutters, because really what else can he say in response to that. He's starting to wonder if any kid of Bruce's comes without a fucked up childhood as a prerequisite, but he'd need more knowledge of what kind of home Timothy Drake came from to clarify that. "Then why did he let you be Robin?"

"Because he believed in me. He believed that I could be someone better, and that I deserved that chance the same as anyone else." Damian rests his hand on top of Jason's head. "He believes in you too, Jason. You made one mistake, but that does not make you a lost cause."

"But he looked so angry."

"I imagine he is, but Father does possess some capacity for forgiveness, even it must sometimes be fought for." Damian's fingers brush his hair. "Are you sorry for what you did?"

Jason hesitates, "I... I don't know yet. What Felipe did to Gloria, it was... unforgivable." He bites his lip. "Is it bad that I think that way?"
"No... no it isn't, Jason." His brother sighs heavily. "Some things are unforgivable. And we all have our moments, things that push us to cross the line. But it's how we choose to move forward from them that makes us who we are. There are many times when I've wished death on our enemies, and I've often considered how easy it would be to follow through."

"Then what stops you?"

"The knowledge that if I did, I would become exactly what Mother and Grandfather intended me to be." Damian turns Jason's head to look at him, "I've chosen to be my father's son instead, and that's a choice you must make also, Jason. Who do you want to be, Robin or someone else?"

"Robin!" Bursts at once from Jason's lips without hesitation. "Of course I want to be Robin, Robin's the best thing I've ever been."

Damian smiles at him, and there's an edge of relief in his eyes that neither of them are going to comment on. "Good. Then everything will be all right, Robin. Neither I nor Stephanie will let Father fail you, as you will not let yourself fail him."

In a rush of gratitude Jason launches himself forwards, actually taking Damian by surprise as he throws his arms around his neck. It's not the first hug they've ever shared, but it's definitely the most heartfelt as Jason clings tightly to his older brother. "Thanks, Dami."

"Of course." Damian murmurs back, as his arms slowly close around Jason in return, and if Jason cries a few tears into his neck then well, that's just another thing neither of them will ever talk about. "You're my brother."

Overwhelmed at hearing the words finally being said out loud, Jason doesn't even notice when Damian reaches around him and throws the last of his cigarettes out the window.

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Things are tense for a while. Bruce is tired and frustrated, and he holds Jason back for few weeks out of concern for his wellbeing before they both eventually break down and apologise to each other. But eventually things settle back into the same pattern they had before, albeit with Bruce learning to be a little more cautious on involving Jason with cases concerning abuse and rape, probably thanks to Stephanie's forceful intervention.

"You should know better than to expect him to be okay in that situation considering where he comes from!" He still remembers overhearing the end of her yelling contest with Bruce as he and Damian came downstairs from the attic, but that's all he ever hears about it, and Jason's grateful that no one other than Steph ever brings it up to his face again.

Time goes on. Jason turns fifteen in August and they hold a party, just a little one for them as a family. Damian and Steph are getting on well enough by the time it rolls around that they both attend together with nothing more than harmless sniping at the other's expense. Cassandra shows up too as a bonus, and Jason teases her and Steph when they hold hands until she pounces and wrestles him to the ground.

Of all the party, only Bruce groans when Jason unwraps a beautiful gleaming sword as a gift from his older brother.

"Really?" Bruce sighs, glaring at his eldest son.
Damian shrugs and smirks, looking at Jason with a knowing gaze that calls back to the first weekend they spent together almost three full years before. "He's old enough to be trusted with it, Father."

The sword takes pride of place on Jason's wall, and the new sword fighting lessons he gets from Damian every week leave him bruised and grinning. They're only using bamboo ones to start while Jason gets the hang of it, but Damian promises they can move onto practising with blunted metal blades soon.

Before Jason knows it November's in the air.

He's running through the East End when it happens, patrolling alone since Bruce got a special invite to attend the circus that's newly arrived in town with Vicky Vale in tow. Jason was asked to go along with him but declined, because even though the show sounded like it might be fun, he really doesn't like being stuck between Bruce and one of his on and off again girlfriends. He'll be playing it up as Brucie to the press, and that's already bad enough at all the galas and other official Wayne Enterprises parties that Jason's forced to attend without adding more to the load.

Besides, how can the circus ever beat this?

Jason lets out an exhilarated whoop as he flips from one broken tiled rooftop to the next, doing an easy circuit of the neighbourhood before coming to a halt on top of a neon lit strip club. From here he can see Wayne Tower rising up like a shining beacon out of the darkness, and he's thinking that maybe he'll head that way next when something suddenly stings into the front of his throat like a biting insect.

It's kind of incredible when you think about it, which Jason blearily does as he pulls the dart out a second later, the guy got him right under his chin. The single tiny point where the collar of his cape doesn't protect his neck. Amazing accuracy, that's for sure. Almost like... he doesn't know, almost like the attacker knew right where to hit to take Jason down.

In desperation he reaches for his comm, determined to get some kind of message out to anyone listening, but a projectile that's shaped almost like a batarang knocks his hand away from his ear before he can get a single word out.

"Fuck..."

Jason collapses backwards, twisted up inside his cape as he tries to get his suddenly uncooperative limbs under control and remember where his hands are. The drug is one that works quickly, making it hard to think or even feel clearly anymore, and when he looks up all he can make out of his assailant is what looks like a thin man with a giant red blob for a head.

_God damn it_, is his last clear thought as darkness falls over him, everyone's going to kick his ass for this.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Someone please take this AU away from me, it's become terrible and mind consuming. And apparently I can only write it in massive chapters.

Warnings for kidnapping, isolation, violence, and people being in generally no good, very bad places mentally. Especially Tim here.

Basically there's trauma all round.

Jason's mouth feels like cotton. Even tastes like cotton, and not the good candy kind.

He'd been drugged, hadn't he? Must have been, because the way his head is pounding screams of dehydration and an ugly come down. Jason is intimately familiar with that feeling in these situations, and he knows that if he doesn't get something to drink soon he's going to be dealing with a chronic headache all day long (and maybe that shouldn't be the most important priority on his list, but after three years of being Robin it's not the first time Jason's been kidnapped; people who want to fuck with Batman always think that his sidekicks are a weak point).

Cracking open his eyes, Jason swallows down the instinctive urge to panic and takes stock of the situation he finds himself in.

The room is medium-sized, square and low-lit, with a tiled floor and no furniture but a solitary chair, the bed he's lying on and... gross, a toilet. There's only one door that leads out, while the light comes from a single bulb hanging from the ceiling rather than a window - which is annoying as much as it's easy on his head and eyes. Natural light would at least give Jason some indication of how long he's been in here, but one glance at the cracked and dusty walls tells him that he won't be finding that out anytime soon.

There was a window here once, he can see that, as well as another door leading out, but they've been bricked over; recently if the fresh colour of the bricks compared to the rest of the wall is anything to go by.

Bastard. Whoever's behind this was smart enough to think that particular aspect through.

The bed is unusual. What villain in Gotham would ever give a damn about Robin's comfort? Normally it's a cold floor in a cell or a warehouse, maybe even an underground cave if they're feeling particularly creative, but Jason's never woken up on a bed before. He even thinks this one has blankets, and when he moves his arm to test that hypothesis there's the slide of light fabric against his skin, as well as well as the rattling sound of something else.

Chains.

Jason rolls onto his back and lifts his arms up in front of him, frowning at the silver circles of metal that curve around his wrists. They're attached to separate chains that then converge together, and Jason can tell just by looking at them that they're nowhere near loose enough for him to pull his hands through, not even if he were to dislocate his thumbs as is standard practice for escaping restraints.
There's no visible lock that he can see either. The metal is almost seamless, which means they must respond to some kind of signal or bio scan from his jailer rather than a conventional key.

"Great... just great." Jason sighs. So much for his lock picking skills.

It turns out that even the sound of his own voice is enough to make him wince like an alcoholic on Sunday morning, and Jason would think more about that fact except his still sluggish mind catches onto something else first.

His hands and forearms are bare.

Oh no. Oh no, no no... He sits up in a rush, swaying before he reaches towards his face and slides his fingers over the bridge of his nose where his domino should be. There's nothing, no plastic, and the realisation makes Jason's blood run cold as he looks down at what he's wearing: a plain T-shirt and sweatpants that are just a little too big.

Whoever caught him knew enough to be able to disable the security measures on his suit. And not just that, they were sane enough to do the smart thing and pull the mask off his face, unlike most villains who just cared about their theatrics. That means they must know who he is. They know who he is, and if they know that then it's not a huge leap of logic to figuring out who Batman and the rest of Gotham's heroes are either.

"Shit, shit fuck. Shit!" Jason rolls himself off the bed. In his drug addled desperation he's not exactly thinking clearly, but maybe if he can't pick the lock then he can at least pull the ring the chain holding him is attached to out of the wall at the head of the bed. "Come on! Come on!"

He yanks back hard, feeling the bite of the metal into his skin as he grits his teeth harder. His feet are bare, which doesn't help him when it comes to getting purchase on the smooth floor, but that doesn't matter because the thing is screwed in deep and Jason knows after only a few tugs that he's never going to be able to move it. Not that it stops him from trying out of desperation anyway.

Even when his skin starts to tear he's still pulling.

"You shouldn't do that."

The distorted, mechanical voice coming from the direction of the door snaps him out of it pretty quickly. Jason whirls round and pushes himself back against the bed, his foot impacting with a bottle of water he hadn't even noticed was there before and sending it rolling across the floor. Now his toe hurts too.

Without hesitating his captor - the guy in the red helmet that he blearily remembers appearing in his vision before it went dark - bends down to scoop it up. He holds the bottle back out to Jason as he approaches the bed.

"Who the fuck are you?"

"You've hurt yourself." The guy says, ignoring his question as he gets closer. There's no face to the helmet that Jason can tell, not even any eye holes, and he wonders how the guy can even see him to know that. "Here, drink some of this and I'll get the first aid kit."

Jason doesn't reach out to take the bottle as his mind runs through scenarios. Maybe, just maybe, if he got close enough he could take the creep out. The chain has some reach on it, and could even function as a weapon itself if he needs it to, but he's still at a disadvantage should he try to fight back.
When in doubt: talk. That's what Bruce always told him to do in these situations, talk, and try to get them to talk back.

"Why do you care?" He asks helmet-head sharply, "And seriously, who the fuck are you? Why am I here?"

The guy shakes his head, "Drink the water, Jason."

The use of his real name makes Jason flinch, and he's not quite good enough that it goes unnoticed. "How do I know you haven't poisoned it?"

"The bottle's sealed." The synthesised voice carries no emotion, just words. "I haven't broken it, and I have no reason to poison you now. If I'd wanted you dead I would have killed you on that rooftop."

Shit, Jason thinks, he does have a point there.

Reluctantly he shuffles forwards, stretching out his arm until he's at the end of the chain and can just grasp the neck of the water bottle. Helmet-head lets go instantly, and when Jason brings it back he can see that he was telling the truth. The packaging and plastic seal are completely intact, but even if they weren't Jason's so thirsty right now that he might have gone ahead and drank it anyway.

"I'll be right back." His captor promises him, but Jason almost couldn't care less as he twists the cap off the water and gulps half the bottle down in one go. After that he forces himself to slow down, sipping it carefully so he won't get sick as he sits down on the edge of the bed and waits for his headache to subside.

Less than a minute later the guy in the helmet returns, and Jason looks up as he hears the door unlock and open once more. Now that he's paying a little more attention rather than just freaking out, he can give his captor the same scrutiny that he gave the room he's being kept in.

He's not exactly tall, 5'5 at a push. Actually only an inch or so taller than Jason is at fifteen, and that surprises him. His own growth has been slowed by malnutrition, so Leslie said, which means he's always been short for his age. It's rare to find grown men as small as he is. Of course, it's hard to get a beat on the guy's age with the helmet and disguised voice, but it's also difficult to imagine that they could be the same age. He's probably older, just short that's all.

Black body armour, form-fitting, and smooth. Pretty standard looking by all accounts, but the snug fit and rounded edges means there's no loose fabric to get a grip on should Jason try to grab him by it - and without his own reinforced gloves all he'll end up doing if he punches the guy is bruising his own knuckles.

If Jason didn't already loathe this creep for kidnapping him, then he certainly would now for how well prepared he is. Not to mention how well armed. There's two handguns that Jason can see outright, and probably more besides.

"I know what you're doing." Helmet-head says, putting a small white first-aid kit down on the solitary chair in the room, alongside another bottle of water, a store-bought sandwich in plastic wrapping, and a newspaper. "And I know I'm probably wasting my breath telling you this, but I really have thought of everything in regards to how to keep you here. You won't be getting out until I'm ready to let you go."

"Let me go?" Jason echoes, trying not to let his surprise show too much. "You mean you're planning to?"
"Eventually." Helmet-head opens up the first aid kit, searching through until he finds a tube of antiseptic cream. "Turn around, please."

"What?"

"Turn around." The tap of the guy's foot might betray impatience. "I know exactly what you're capable of, Robin, and it'll be easier on both of us if I lessen the risk of you doing something stupid."

Jason glares at him, pointedly not moving. "Fuck you, asshole."

Helmet-head sighs, and it's a weird sound through the helmet, like a thousand bees buzzing. Then, like lightning, he moves.

Jason jumps to his feet and raises his fists, lashing out at the creep's neck in hopes of finding a vulnerable spot despite his earlier observations about the armour vs. his knuckles, but he's slow thanks to the lingering effects of the drug in his system. Helmet-head ducks underneath it - Jesus, he's fast - before his hand finds the chain binding Jason's wrists and yanks it forwards, bringing Jason's entire upper body with it, and he chokes as his stomach meets the asshole's raised knee.

He's still trying to recover from that when his feet are knocked out from underneath him, and another hand seizes Jason by his shoulder, spinning him so he ends up landing with his top half face-first down on the thin mattress with his arms trapped uncomfortably underneath him. A knee presses down into the small of Jason's back and, just like that, it's over.

Or not quite. Cold metal presses against his cheek, and Jason freezes as he smells residual gunpowder from the end of the firearm.

"Y'know," he eventually wheezes, "Saying you want to patch me up an' let me go sometime is kinda hard if you blow my head off."

"I'm not going to blow your head off." The gun barrel slides to his shoulder, to a spot Jason knows will let a bullet pass through cleanly, if painfully. "But I will hurt you if I have to. You need to understand the rules here, Jason."

"Can you try to sound creepier? I don't think I'm really feeling it yet."

There's something almost like a snort. "Look, it's nothing personal. You just happened to be the easiest piece to remove from the board, with the most strategic effect on the others."

Jason's heart skips a beat. "So what, I'm just a pawn in whatever game you're playing with Batman?"

"You should be used to that by now. You're Robin."

"And you should know how well this ploy's worked out for all the other morons who've tried it in the past." Jason growls back at him, struggling on principle. He has more words lined up, but what the guy in the helmet says next knocks them right out of him.

"I know how well it worked out for the Robin before you."

Son of a -

Jason swallows hard. It takes him a moment to remember how to speak again. "If that's supposed to scare me, you're barking up the wrong tree. Batman doesn't make the same mistake twice, and you already said you're not going to kill me."
"I'm not, but he doesn't know that."

"Fuck you! He's going to find me, and when he does he'll kick your ass and lock you up in whatever hellhole you deserve!" Jason says with sudden venom, furious that this guy knows about what happened to his predecessor, and livid that he's trying to use it against Bruce. Some things are meant to be sacred, especially Tim Drake's death and the legacy it's left on his family.

He feels more than sees his captor shake his head. "Not this time, Jason."

"Well 'scuse me if I don't believe you."

"I don't need you to believe, all I need you to do is understand your position." The gun barrel jabs into his shoulder again, as if Jason could ever have forgotten that it's there. "The rules are very simple. You behave, you don't try to attack me or escape and I'll treat you well. You get three square meals a day and I'll bring you books to read so you won't be bored. Understand?"

"Wow, how gosh-darn generous of you." Jason says, deadpan. "And if I don't?"

"You get one meal a day and no books. And I make that chain you're wearing about six feet shorter."

Jason glares at the bed cover, then twists his head to look at where the chain attaches to the wall. Right now it's easily long enough for him to stand and move about the room if he wants to. But if his new friend makes good on his threat of shortening it? Jason won't even be able to get off the bed.

"Why the hell are you doing this?" He demands instead of commenting on that horrifying realisation, wincing as his back starts to ache under the weight of the knee pressing down onto it. The feeling in his arms is steadily going dead thanks to the pressure cutting off the blood flow to his muscles. "Who are you?!"

There's quiet for a moment.

"Red Hood. That's all you need to know. Now," The newly dubbed Red Hood says, "if I let you up are you going to behave?"

Jason growls, then nods. Spitting out the word, "Fine." like a curse before hissing as Red Hood jabs the gun into his shoulder one final time for emphasis before climbing off of him.

He turns over, pushing himself back up onto the bed properly as he watches Red pick up the antiseptic cream again, still holding the gun in his other hand. "Lemme guess, turn around?"

"Bingo."

Jason does it reluctantly, stepping through the trapped circle of his arms so they'll be behind him and then sitting cross-legged on the bed. He hears Red Hood step up at his back a moment later, and it takes every inch of control that Bruce and Damian drilled into him for Jason not to do something idiotic like try to smash his head backwards into Red's face.

Stupid because he's wearing a helmet, and the only gain the action will give Jason is a busted skull.

Gloved fingers grab his hands, more gently than Jason would have initially expected. He restrains a hiss as the cream stings into the welts he gave himself under the cuffs, digging his teeth into his lip instead as he tries not think how much more disturbed he is by the fact that this Red Hood seems determined to take care of him while keeping him chained up like a dog than he would be
by some normal villain knocking him around.

Whatever his motivations are, they worry Jason. Those words - that he was the easiest piece to remove from the board with the most strategic effect on the others - what did they mean? What was the motivation behind that? What machinations does this guy have on Bruce and his family?

He has to find out, then he has to escape from here and warn them.

Jason turns back around when Red's fingers withdraw, slipping his hands back under his legs so that they're in front of him again. He's just in time to catch the plastic wrapped sandwich that Red tosses at him. "Eat that, it'll help you shake off the last effects of the sedative."

Jason grimaces but can't see any point in arguing. He tears it open and takes a bite, tasting pastrami, cheese and pickle. It's nowhere near as good as one of Alfred's sandwiches, but for something that looks store bought it's not half bad. The second bottle of water lands on the bed next to him, followed by the newspaper.

"Thought you might be interested in that." Seemingly having said everything he has to say for now, Red Hood turns and leaves the room, shutting the door behind him. There's the sound of the lock sliding into place, which only goes to prove that he's taking no chances where Jason's concerned.

Jason huffs, takes another bite of the sandwich and picks the newspaper up. Then, almost immediately drops it.

*TRAGEDY AT THE CIRCUS* the headline reads, and Jason sinks back onto the bed as he tears through the article. Bruce had been at the circus last night, and if he was there then -

The rest of the sandwich sits forgotten beside him as he reads. Two trapeze artists, Mary and John Grayson, had been performing with their young son when their rope snapped. Both the adults were killed instantly but the boy survived, and though the police have yet to make an official statement foul play is suspected; of course, the paper makes sure to mention that Bruce Wayne was in attendance that night.

Jason swallows thickly.

Really, really not good. Jason can only imagine the unpleasant memories witnessing that would have brought back for Bruce. And of course that poor kid, Richard, enduring one of the worst experiences anyone could go through.

Bruce would have seen that, then gone home full of fire and brimstone to find out who murdered the Grayson's, only to discover one of his own children missing. The timing can't be anything more than coincidence (can it?), but it's still really messed up.

Jason folds the paper back up and sets it down next to him. He'll read the rest of it later, after he's had some time to think.

He has to get out of here, just has to.

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There are more papers after that. One every day.
Even when Jason does something to piss Red Hood off there are still papers.

Once he's done yelling and banging on walls to prove he's beyond the earshot of anyone who could help him, Jason follows the ongoing aftermath of what happened at Haly's Circus with a gritted jaw. Definitely murder, the police confirm it the day after, and somehow he's completely unsurprised to see that Bruce Wayne volunteered to take the newly orphaned Dick Grayson in.

Red Hood watches him closely when he reads that headline. Maybe he expects more of a negative reaction from Jason when he learns that, while he's been kidnapped, his adopted father has gone ahead and brought home another child like a replacement toy. But honestly Jason doesn't give a rat's ass, his faith in Bruce is absolute after all they've been through together, and Batman can help more than one person at a time.

Bruce would never give up on him.

Besides, the society pages tell Jason another tale. The story his family have cooked up for his disappearance from public life is the usual bullshit: Jason's gone travelling in Europe, and no one knows when he'll be back. There's some crap by the writers criticising him for leaving at this difficult time, of course, the media pricks never miss a chance to shoot scorn over the lowly street rat, but far more attention is paid to the fact that the eldest Wayne son has been spotted back in the city.

Jason knows with a warm squeeze of his heart that Damian is looking for him too.

"They're going to find me, and you're going to get your ass-kicked." He growls after what is his fourth failed escape attempt, arms twisted up around his back.

Red Hood had unlocked him from his chains so he could go take a shower at the end of the first week (seven papers, seven days), and Jason's never been one to waste an opportunity. He'd lunged the moment he thought the creep wasn't paying attention to him, and now he's nursing a bruised jaw and ribs for his trouble.

"I doubt it. They'd have to know I exist first to blame me for your disappearance."

Jason snarls as he's hauled up from the floor and marched back to the bed. He reflects that he probably should have tried to escape after he took that shower, rather than now having to put up with his own stale body odour for presumably a few more days. "That sort of shit's never stopped them before. You'll have left something they can use."

Red Hood shakes his head. "You're not getting it, Jason. I'm not like all those other costumed villains you fight. I'm not stupid, I know Bruce, and I know Damian. I know how they work and how they think. And I've laid enough false breadcrumbs for them to follow that they'll never know to look here to find you."

He swears as he's yanked round, aiming a backwards kick at Red Hood's chest that's impatiently knocked aside. The cuffs slip back around his wrists, and Jason thinks that just for a moment he glimpses the key before it slides back into a not-so-hidden pocket in Red's armour.

"Then what's the point?!" He snaps, pissed off and miserable, wincing from his newest set of bruises. At this rate he'll end up looking like a human Jackson Pollock painting. "Why are you doing this?! If you don't want to hurt me or use me to lure them into a trap, why am I here?! For fuck's sake, stop being a dick and tell me!"

A sharp shove knocks him down onto the bed and Red Hood shakes his head, "Figure it out for yourself if you want to know."
"Whatever!" Jason seethes, "I don't need help from some guy who doesn't even know what a hood is."

Red Hood looks back at him, head tilted in question.

"Your outfit, you goof. That's a helmet, not a hood." He smirks, as nastily as he can manage. "And it makes you look like a moron."

"You're not going to rile me into revealing my evil plan, Jason. I told you, I'm not like anyone else you've ever fought. I'm not a villain."

"Like hell you aren't. Good guys don't kidnap kids."

Red Hood shrugs, thin shoulders rising high. "I never said I was a good guy either."

Jason glares at his back as he steps out and locks the door.

Just like he had the first few times Jason tried to escape, Red Hood cuts his meals down for the next couple of days. The two books he'd been given to read are taken away too, and so the only entertainment Jason has is his growing pile of newspapers and what exercises the reach of the chain allows him to practice.

Jason has yet to piss him off enough to follow through on his threat of shortening the reach on the chain, and it makes him wonder if Red Hood isn't all as ruthless as he's making himself out to be, or if he's more bark than bite.

(He taunts him once about not having the balls to do it, to little effect)

But that still leaves Jason to drive himself a little stir-crazy between push-ups and trying to complete the crosswords in the papers by memory since the asshole won't give him a pen. It's probably what Red Hood wants, thinking that if Jason gets bored enough he'll become more cooperative by default. And not to tell a lie, it is tempting; loneliness is a hell of a motivator, but Jason will be damned before he breaks that easily and begs his captor for some relief.

The most interesting thing to read in the news is the sudden influx of arrests by the GCPD with the aid of the city's vigilantes; more proof to Jason that his family is out there searching for him. It's not just small time thugs, it's the big ones too. Any of their major rogues gallery who weren't already in Arkham or Blackgate are quickly finding themselves there.

_They really don't know_, Jason realises eventually, _They're just crossing names off the list until they find something concrete._

It's not a comforting epiphany.

"Here." Jason looks up when Red Hood walks in through the door on the third day since he tried to escape, carrying a bag that smells heavenly, as well as some books under his arm. It looks like his punishment is over.

"Is that McDonald's?" He demands, unable to deny his hunger as his stomach rumbles. Normally Jason's a little more picky when it comes to fast food, but it's been long enough since his last hot meal that he'll take anything.

Red Hood nods, "It's a peace offering." He drops the bag full of fries and burgers into Jason's waiting hands and watches, maybe amused, possibly disgusted, as he immediately tears it open and digs in. All of Alfred's hard work at teaching the street kid manners falls away when Jason reaches this level of hungry, because he's never forgotten what it is to starve. "I hope you've
"'uck 'ou." Jason says ungraciously, around a mouthful of fries. He chews and swallows quickly. "I know all the tricks you guys try and pull. You can't bullshit me into thinking you're my friend. You didn't even bring me a milkshake."

"I've never tried to be." Red Hood drops the books on the bed next, and Jason chokes when he sees the titles.

"Wow. Wow. I figured you were a sadistic asshole, but Twilight, seriously?! What do you think I am, a twelve year old girl?"

"I promised you books," Red Hood says, and this time, voice modulator or not, he can't hide the amusement in his voice. "Not great literature. I drank the milkshake on the way home, by the way. I can't let you have anything with a straw."

Jason stares and flips Red the bird as he steps back. It's the first time he's been given a sign that Red possesses anything so human as a sense of humour: up till this point Jason had actually been theorising that he could be a robot. "Sadistic. Asshole."

Red Hood shrugs, not denying the accusation. "So have you figured it out yet?"

"Your evil 'masterplan'?" Jason puts his food down to do the finger quotes. "No, not yet."

"You're slower than I expected."

Jason growls at him. "Go fuck yourself. You haven't given me anything, just the goddamn Gazette every frigging day."

"Then you already have everything you need."

If there's one thing that grinds Jason's gears, it's people insulting his intelligence. The society men and women who turn up to Bruce's parties and galas all make that mistake based on where Jason comes from, and so did his classmates at school until he proved them wrong with his grades. He might not be a genius like Bruce and Damian, and maybe he's a year behind in school because of the time he spent on the streets, but he sure as fuck isn't stupid either.

"You're so sure of yourself, aren't you? How the hell can you believe that whatever you're up to is going to work?"

"Because it already is working, Jason." Red Hood nods his head towards the pile of newspapers, "Think about it a little."

Jason grunts and ploughs through the rest of the bag of McDonalds as soon as the Red Hood leaves. He'll show him, he'll figure out his stupid plan, then figure out a way to escape from here. Then, together with his family, Jason will teach this smug Red Hood asshole exactly how things work in Gotham.

It's going to be fine. It's going to be okay.

He'll be home soon.

Jason licks his lips and fingers clean of grease and salt, trying not to think about how the walls of his 'cell' grow ever closer and more oppressive day by day. He's never been claustrophobic before, so there's no reason to start now. He won't let this get to him. He won't.
It takes a little while, but he finally picks up the first *Twilight* book. It might be crap, but it's still better than nothing.

*

The resolve doesn't last. The next time Red Hood comes through the door, Jason throws the books at him in a fit of anger.

He doesn't get anymore after that.

*

Time becomes even less of a concept than it did before.

There's no rise of the sun to tell Jason that it's morning, no sunset to tell him that evening has come. All he has are the papers, and he reads them over and over until he starts to feels like he's going crazy trying to find salvation in a world of black and white.

Jason tears the oldest ones up in a fit of anger after failing to turn them into origami the way Damian taught him, then throws the pieces across room until they pattern the floor like some bizarre mosaic. There's no answers to be found here, and every time he sees a picture of Bruce or Damian, or even reads a single mention of their names, the homesickness strikes him like a fist to the gut.

Misery makes it easier for the paranoia to seep in, fuelled by the endless light cast by the bulb over his head; Jason's mind tracks back to that kid, Richard, the one Bruce had taken in. It whispers that maybe Bruce can't save two people at a time after all, despite all the evidence Jason knows points to the contrary. That maybe the constant stream of arrests means nothing, that maybe it's all just a coincidence and they've given up on Jason after all.

"I'm here." Jason mutters to himself, stretched out on his back on the bed, studying the water-stained pattern of the ceiling for what feels like the thousandth time. "I'm right here, B." Wherever here was.

He's never been away from home this long before. Not without Bruce, Damian or Steph by his side.

The pain of missing them is the worst Jason's ever known, except for one. His mother when she stopped breathing. When she laid down on a tiled floor like the one in this room and never got back up again.

"Fuck..." Jason blinks wetly at the memory poking through, then grabs the blanket and pulls it up over his head. Anything to give himself the illusion of comforting darkness away from the all consuming light. He just wants to go home, that's all he wants. Why is it so much to ask? Why can't he get himself free?

*Because you're a failure. A fuck up, Jason Todd. Why would anyone want you?*
He grits his teeth and forces the needling voice back. The sense of his own worthlessness hasn’t been this strong since the business with Felipe, and this time there’s no Steph and Damian to come to his rescue. Jason’s going to be have the one who holds himself together alone.

He burrows further under the blanket, closing his eyes and willing himself to sleep. There’s far worse that Jason has survived in his lifetime than this.

*

Back when he was a kid, Jason used to have a lot of nightmares. Especially when Bruce first took him off the streets.

They were driven by exhaustion, as he pushed himself through his lessons as Robin and then sat up all night, trembling with fear as he waited for the hammer to fall on his life with Bruce. Because when a billionaire adopts a kid from the street, what else could he expect to happen? Happy endings were for musicals and pretty girls who could sing their hearts out, not little boys with dirt on their souls that would never come clean.

The nightmares ranged from his mother’s cold still body, to his father’s disappearance - and anytime he appeared in Jason's dreams there was always a smoking and bloody hole in Willis Todd's head, put there by his imagination in lieu of a body never being found. There were the dreams about starving, the dreams about being shoved into foster homes and beaten, the ones about unfamiliar hands crawling across his skin like ants.

This one is not like any of those.

Gotham stretches up around him, a black and white silhouette, and Jason wonders where all the colour has gone. He's Robin in the dream, Robin alone in an empty city devoid of life. There's no people, no animals, not even the rats that survive any disaster. The ones Jason found chewing on a dead bum in an alley once.

He keeps walking, wandering. Calling for Bruce, for Damian and Steph, for Alfred. Anyone really. He can feel the sweat stinging into his eyes and palms as he breaks into a run, tearing into the silence as he starts to realise there really is no one there. No one is coming for him, and by the time Jason in the dream finds the manor abandoned, he's almost sobbing with terror for the imagined fates of his loved ones.

"Jason."

He runs from room to room, shoving open doors and pulling apart curtains. He checks everywhere, from the top of the house to the bottom. Right down into the cave, and his cries turn to pleading, begging for his family to come back. To find him. To not leave him behind in this world of shadows and emptiness.

"Jason, wake up."

Hands take hold of his shoulders, and he yells, lashing out blindly. Jason's hand collides with something solid and the pain should be enough to wake him, but he's locked into his night terror, trying to scream for Bruce to come get him. Get away from me! he wants to yell, but the words lodge in his throat, choking him instead.

The hands move, letting go of his shoulders and Jason whimpers when he realises that he can no longer move. That there are bands of steel digging into his body, pinning his limbs against his sides and trapping him. The realisation only makes him thrash harder to escape.
"Stop!" That voice does nothing to calm him. It's cold and mechanical, but then Jason feels the bonds around him suddenly loosen with a quiet click, and the hands are there again, taking hold of his limbs as they try to guide him to loosen up. "Jason, you're having a nightmare. You've-

Jason attempts to strike out once more, but this time whoever it is has his wrists in a firm grip, pulling him up from the mattress to a sitting position before a thin body slides in behind his. Now those wiry, strong arms wrap around Jason's chest, holding him carefully, and a hand goes to his hair, stroking it back as he whimpers.

That's what finally wakes him up.

Jason's eyes fly open, and he stares through sweat soaked bangs at the wall in front of him. He feels like he can hardly breathe and he's shaking, trembling from fear. "What..."

"You were having a nightmare." The mechanical voice says again, and Jason freezes as he realises that Red Hood's the one holding him.

"Let go."

"Jason-"

"Let go of me, you freak!"

Red lets go, and Jason throws himself forward in an effort to get away from him. Crawling across the bed until he's as far away as he can get. His heart pounds in his chest as he stares across at that blank red mask, then slowly lets his eyes track downwards. The chains have been unlocked from his wrists, and they lie coiled like glistening snakes playing possum on the mattress, ready to strike again at a moment's notice. "... you... you unlocked me?"

"You were hurting yourself." A gloved finger points, and Jason looks down to see red marks dug into the exposed skin of his arms. In his tossing and turning he must have wound the chain around himself, and it feels like there's similar marks across his chest, under his shirt and around his shoulders. "I had to."

Is that regret, or is Jason just imagining it?

"Fuck you." He says shakily, wrapping his arms around himself and bringing his knees up to his chest. "Just go fuck yourself."

"I'll get you some water -"

"I don't want fucking water! I want to go home!" Jason bursts out, fingers digging fresh bruises into his arms.

Red pauses, then slowly shakes his head. "I can't do that, Jason. Not yet."

"Bullshit." He whispers. Then louder, "Bullshit!"

The word echoes away, and Jason ducks his head down, pressing his face against his knees. He should attack Red Hood now, the part of him that's forever Robin whispers, while his hands are free and he won't be expecting it. But he can't. His limbs feel like jelly and Jason doesn't trust them.

"... what was it about?"
"What was what about?"

"Your nightmare."

Jason manages a shrug. The details of it are slipping away the longer he's awake, but none of it is anything he wants to tell Red Hood. "Why do you care?"

"I don't. Just... I have nightmares too."

"So what? Everyone does. Doesn't mean I'm going to have a heart to heart with you." Jason says bitterly. "This is your fault, so you can just go screw yourself."

More silence, and for a moment Jason thinks maybe he's managed to shut the guy up once and for all. He hears Red Hood stand, but instead of leaving he comes around the bed to where Jason is curled. "Maybe not. But you do need a shower. Come on, you're soaked in sweat."

"Fuck you." Jason says again tiredly, but the idea of a shower sounds more appealing than ever right now. "You going to cuff me again?"

He looks up in time to see Red shake his head. "Just this once, I'll trust you. But if you-"

"Yeah, yeah. I know." Slowly, he convinces his stiff limbs to uncurl. Jason skirts round his captor, not wanting to be touched as he stands. Red is still armed with his guns and knife, and that's enough to make him think twice about trying to make a run for it. "You'll kick my ass if I try anything."

Red nods. Then he points for Jason to walk ahead of him.

It's a slow shuffle out of Jason's prison into the space beyond, which turns out to be a depressingly bare apartment, furnished with just a threadbare couch and a low table, on which is sat a couple laptops and some closed up folders. Jason would bet anything there's some very interesting information contained within them, but with Red breathing down his neck there's no chance for him to get a better view.

"Keep moving." Red says, nudging Jason forwards to another door when he notices him looking. The door opens up to a tiny bathroom. There's a shower, a sink and another toilet and Jason's directed to sit down while Red does a sweep, removing anything from inside that he could potentially pick up and spirit away as a weapon. He's depressingly thorough about it, as always, and even though there's a window it's boarded up from the outside and far too small for even Jason to think about squeezing through.

"Ten minutes." Red says when he's done. "I'll be right outside. Don't make me regret this."

Jason doesn't even dignify that with an answer.

As soon as the door shuts behind him, Jason switches on the shower, though he doesn't immediately strip off and get in. First he hunts futilely round the room for anything Red Hood might have missed, and after coming up empty, climbs up the wall to try and peer out through the boards covering the tiny window, counting on the running water to cover the sound of him doing so.

No dice. Wherever they are it's dark outside, and Jason can't see a thing.

With a shaky sigh he drops back down to the floor and strips off his sweat stained clothes, sparing another wary glance at the closed door before ducking under the spray.
Despite Red's warning about his time limit, Jason takes a moment just to absorb the wonderfully simple pleasure of hot water against his skin. It's amazing how good something so basic as just being clean can feel after so long an imprisonment, even with the heat stinging into his various bruises. But after a minute, conscious of the man waiting outside, Jason gets to work scrubbing himself clean of over a week's worth of sweat and grease from his hair, using the generic brand shampoo and body wash Red was kind enough to leave him. Jason's first instinct is to grab it and squeeze the stuff into Red's eyes when he opens the door, but then he remembers the helmet and puts the idea out of mind.

By the time he's done he smells of mint and tea tree (not exactly what he'd imagine as your typical bad guy scent), and the water has chased off the last lingering shakes of the nightmare from his limbs. Now, with the clarity that comes from wakefulness, Jason finds himself feeling embarrassed. And resentful.

Resentful towards Red for seeing him in that state. For seeing his weakness. For waking him up and trying to talk to Jason like he was anything other than a prisoner.

What the hell is his deal? Try as he might, Jason can't figure the guy out.

A knock thuds on the door, and Jason knows it's his warning signal to get out before Red decides to let himself in.

He turns off the water, which is starting to turn lukewarm, and steps out of the shower. The single towel hanging on the radiator feels a little damp, which means it's probably not completely clean. But Jason swallows down his revulsion to give himself a superficial drying off before going to the door and cracking it open.

Red is waiting, with what looks like clean clothes for Jason.

"Here." He says, thrusting them towards the gap. Jason snatches them out of his hand and then closes the door again to get dressed, leaving the dirty ones on the floor where he dropped them. Red can pick them up later and deal with Jason's B.O if he wants to. Jason doesn't give a shit.

When Jason comes out Red is unsurprisingly ready for him, one hand casually hanging over the gun at his side as he directs him back to the room he came from.

"Nice place." Jason snarks in a bid to feel more like himself. "Where'd you find it, the crackhead's version of Craigslist?"

"Private listing." Red says smoothly, not missing a beat.

"Think you got a shitty deal."

"It serves its purpose."

Jason rolls his eyes, but when they reach the threshold of his cell again he hesitates, swallowing at the thought of going inside once more. It's just a room. It's just a - "How much longer?"

"What?"

"How much longer is this going to take?" His hands have curled into fists at his sides.

Red is silent, then he draws in a rattling breath. It sounds like the noise a ghost would make, if a ghost ever wanted to imitate the sound of the living. "Not much longer. A week maybe, if things continue to move as fast as they have."
"And then I get to go home, right?"

"Yes."

"Okay then" Jason grimaces as he steps back inside, feeling a little like he's entering the lion's den once more - not that he ever left.

One week to figure this shit out and escape before whatever Red has planned comes to fruition.

Jason turns round at the bed and holds out his wrists for the chains to be put back on, figuring that a show of cooperation now might serve him better in the long run, but Red doesn't immediately move to pick them up. "What? Don't tell me you've lost your nerve."

The question startles him into action, and he steps forwards to fasten the cuffs around Jason's wrists again. "I'll figure something better out tomorrow."

"Because these have been such a stellar solution so far." Jason says sarcastically. "Why do you care so much, man? I'm your prisoner."

"I don't. But there's no reason to hurt you unnecessarily."

"Right, because it's not about me. Just my family. You're a real bleeding heart, Red." Jason strokes his fingers over the now familiar links of steel draping down from his arms.

"You'll understand when this is all over."

"I understand enough already." Jason glares at him. "And you know what? If you hurt my family, I swear to God when you let me out of here I'll kill you for it."

Red nods in understanding. "I know." He turns to go. "Goodnight, Jason."

Jason flips him off as he steps outside and locks the door behind him again. What a prick.

*

Red's solution is not to remove the cuffs entirely, just the part that attaches them to the wall, so that if Jason has another bad dream he won't be able to twist himself up inside them again. Jason's hands are still bound, but the change allows him more mobility and that's something at least.

At first he spends a lot of time considering his chances of looping the chain around Red's neck from behind and choking him into unconscious, before noticing that his captor never turns his back on him now, and always enters the room with a gun in his hand.

Red's too smart not to be aware of the new possibilities he's given Jason for attacking him by loosening his bonds.

There are a couple more nightmares, but they're not as bad as the first, and Jason pours himself back into working on figuring out Red's plan through the papers. He grimaces when he sees Two-Face is back in Arkham.

Two-Face, even past the Joker (who everyone hates on principle), is Jason's most loathed rogue. Besides being a murderous psycho who likes to decide life and death with the flip of a coin, he's the one who killed Jason's dad. His biological dad. And, as much a no-good lowlife as Willis
Todd was, anytime Dent is back behind bars is a good time so far as Jason's concerned.

He and Red continue their one-sided antagonistic dance around each other, but Jason thinks Red is trying to be kinder to him now. As fucked up as that is. There are more hot takeout meals mixed in with the sandwiches, and the books reappear, this time in the form of the classic literature that Jason likes best.

It creeps him out that Red knows that about him.

Everything else stays the same, until one night Jason wakes up to the sound of two voices talking in the room next door.

At once he's up and on his feet, intrigued because he's never heard anyone else in the apartment before. Hell, he never usually hears Red until he's in the room with Jason. This could be the opportunity he's been waiting for to find out what the hell is going on, so Jason doesn't waste a moment in creeping over to the door as silently as he can and pressing his ear against it.

"... soon... I..." The first voice is male, and young. Jason grits his teeth as he leans in close, straining to make anything out clearly. Is that the Red Hood? If it is, it's the first time Jason's ever had an inkling of what he really sounds like.

"... have things under control."

For a moment Jason thinks that maybe he's on the phone, and that he was only hallucinating the second voice, but then he hears the other speaker, and the familiarity of those tones chills him down to his bones. It can't be...

"You are running out of time."

Ra's al Ghul. Jason thinks above his thundering heartbeat. There's no mistake, that's Ra's al Ghul, Damian's grandfather.

If the Red Hood is working with the League of Assassins, things just went from bad to worse.

"I said I have it under control."

"Forgive me for thinking otherwise." Ra's says smoothly. He talks even lower than Red does, so Jason really has to strain his ears to hear him. "Your insistence on keeping Todd here is distracting you."

"And what do you suggest?" Red, if it is Red (and who else could it be), sounds like a Gothamite, but more Bruce's brand of Gotham than Jason's.

"Let me take the boy out of your hands."

Behind the door, Jason's eyes go wide. Oh fuck no. No way in hell. He does not want to be a prisoner of the League, that's a surefire way to get fucked over. Jason doesn't have a lot experience with Ra's - and what he did have was always with Bruce or Damian taking the brunt of the Demon Head's attention - but he's pretty sure the guy doesn't like him for whatever reason, so if Ra's takes Jason it will only be to use him for his own purposes.

Red is quiet for a moment. A rather chilling moment. "Would you kill him?"

"Do you wish me to?"

"... no."
"No?" Ra's scoffs, "Don't tell me you've become attached to the thief who took what is rightfully yours."

What?

"No, it's not - no. He isn't to blame. Bruce is the one who-"

"Then perhaps, you are implying that you don't trust me?"

Jason would have plenty to say on the idea of anyone trusting Ra's, but he's too busy reeling from what he heard before. That can't be right. He doesn't understand. How could he have stolen anything from Red? He'd never met the guy before he decided to kidnap Jason, and even if he did -

Who is he?

That's the backbone of everything, Jason realises. Who is Red behind the mask? If Jason can figure that out everything else will fall into place. He just needs a name.

"Of course not. You know I'm grateful for everything you've done for me."

"Then allow me to continue to help you. No harm will come to the boy if you do not wish it to."

"No." Says Red again quickly, and maybe for the first time Jason actually feels grateful towards the bastard, "No. Thank you, but that's not necessary. It's already almost done. All they have to do is catch the Joker and we can finish this."

The Joker? What the hell does he have to do with anything? A suspicion starts to form in Jason's mind as he tracks back over the wave of arrests that have happened within the past two weeks. Clayface, Scarecrow, Killer Croc, Two-Face... Poison Ivy, Harley and the others were already in the clink. So that left -

Joker.

A cold suspicion starts to take root in Jason's mind.

"I see. Well in that case, I shall leave you to your business, Timothy. But I expect you to-"

Jason doesn't know what sound it is he makes, only that he made it. He can't hear anything suddenly, his mind has gone blank with shock and disbelief, certain that he couldn't have heard that right.

Hoping that didn't. Because if he did -

The door suddenly flies open, knocking him back across the floor, and Jason stares up with wide eyes from where he's fallen as Ra's al Ghul looks down at him with a scornful gaze.

Fuck.

"You said he was secured." Ra's accuses, speaking to the one behind him, and Jason's eyes go past his shoulders, wide and afraid, expecting to see something terrible - but all he finds is that familiar red helmet staring back at him when his captor slides past the Demon's Head into the room.

He must have just replaced it, but Jason knows he heard that name.
"You - you fucker!"

Jason flips himself back onto his feet, powered by rage and desperation. "I heard what he called you!"

Something stiffens in Red's pose, then he's snaking forward, whip-fast to grab at Jason.

Jason doesn't let him. Instead he strikes out, ducking under the sweep of that arm. He rams his shoulder into Red's midriff, glad to find that for once he's not all dressed up in body armour, just an ordinary shirt and pants. The blow knocks the breath out of him so that Red falls back onto the floor, letting Jason take the advantage.

Going for the head is still out of course, that helmet would break his hand, but Jason is quick to think on his feet when he fights (as futile as it is with Ra's blocking the doorway).

He drops and drives his knee into the Red Hood's stomach this time, moving as fast as he can, and manages to lean back out of the way of the first retaliatory punch, though not the second. The blow from Red's pale hand snaps his head back and Jason spits the blood out of his mouth, but not before fingers wrap around his throat and throw him to the side on the floor.

They both scramble to their feet, Jason driven by desperation and Red by anger, and end up staring each other down for a moment before they move. Red Hood comes forward first, kicking out, and Jason leaps to the side, grabbing for that leg and twisting it. The move works, in a way that actually surprises him, and Jason moves faster as Red goes down, turning his fall into a flip. He gets behind him, hooks the chain binding his wrists together around the other man's throat in an attempt to strangle him into submission.

That... that doesn't work.

Red lets out a cry that's part pain, part rage, taking Jason by surprise, then the chain is grabbed yet again by thin but strong hands before he can pull it taut and trap him. He yells as Red snaps his head back at the same time as he pulls Jason's arms forwards and down, the helmet impacting against his nose with a sickening crack, and this time there's no mistaking by the flow of blood and pain that it's broken.

The chain is released, and the next thing Jason knows he's being hurled over Red's shoulder to land on the floor with a world-shaking crunch. His back is agony, and he's too stunned to move before he's dragged upwards and an arm wraps around his throat, tight enough that he can't breath.

"Fuck!" Red grabs his right arm, pinning it by his side, before using his leg to hold it there instead as he goes down onto his back and pulls the teen with him. Both arms are now on his neck, and Jason chokes against the hold. He can't get his left hand up high enough with the chain attaching it to his right to retaliate.

Now Red Hood speaks, hissing in his ear with that mangled electronic snarl that's nothing like the human voice Jason heard before. "Listen to me."

"Fu..." He can't vocalise anything, and Red Hood increases the pressure against his throat for a split second in a way that makes him feel dizzy. The force he's using now in the sleeper hold lets Jason stay just on the waking side of consciousness, but anymore and he'll be out.

"Listen..." Red snarls again, voice about as low as it can get. "He'll kill you without blinking, thinks I should have done it already. He doesn't give a damn about keeping you alive. You're nothing to him. Meanwhile, I'm trying to keep you safe, so stop resisting."

Jason gurgles in response, it's about the only sound he can make. Defiant, he kicks out, tries to do
something, anything to escape the hold because he's too angry to calm down the way Red - Tim - is insisting he do. He wants to spit instead, wants to curse, and the amount of blood in his mouth, running down his throat and his chin, also really, really makes him want to vomit.

"Enough of this foolishness." Ra's interjects from the doorway impatiently. "Knock the boy out and be done with it."

"Fine. It's probably for the best anyway." He hears the rattling sigh, before an increase of pressure on his throat sends a dizzying wave of nausea through him. A second after that, Jason's vision is eaten up by darkness.

Then, nothing.

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Deja vu. It's like Jason's waking up on the first day all over again, except that he hurts a whole lot more now than he did then and has trouble breathing through his nose.

He reaches up slowly, feeling round his neck for the bruises that must litter his skin, before moving his hand further up to gingerly touch the centre of his face. His nose has been set while he was out, Jason realises, feeling sickened all over again as a fresh wave of pain spasms out from it. There are some good things about being unconscious after all.

"Don't touch it." Comes from beside him, and when Jason turns his head Red Hood is sat in the chair near the bed, bent forward with his head hanging down to his chest.

"M'not stupid." Jason grumbles. Swallowing. His mouth still tastes like blood, and his voice sounds kind of fucked up, but that's the least of his worries. "Bet I look real pretty now."

Red's gloved fingers twitch. "I didn't mean to hurt you that badly."

"Yeah well, you did asshole!" Jason finds himself snapping, glaring with every bit of feeling he can muster towards the villain before him.

The... the maybe Robin before him.

Red's head bows down further, with something that looks a lot like shame curving his back forwards. If that's so Jason doesn't feel sorry for him at all, not with what he's done. "What was that?" He demands before his captor can say anything else. "You had... you had Ra's Al-fucking-Ghul here! And he called you -"

"He's helping me."

"Bullshit! Ra's only helps himself."

Red shakes his head. "I know, he's using me. But his help, and the resources he has, have been very useful in arranging this. And..." his voice trails off. "It's complicated."

Jason stares as he pushes himself to sit up, he's not at all surprised to find himself chained back to the wall again. But at least there's no mirrors in here for him to see his own mangled face in.

He has to ask. He has to ask and he has to get a straight answer.
"Are you Tim Drake?"

Red cants his head towards Jason for a moment, then - with an air of resignation - his fingers hook behind his helmet, finding some kind of hidden catch. Anything Jason else might have had to say is replaced by silence at the hiss of pressure releasing as the helmet comes off.

Tim Drake, alive and not at all well, smiles thinly across the room at him.

"Oh God... it really is you." He whispers.

"I told you, Jason. I'm trying to keep you safe."

Jason's world tilts on its axis, as so many things that were meant to be tried and true shatter and fall apart. Then suddenly he pitches forwards across his lap. His head is spinning, and it's too much to take in the wake of the beating he took last night. "I think m'gonna sick."

Tim is there in an instant, wrapping his arms around Jason and hauling him over to the toilet. One part of the room that is pointedly within the limits of the chain. He pushes the lid up and helps the teenager lean over it, keeping a steadying hand on Jason's back as he throws up whatever is left in his stomach from yesterday.

"Easy." Tim says, though it's in the uncertain platitudes of someone who's not used to having to comfort other people. "You're okay."

Jason shakes his head, flinching away from that touch as another bout of sickness takes him. It's only bile he has left to throw up, and it disturbs him to remember the last thing in his stomach was his own blood. That thought makes it worse for a time, but finally he leans his head against the cool porcelain, shivering.

Tim Drake. What the hell.

"How... how are you..."

Ra's, he thinks. The fucking Lazarus Pit. Jason knew it could perform miracles, but this -

"That's not important."

Jason thinks it's pretty fucking important, actually, but he also has other, far more pressing questions to ask.

"Is this - that's why you locked me up, isn't it? To get back at Bruce."

Tim shakes his head, withdrawing his hand quickly now that Jason's vomiting fit is over. "It's not personal, Jason."

"To me, maybe." Though Jason wouldn't be surprised if it was. Ra's had implied that much, even though Tim had denied it then as well. He'd taken over Robin, had - like Tim did to Damian - taken something precious without asking. "I'm just a pawn, you said it yourself. But it's still payback."

Jason grimaces. If his voice sounded messed up before, it's worse now.

"Why do you think I'd want to get back at Bruce?"

Jason's mouth falls open, disbelieving. The logic seems pretty clear cut to him, but either Jason's wrong or Tim's lying. "Because... because he didn't save you. Because he didn't stop the Joker in
time. I mean, why else would you be doing this?"

If it was Jason in his place... no, he really doesn't want to go down that route.

"Because it's the right thing to do."

"Bullshit. You can't tell me this is all because of some noble, do-gooder altruism." Jason laughs, on the edge of hysteria. He's having a conversation with a fucking zombie. "You don't just... you don't kidnap someone as part of an elaborate fucking scheme if it's not personal."

Tim is perfectly still. Too still, and just so damn robotic even without the stupid helmet modifying his voice. "I'm not angry with Bruce for not saving me, I know he did everything he could. It wasn't his fault."

"The Joker then. You want to murder the Joker for revenge right? That's why you're letting Bruce round up all the villains for you!"

Bingo. Score one point for Jason, because this time Tim actually flinches.

"It's not just the Joker. It's all of them. They have to be stopped, someone has to stop them." The elder Robin, the second Robin, the one Jason knows only from photos and a maudlin glass case, stands up. His feet barely make a sound as he starts to pace across the floor. "It's only logical."

He moves like an assassin, Jason thinks dimly. A background thought to the ones screaming more loudly in his head.

Tim had taken Jason, knowing that after having lost one Robin already Bruce and Damian would tear the city apart trying to find him, and in the process put all their worst enemies back into a single spot. A place vulnerable to anyone who had the means and resources to get inside. Like say, the help of the immortal leader of one of the oldest terrorist organisations in the world.

Oh God. It all makes sense now.

"We all fuckin' know that, Spock," Jason tries to argue over the sound of his racing heart. "but logical doesn't make it right."

"Doesn't it?" Tim shoots him a sharp look, and the long sweep of his hair is oddly fascinating. It was always short and spiked up in his photos, but now it looks like he hasn't had a haircut in months. Hair doesn't grow on dead people. "Tell me this, Jason, do you think Gotham would be better off if the Joker was dead?"

Jason swallows reflexively. "That's not..."

"Jason." He says patiently. "Do you think Gotham would be better off?"

"I'm not going to validate you, you sick-"

"Yes or no, Jason. It's a simple question. If the Joker was dead, would this city be safer?" Tim talks like they have all the time in the world, and for Jason that's more or less the case. He's certainly not the one who's going to be going anywhere anytime soon.

But this - Jason knows the answer that's in his brain and in his heart. Yet saying it aloud feels like it would be betraying Bruce and everything he's been taught to stand for. Try as he might not to, Jason can't help but think of the dozens upon dozens of the Joker's murder victims that he's seen over the years. Men, women, even little children; the ones that hurt the most, with bloody frozen smiles and faces melted by acid. Gruesome portraits left behind by a madman no one could or
would put a bullet into.

The man before him, dead under rubble on the Gotham riverside after being tortured for at least a week.

It turns out his silence is answer enough for his captor. Tim nods slowly, accepting the words Jason doesn't say. "You're a smart kid, you figured it out. So you understand that this is the only way it's ever going to stop."

"No fuck you, we don't have the right to decide that." Jason glares.

"Those are Bruce's words coming out of your mouth."

"Justice, not vengeance."

"And those are Damian's." Tim shakes his head, like he's somehow disappointed in Jason. "Bruce holds himself back, and I - I understand why he won't do it. But what doesn't make sense is that he goes to such lengths to stop others as well. He'll never just stand back and let his enemies die."

Jason shifts uncomfortably, still leaning against the cool porcelain of the toilet seat. His head is pounding and he needs some water, but he's also afraid to move. Afraid of what the spectre pacing in front of him might do if he did. "Because that'd be just the same as if he killed them himself."

"And what about all those who've died because he saved them?" Tim says flatly. "What about all the people who could still be alive if the Joker and Two-Face had been taken out of the equation years ago? If Bruce would just let someone else kill them... But he won't, he won't because the truth is he feels compelled to save everyone because of his parents. Even those who don't deserve saving. There's only one solution to that problem."

"Tim..." Jason tries, horrified by the cold reasoning. The name feels unnatural in his mouth. "Stop. Just stop. Come home with me. He misses you. Everyone misses you."

"Really." Tim's voice continues to be flat and emotionless, what little expression he has left drops off his face.

"Yes, really." Jason's voice shakes. "Of course they do. Bruce doesn't say it a lot but he has this... this case with your uniform because he doesn't want to forget you. And Steph, she does say it a lot. She told me all about you. That you were a good kid, a good Robin."

If the reminder of his ex-girlfriend pains him, Tim doesn't show it. "No. She told you about a boy she used to know." There's a hiccup of laughter, then Tim's shaking his head, getting up and stepping back away from Jason like he's poison with his words. "I'm not him."

"Y'sure look like him."

Tim's face turns ugly, and Jason could swear there's something greener about his grey-blue eyes before it disappears into measured blankness once more. He has to fight not to flinch backwards at how disturbing it is that Tim seems so practised at sweeping his emotions under a rug. "Not by choice."

And Jason twitches, freezes. Remembering something terrible about the reports he read about Tim's murder on the Bat computer. He wasn't supposed to read them, but he broke into the files and did so anyway out of morbid curiosity one night when he was feeling particularly resentful towards Bruce for treating him with kid gloves.

The Lazarus Pit wipes away all sins.
"You were Robin," Jason tries desperately, because he has to believe that there's some way that Tim can be appealed to. He's spent his career being held up to his memory, and now to find him on the side of the devil means so much of Jason's accepted reality is being brought crashing down around his ears. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because someone has to make sure it doesn't happen to Robin again." Tim tells him, as if he's doing Jason a damn favour. "You have to see it, Jason. Bruce has trapped himself in a cycle, one that will repeat over and over and get other people killed unless someone else steps in and breaks the loop."

"And that person has to be you?!!" Jason says incredulously, hating the parts of him that agree.

"If not me, who else?" Tim says with a sharpness that can only come from bottled pain. "Now stay put, I'll get you some water and painkillers." He takes another step, "Just be patient for a few more days, Jason. It won't take them much longer to find him, then you can go home."

"Let me go now and so can you."

Tim shakes his head as he walks away. The droop of his narrow shoulders looks broken and defeated when he scoops his helmet back up off the floor. "No, I really can't."

The door shuts and Jason moves away from the toilet after flushing it, leaning his head back against the bed.

Tim Drake is alive.

Tim Drake is alive. And he's going to kill the Joker and all the other monsters inside Arkham Asylum if someone doesn't stop him. It's a nightmare, and Bruce has no idea.

"Be patient, my ass." Jason mumbles as he turns his hand over, looking at the small circular key to his cuffs where it sits cupped in his palm. He'd lifted it out of Tim's pocket when he'd helped him off the bed and Jason's fairly certain that he managed to grab the right thing. If not, he might very well end up escaping his bonds by blowing himself to kingdom come instead. Explosives in their line of work take on all kinds of appearances.

It's a shit chance, but desperate times call for desperate measures. All Jason needs now is the right opportunity to get the hell out of here before Tim realises the key is gone.

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As it turns out that opportunity comes quicker than Jason would have anticipated, and for all the wrong reasons.

JOKER BACK BEHIND BARS says the paper when Tim drops it down onto his lap the next morning, and Jason curses his family's efficiency. Tim's not wearing his helmet, doesn't bother now that Jason knows who he is, and it still freaks him out a little to see the pale pointed face that he only knew from photographs before staring back at him.

"Don't do it." Jason begs, looking up at the tiredly triumphant smile Tim wears. "Don't. Come home with me, we can tell Bruce everything. He'll help you."

"I'm sorry, Jason. That's not going to work."
Desperately, for the sake of others if not himself, Jason tries again. "They're your family. They'll want you back, but if you do this..."

"Jason-

"What about the Titans!" He bursts out suddenly, pulling on memories from the previous year. "What about your friends?! That Superboy guy? He was your best friend, wasn't he? Damian told me he was. He has to miss you too. If."

Jason cuts off, because suddenly Tim's giving him a glare that could shave years off his life just by its intensity. He swallows thickly, realising that he's managed to hit Tim somewhere where it really hurts, and that may not necessarily be a good thing.

"Don't talk about h - them. Don't talk about them to me."

"Don't talk about Damian to me either!" His predecessor snaps. "Damian is a spoilt, cruel man! He doesn't care about anyone but himself!"

"That's not true!" Jason bursts out before he can stop himself, his loyalty to his elder brother instantly pushing him to his defence. "You don't know him like I do, he's good!"

Tim snarls, suddenly right up in Jason's face. His eyes have that look about them again, that poisonous green shine that Jason was so sure he saw the previous night. "Oh, yes. Because you're lucky, because Damian's guilt made him try with you. But I didn't get that, I got the real Damian, the one who didn't want or need a little brother, and that's who he is Jason. That's who he really is. He's a selfish, violent jerk, who's only good to you because he feels like he has to be."

"You're so full of shit!" Jason growls back at him. "People change, numbskull! And if you gave him a chance you'd see that!"

The backhand takes him by surprise, and judging by the look on his face, Tim too. The older boy steps backwards quickly, breathing hard as he holds his hand away from himself like it has a mind of its own while Jason touches his aching face and stinging nose. A fresh trickle of blood drips down from his left nostril, and he desperately hopes that his nose hasn't been knocked out of joint again.

"People change." Tim whispers. "I changed too. That person you're trying to talk to, Jason, he's gone. And I have to do this now, for you, and everyone else in this city."

"I don't want you to do it for me!" Jason pleads, but Tim ignores him, walking back to the door for the last time. He stops just before exiting, casting one final look Jason's way.

"I'll send them a message so they'll know to come find you once I'm done, I promise. And..." Tim licks his lips, "I'm sorry, Jason. For all of this."

"Tim! God damn it, Tim!"

The door shuts and Jason leans forward, biting his lip until it's bleeding just the same as his nose.
He uses the bed sheet to wipe the blood away, and stares at the red pattern it leaves for a hell of a lot longer than is strictly necessary. He can't let Tim get away with this, he just can't.

Jason waits. An hour, almost two. Foot bouncing on the floor impatiently until he's completely sure that Tim's gone from the apartment before he slides his hand under the mattress and draws out the key from where he's hidden it.

"Okay," he murmurs, "Time to test this thing out."

His finger finds the small depression in the top of the disc, and he sincerely hopes it's not keyed to Tim's fingerprint or he really will be screwed. Jason holds it over the cuff on his left wrist, takes in a deep breath, then pushes down.

The cuff falls open.

"Yes, fuck yes!" He laughs, elated as finally something goes right. Quickly, Jason repeats the process over his right wrist, then jumps to his feet and runs for the door. That's still locked, but Jason kicks his foot under the latch until it breaks and the door swings open.

There are wires around it, probably an alarm system, but he's reasonably confident that Tim won't bother coming back to stop him now.

The room beyond is just the same as it was before. Still dark and dismally depressing, but minus the laptop and folders that were on the table. It's a burn that Tim didn't leave them behind, but the only thing Jason really cares about right now is finding a telephone.

He tears around the room and comes up empty, which means he's going to have to go outside and find a payphone that he can make reverse-charges from - and hopefully he's still in Gotham, somewhere he recognises. Tim's daily gift of the Gazette seemed to confirm that, but they delivered it these days by request even outside the city.

Jason finds the front door and opens the latch from the inside, emerging out into a hallway filled with similar looking doors. Some even still have numbers on them. But it's quiet, too quiet, and Jason thinks quickly that there's a good chance he's been kept in a condemned apartment building; one of many that are stood waiting for funding that will never come so they can be knocked down and renovated in Gotham City.

He rushes down the hall and to the stairs, ignoring the elevator. There's no indication that in a building like this it will still work and he doesn't want to waste precious time trying, so Jason grits his teeth and hurries down the many steps in front of him, trying hard not to think of his bare feet touching ground that smells like stale piss and vomit. There's broken glass and empty beer cans too, and he mostly avoids them but for a shard that cuts into the arch of his left foot.

"Fuck!" No time to stop and think about it, or even pull it out. Jason keeps moving, slower now as he leaves a bloody trail behind him until he finally reaches the ground floor and a dilapidated foyer. He wastes no time shoving open the front doors and out.

Out into grey daylight. Out into the bitter cold of a Gotham winter. And Jason blinks rapidly against the stinging in his eyes, astonished at the sight of white flakes of snow drifting down from the sky above him to melt into grey slush on the ground. He hadn't known it had gotten this cold... it hadn't even occurred to him that Tim would have kept his room heated.

Jason turns his head and looks back at the building that has held him for the last few weeks of his life. It's grizzly and depressing, built out of thick grey stone with boarded up windows, and those boards surely hide the bricked up window of what had been Jason's room.
"Jesus..." He whispers for a moment, before shaking his head and taking off limp-running across the gated off yard into the streets beyond.

He's still in the East End. Tim didn't take him that far from home after all.

In these streets a bruised up teenager running around in the snow with bare feet and a short-sleeved shirt barely gets a reaction, even if that teenager happens to look a hell of a lot like Jason Todd-Wayne. It's too common with the people here to see such misery, and even the way Jason's bleeding doesn't get much more than the odd frown. He ignores the reactions, and the one single call of concern, because he knows where he is now, and just round here is -

A payphone! One that hasn't been smashed open by drug addicts for quick cash or had its cord cut by vandals. Jason grabs the handset off the hook and dials the number for a reverse-call from memory. He tries to stay calm and not shout the number down at the operator without much success.

"Just tell them it's Jason." He swallows thickly, leaning his head against the bulk of the payphone. It's been so long since he's seen real daylight, it hurts his eyes.

Finally he's put through, and the voice on the other end is beloved and everything Jason needs to hear. "Master Jason?"

"Alf!" Jason swallows thickly, "Yeah, it's me. You gotta..." Damn it, this is an unsecured line. He thinks about that for a moment while Alfred shoots questions down the line, demanding to know where he is and if he's all right. Jason quickly talks over him, "Call me back. I'm about out of change."

If the operator or anyone else is still listening in they'll be confused by that, but it's better than saying anything even vaguely related to the truth.

He rattles off the number from the sign on the front of the box, then hangs up. It only takes a few minutes for it to start ringing so that Jason can snatch it up again. Minutes he spends looking round, trying to see if anyone's watching him.

"The line's secure, Jason." Says a deep, worried voice.

"B!" Jason bites back a cry, and all the things he wants to say rush to the tip of his tongue, tempting in their indulgence. Bruce's voice is heavy with exhaustion and the sleep Alfred must have roused him from, but alert.

And yet... Jason hesitates. Because just for a moment, a split second, the temptation is there.

If he says nothing, their very worst enemies could die. The Joker, Two-Face, Killer Croc... They'd be gone, and so many innocent lives could potentially be saved by the simple act of Jason keeping his mouth shut. He doesn't want to think that Tim's doing anything close to the right thing, yet it would be so easy to stand back and let it happen.

Who do you want to be, Robin or someone else?

Jason grits his teeth. He's Robin, and that's his choice. "You've got to get to the asylum."

"Jason, where are you?! What happened? Are you all right?!" The demands and open concern in Bruce's voice make him feel better, but damn it, they don't have much time.

"I'm in the East End, and I'm okay." Minus a lot of bruising, a broken nose, and a cut up foot. "But B, you've got to get Arkham now."
There's the sound of keys tapping, and Jason knows Bruce is tracing the number. "I'm coming to get you."

"No! Damn it, you're not listening to me!" Jason hiccups because he wants that so bad, he wants Bruce to come get him. He wants to be held and reassured that he's all right like the little kid he's never been. "It's what he wants. You and N, you've done exactly what he wants you to do!"

"Who?" Bruce demands, attention finally caught. "Jason, what are you talking about?"

"It's why he took me!" He babbles, trying to keep his voice down. "Because he knew if he did you'd rip Gotham apart trying to find me, and lock anyone you suspected back up in the asylum. And now they're all there, including the Joker, and he's going to kill them, B!"

There's silence, except for Jason's heavy breathing. Bruce's voice is so much quieter, low and dangerous when he asks again, "Who?"

Jason licks his lips, then squeezes his eyes shut. He doesn't know exactly what his answer is going to do to Bruce, but he knows it won't be pretty. He really wishes he didn't have to be the one to drop this bomb shell. "Tim. Tim Drake."

There's a sound on the other end of the line of something heavy falling over. Jason thinks it might be Bruce's chair, then another voice comes on the line.

"What did you say?!" His knees almost buckle in relief all over again when he hears Damian shouting down the phone at him.

"He's alive. I know it sounds crazy, but you've got to believe me, it's him." Jason's starting to shake from the cold, and wraps his free arm around himself in a vain attempt to stay warm. "I'm not sure exactly how, but Ra's al Ghul's involved, and-"

"Grandfather." Damian snarls, before breaking into some Arabic swears that make Jason smile with their familiarity. He'd made Damian teach him what they all meant years ago.

"Jason." Bruce is back on the phone, sounding shaken. "Stay exactly where you are. Damian will come and get you. I'm going to Arkham."

Jason nods, then reminds himself that he's on the phone and whispers. "Okay, okay. Hurry?"

"Don't worry, Jason." His older brother promises furiously, "I'll be there soon."

Alfred stays on the line with him while he waits. Speaking to Jason in that calm, self-assured British way that he has. Asking him about any injuries he might have, as well as his general condition. If he's been well-fed, as well as filling him in on the small things Jason's missed while he's been locked up. It does a lot to help him stay calm.

"Master Richard is very much looking forward to meeting you." The butler tells him quietly, and Jason laughs a little, not quite sure what to make of it. Of the knowledge that there really is another kid in the manor now. "Unfortunately, Master Damian has built him up to some rather high expectations of your abilities."

"Well shit," Jason swallows, "Now I'm going to have to try not to disappoint him."

It's telling that Alfred doesn't chastise him for the swear.

Jason hears the roar of a bike, then the screech of tyres braking over slick ice in the alley. He turns and sees the familiar machine and rider, and relief breaks over him like a wave on the beach.
"Gotta go, Alfie. See you soon."

Jason barely has time to hang the phone up before Damian's there in his civilian gear, sweeping him into one the biggest hugs Jason's ever experienced in his lifetime. "Jeez, you mook." He whispers, wrapping his arms around his brother tightly in return. For once neither of them cares who might see them. "Almost think you'd missed me."

"Hardly." Damian says without bite, his gloved hand running through Jason's thickly curled hair before he pulls back and looks down at his face. Jason swallows at the look in his brother's eyes, at the way Damian's mouth falls open, then clenches tight at the sight of the bruising. It tells all about what's going through his head. "I'll kill him."

Jason shakes his head. "Something's wrong with him, Dami. Something's really wrong."

"If he's been with my Grandfather, I don't doubt it." Damian looks down, then shrugs off his biking jacket before wrapping it around Jason's shoulders. It's warm from his body heat and soft from years of wear. Jason pulls it tighter around himself immediately. "Your foot is bleeding."

"Yeah, I stepped on some glass in - whoa!"

Jason's barely finished slipping his arms through the sleeves when Damian picks him up. He flushes and bites his lip. "Damian, this is embarrassing."

"Yes, I'm told that's the correct feeling that should be exchanged between an older brother and his junior." Damian carries him over to the bike, then helps Jason climb onto it. He frowns at Jason's face for a moment longer, "You can't put a helmet on over that, so just hang on tight and keep your face hidden against my back."

"S'okay, we're Wayne's. We're expected to do crazy shit." Jason swallows as Damian straddles the bike in front of him. He wraps his arms around his waist. "B?"

"He took the jet to the asylum and sent a message ahead to the warden, as well as one to the GCPD. Hopefully the fools will heed the warning. Do you know exactly what Drake is planning?"

Jason shakes his head. "There might be clues in the apartment, but I had to warn you, so I couldn't take the time to look. We should go -"

"No." Damian cuts him off before Jason can finish suggesting they go back to investigate. "That can wait. I'm taking you home, then I'll go assist Father." His voice softens, trying to be reassuring. "Whatever Drake and my Grandfather have planned, he'll be able to handle it, Jason."

Hearing Damian regress to calling his predecessor 'Drake' makes Jason feels strangely conflicted. On the one hand he's right on up there with Damian at being furious with the man who kidnapped him and kept him imprisoned as part of some grand murderous plot, yet at the same time...

"Yeah, sure. He could handle any of our regulars, but this is Tim, Damian." Jason stresses, fingers curling tight in Damian's shirt. "Bruce's been carrying around a torch of guilt for the guy for years. It's different when it's someone you care about."

"I know," Damian mutters, starting the engine and slipping his helmet back on. "I know."

They roar up the street and back to the Manor, breaking the speed limit as they go.
In the cave the usual amount of fussing from Alfred is dialled up to eleven. He immediately gets Jason settled on the bed in their medical station while Damian disappears to go change outfits. The butler looks incredibly pale as he pulls the glass out of Jason's foot and starts to patch the wound.

"Alf, is there any news from B?" Jason asks, gritting his teeth. "Has anything happened?"

He can see the hesitation on Alfred's face, which is as good as confirmation.

"Alf, please."

"There have been some explosions. Localised ones." Alfred swallows, setting the tweezers aside. He presses a thick pad of cloth to the bottom of Jason’s foot after applying the antiseptic spray, then wraps a bandage around it. "It seems they were planted specifically in certain cells."

Jason's eyes widen. That's brutal. Incredibly so. "Casualties?"

"It's hard to say yet, Master Bruce stopped replying some time ago. But the police were quick to cut off all access to and from the island, and I believe Commissioner Gordon is now on the scene."

Damian steps back around the curtain, wearing his uniform, and it's clear by his demeanour that he's Nightwing now in every sense of the word. Their superhero identities aren't just costumes, they're mindsets, and Jason suddenly wants to slip into the Robin uniform and join him very badly.

"I'm taking the boat. Take Jason upstairs when you've finished, Pennyworth."

"I want to come with you."

"No." Damian's tone and look brook no arguments. "Go upstairs and rest. Father and I will come see you later on."

Jason glares at him, torn between being equal parts relieved and indignant. "I don't need rest. I can help, Damian."

"You can barely walk, and you've been kept captive for over two weeks. You are in no fit state for this."

He starts to growl out a reply, but then Alfred's hand clamps down on his shoulder. Jason turns his head to look at the butler, and grimaces as he reluctantly accepts defeat. He'd argue with Damian, but not Alfred. "Okay. Fine. Just..." Jason licks his lips, conflicted. "You're going to bring him back, right?"

Damian nods, his expression one of barely contained fury. "I will not let Drake get away, nor my Grandfather if he dares show his face."

Jason sucks in a sharp breath. "Good."

Damian reaches over and touches Jason's hair again for a moment, then he's gone, sprinting across the Cave before rappelling down to the underground river where the Batboat is moored. Jason swallows as he watches him leave, then his eyes drift downwards to stare at his own hands. "I should be with them, Alfred."
"Considering the circumstances, young sir, I think you've already helped exceptionally." Alfred squeezes his shoulder. "Now come along, let's get you upstairs."

"I want to stay down here. I could help from the computer."

"Alas, my instructions were quite explicit." Jason's pulled up from the bed and steered towards the stairs, though Alfred does take it slow to account for how he has to limp along with most of his weight on one foot. "I daresay a hearty meal and a strong cup of tea will do you far more good than worrying in front of a computer screen. I do believe you've managed to lose weight while you were gone, and I've spent far too much time feeding you up until now to let that sorry state of affairs continue."

Jason hesitates at the bottom of the stairs. "The new kid..."

"Knows everything about Batman already, and despite his recent loss, let us say that Master Richard is one of the most considerate children I have ever met. You have nothing to fear from him."

"I'm not scared of 'im." Jason growls at once. "He's like what, five?"

Alfred's lips twitch into a smile that does nothing at all to wash away the worry in his eyes. "Eleven. And of course not."

They get upstairs to the kitchen and Alfred eases him into a chair. Jason's glad he doesn't try to insist he go to bed, because sleep is one thing he definitely didn't get a lack of during his imprisonment, and he doesn't think he'll be able to get anymore of it until Bruce and Damian come home anyway. It does however leave him feeling more than a little useless while Alfred bustles around the kitchen, fixing him up a bowl of soup.

"Will you be all right up here alone while I go back down to the cave?" Alfred asks him guiltily, once Jason's got a spoon in hand and is digging in.

The soup is so hot and thick and good that Jason takes a moment to answer, mouth full of beef, peas and carrots mixed with thick chunks of potato. God, but he's missed Alfred's cooking so much. Back when he'd first come to the manor, undersized and on the edge of starving, he'd lived on a steady diet of Alfred's broths and soups to build up his weight until he was ready for richer food and never once got tired of them.

"Yeah, of course I will. You need to be down there in case Bruce or Damian phone in, I get it." It's hard not to say different, but Jason knows what's expected of him. Maybe he's not in uniform, but he can still play the part of Robin in other ways. "Go be you. I'll be fine."

"Oh my dear boy." Alfred sighs softly, shaking his head, "I have missed you." But he still takes Jason's permission to go with a final squeeze to his shoulder.

Alone, Jason tries to focus on eating his food and soaking in the warm familiarity of home around him. Being back here at last hits him so hard that he feels the corners of his eyes sting, and Jason has to remind himself over and over that he's not a baby. He's Robin, and Robin can handle anything. Even dead boys rising from the grave to hold him captive.

He huddles back into Damian's jacket with a shudder, wishing that he knew how he and Bruce were faring.

"Uh, hi."

Jason looks up from his now empty bowl, letting the hands he'd wound into his hair slip free as he
eyes the boy stood in the doorway. The black and white photos in the Gotham Gazette didn't do Richard Grayson justice. In reality, he looks like he walked out of a Victorian painting, with deep blue eyes and light golden brown skin, topped off by a veritable mop of black hair. The revelation of his eye and hair colour somehow doesn't surprise Jason in the least.

Painting on a smile, Jason tries to make light of how horrendous he must look in comparison to the kid right now. If he's going to live in this house then he's going to have get used to seeing people bruised up and injured. "Hey. Richard, right?"

"Dick."

"Beg your pardon?" Jason starts to hear that word come out of his mouth, wondering if Alfred was really that far out with his assessment of the boy acrobat's good nature.

"Dick. It's my name. And I know exactly how it sounds, but only Alfred and Damian call me Richard." The expression on Dick's face says that he's rather hoping Jason won't join their number. He walks on over, bold as brass, to pull out the chair next to Jason and hop on up into it. He may not be as tiny as Jason remembers being at his age, but he's still pretty small. "You're Jason, aren't you? Alfred said they'd found you."

"I like to think I found myself." Jason replies before he can stop himself, a little wrong-footed. He's not ready for this meeting yet, nor is he used to being around kids younger than him. Jason thinks he might actually be rather spoiled after getting to be the baby of a family for the last three years. "But yeah, I'm, uh, Jason."

"Nice to meet you. I'm glad you're back."

Jason stares. "You... are?" This kid doesn't know him from shit on the street, so who is he to say that?

Dick nods, swinging his bare feet under the table. "Everyone's been pretty miserable without you." On closer inspection Jason can see the dark circles under his eyes, and has to forcibly remind himself that Dick had lost his parents not even three weeks before. "They've tried not to show it, but they were." He puts on what he must think is a bracing smile. "So I'm glad you're back."

"Thanks. I guess." Jason swallows. "I heard you've moved in."

"For now at least. Bruce said he'd help me find the guy who... who..."

Jason's expression softens. "It's okay, I know what happened. You don't have to say it."

"Yes I do. It happened, so I have to get used to it." Dick says with a force that's surprising. This kid is intense. "The guy who killed my parents."

"Yeah, but at your own pace. You don't have to force yourself into it." Jason tries, even though the last thing he wants to be doing right now is playing counsellor. "You don't think you'll be staying long term?"

Dick shrugs, a tiny movement that's hard and defensive. "The police wanted me somewhere safe while they try and find him, and Bruce offered. Once they've got him I'll probably get put in a home, since they said I can't go back to the circus. It's not 'appropriate' for me anymore." He says bitterly.

"Yeah, that sounds like the kind of shit social services would say." Jason empathises, "They tried to put me in one of those places too a couple times. But I didn't let 'em."
"Damian said you lived on the streets until Bruce found you. What was that like?"

"Terrible. Fucking awful." He says at once, flatly, to put the idea out of Dick's head before it can take root, because he can see where that line of questioning is going. Jason doesn't have to try hard to imagine how poorly he'd fare in Crime Alley, and how quickly a kid with his looks would get all the wrong kinds of attention. "One hundred percent, do not recommend."

"But you -"

"Look. You don't gotta worry about that." Jason shakes his head. "If you know Bruce at all, you'll realise he'll never let you get put in one of those homes or end up on the streets. He'll probably jump at the chance to let you live here permanently if that's what you want."

Biting his lip, Dick looks to the side. Away from Jason. "I don't really."

"Don't what?"

"Know Bruce."

"Oh." Of course. Probably because Bruce has been running himself ragged searching for Jason, and that's kind of awkward, but he can't find it in himself to be apologetic. It wasn't his damn fault he got kidnapped.

Or maybe it was, Jason thinks bitterly. Maybe if he'd been a little more alert that night this never would have happened, then he could have been here for Bruce and this new kid would have gotten the attention he needed after such a horrible loss. But he still won't apologise. "Well, I'm back now. So you guys can start working on that." Jason forces himself to say instead with false cheer.

Dick, apparently not one to be fooled, quickly picks up on the lie. He looks conflicted and then, more than anything, apologetic, like he's realised he's put his foot in it. "I'm sorry. That was... sorry. I wasn't thinking. You just went through something really bad, and I was -"

"Kid." Jason cuts him off. "It's fine. No really, it is. I just..." He swallows thickly, flexing his fingers. "I'm going upstairs. Nothing personal, I just need to go."

He pushes himself up, chair scraping across the floor. Jason wants his own room suddenly, his own bed. He wants his own clothes, the bear he hasn't touched in over year, and his spot in the attic; he wants cigarettes, and a shower to get rid of the phantom itch of cuffs around his wrists. He wants -

Bruce. Bruce is stood there in the kitchen doorway, still mostly in the suit, which is scorched and torn, but with the cowl pushed down off his head. Jason stares at the bruises forming on his jaw, the prominent lines on his face, as well the grey in his hair that looks more pronounced than it ever has before. "B..." his voice cracks.

"Jason." He doesn't know which one of them moves first, but then he's wrapped up in Bruce's arms. Bruce clutches him tight, with almost bruising force. "You're all right?"

"Fine. M'fine." Jason lies. Up this close Bruce smells like smoke and gunpowder. Blood and violence. "Did you... is he...?"

Bruce's gauntleted hand sits heavy in his hair as Jason pulls back. There's a raw agony in his eyes that Jason hasn't seen in years, not since the first time he put on the suit and found Bruce staring at him like he'd seen a ghost. "B?"
His father shakes his head. "I'm sorry, Jason. Damian's still trying to track him down but..."

"He got away." Jason fills in, far more calmly than he actually feels. He's conscious of the audience of one behind him, and there's no way in hell he's going to let the kid - any kid - think Batman and Robin can't get a job done. "Don't worry, we'll catch him."

Bruce looks down at him and slowly nods. "We will."

But try as Jason might to believe, it doesn't feel like the promise it should be.
Hi! Here we are again with another chapter of this monstrosity, one I hope you all find as enjoyable to read as I did to write. It's pretty much all angst in here today, covering the weeks immediately following the last chapter and Jason dealing with what happened to him in typical Jason fashion (i.e badly). Tim himself doesn't appear this time sadly, but he will be back soon, I promise XD

For a moment, Jason's hand rests on the brass handle of the door without turning it. It's just a door, he berates himself when he hesitates. It's nothing, just a door. Solid oak, a little under seven feet tall, a door like any other in the manor; stained to a deeper, darker shade of brown than nature intended. It's just a door, but Jason felt his heart start to beat that much quicker the moment his fingers made contact with the cold metal.

He isn't supposed to come here, none of them are. As long as Jason can remember it's been forbidden territory, a sacred place only Alfred or Bruce could go. Now he's about to invade it, not because he wants to violate that unspoken edict, but because he has to.

Ever since Jason came back home he hasn't been able to sleep.

A flick of his wrist has the knob turning easily, with a motion as smooth as silk despite it's lack of use in the last four years. There's no outer lock to stop him from going inside, so Jason only has to give the door the lightest push for it to swing open. Holding his breath feels like the right thing to do as he steps over the threshold, crossing the invisible barrier between the living and the no longer quiet dead.

Into Tim's room.

Dust stirs up under Jason's feet, making the bandage on his left foot itch as he limps forward into the dark interior. He pushes the door shut behind him again, wary of discovery, but doesn't quite latch it.

Jason has a - a thing at the moment, about locked doors. And closed windows. The reassurance of a visibly open path out of any room makes him feel safer - a fact he has carefully kept to himself ever since he realised it. Jason doesn't want Bruce and Damian to think he's weak because of what happened to him, not when they've already benched him from patrol until after the New Year at least.

The only way he's going to get back out where he belongs is by proving to them that he's okay.

Coming in here is not the best way to do that, but what Bruce and Damian don't know can't be used against him. They're still too busy cleaning up in the wake of Arkham's destruction four days ago to notice; combing the city for any remaining sign of Tim and the League while he sits at home on his ass.

Despite Jason's best efforts, his warning hadn't come quite quick enough.
The Joker's dead, executed personally with two bullets right between the eyes, as if Tim had to make doubly sure he wouldn't be getting back up; Two-Face will never walk again, while Harley Quinn may never *wake up* again, and maybe that's a blessing, considering what she would do if she ever found out what happened to her psychotic boyfriend. Those are just the most high-profile casualties: people like Victor Zsasz could only be identified by their dental records.

He should feel bad about that probably, but the truth is he mostly just feels numb. Bad guys died, good guys suffered; a hell of a day in Gotham City.

Jason drags his fingers over the top of Tim's dresser while he waits for his eyes to adjust to the shadows. The layer of dust covering the surface is millimetres thick, making it clear that no one's been in this room in months, not even Alfred to clean it.

It's like a tomb with no body; a cenotaph made from a teenage boy's bedroom frozen in time.

Jason's skin crawls at the thought, but he keeps the urge to flee back out the door at bay as he begins to explore the room.

His first dismal impression is that, under the covering of dust, it's remarkably like his own, with books piled up on high shelves and posters plastered to the walls. In the corner a pile of CD's sit neatly stacked next to an old-model stereo like the one Jason once rescued from a dumpster and fixed for his squat back before Bruce found him; a skateboard leans against the wall by the door, and on the mahogany desk sits a real film camera, giving some explanation to the origins of the framed photos that seem to cover every other spare bit of space on its surface.

Jason drifts over to examine them, pulled by some inexorable force.

Pictures of Tim smiling, never alone. He's always with other people, but sometimes those other people are without him. Jason wipes the frames clean of the dust that has settled on the glass with the bottom of his shirt, lips twisting up into a half-smile at every face he recognises. Steph is a frequent sight, as are Cass and Bruce, alongside other familiar heroes like Superboy; members of Tim's generation as teenagers who have now grown up and joined the big leagues. There's even one of an older couple Jason guesses must be Tim's parents, Jack and Janet Drake.

But not Damian. Never Damian.

Swallowing at that realisation, Jason pulls away. He has no idea what he's looking for, just that he wants to find *something*. Some sign or justification that the man who kidnapped him and enacted the destruction of half of Arkham had been here all along.

Quieter than a mouse, he pulls open the drawers of the desk, then the door to Tim's closet, finding no skeletons, only clothes and shoes. A couple birdarangs sit up on the top shelf, seemingly stowed there just in case, alongside some video game cartridges for an outdated system. Disappointed, Jason shuts the door again, then kneels down to examine the space under the bed.

Finally his efforts seem to be rewarded, as he scrabbles blindly with his fingers until they encounter something heavy, square, and made of metal. Jason stares down in wonder at the box after he draws it out, brushing his thumb over the small padlock fitted around the catch at the front. A quick examination of the locking mechanism has him sure that he can crack it, he just needs his tools, and those are back in his own room.

What was so important to Tim he had to hide it like this? Jason has to know. Maybe if he does, it will give him some kind of clue as how to -

Something furry brushes against his ankle.
It's only by sheer force of will that Jason doesn't jump, swearing quietly instead as he looks back over his shoulder to find Pennyworth standing there by his bare feet. The cat's green eyes gaze placidly back at him, unphased by Jason's reaction to his presence.

"What the hell..." Jason whispers once he's got his wind back, reaching to brush his fingers over the top of Pennyworth's domed head with an exasperated sigh. "You sneaky little fuck. Trying to give me a heart attack, are you."

His heart is pounding a little bit, but at least it was only the cat. It's really no surprise that Pennyworth would follow him now, Jason's always been one of his most dedicated sources of affection, especially whenever Damian is focused on other things. Forgiving the sneak attack, Jason indulges Pennyworth by scratching his ears for a minute before going back to what he was doing, settling the box on his lap in preparation to -

"What are you doing?"

Now Jason jumps, and this time swears even louder. It's one o'clock in the morning, but that hasn't stopped Dick from discovering him. Even without training the kid can be ridiculously quiet when he wants to be.

Some Robin Jason is, he didn't even hear the door creak open.

"Nothing, go back to bed!" Jason hisses in reply, heart hammering in his chest after being surprised twice in as many minutes.

"Can't sleep." Dick rubs his eyes, and yeah, Jason knows how that feels. They both have sinister ghosts hanging over their heads at the moment. "You're not supposed to be in here, are you? Isn't this -"

"Yes." Jason cuts him off quickly, swallowing. "Look, I - don't tell anyone about this, okay?"

Dick frowns at him, too dark eyes under a sheet of hair that really needs cutting. He doesn't answer Jason either way as he walks over to stand next to the teenager and peer down at the box in Jason's lap. "What's that?"

"I don't know." He finds himself answering, "I found it under the bed."

"Are you going to open it?"

There's no real point in lying. Jason nods stiffly as he admits, "Yeah."

"Can I see?"

Fixing Dick with a scrutinising look, Jason weighs his options. He still doesn't have the complete measure of the kid yet, and can't help but wonder why he's so curious at all, or why he so often seems to appear wherever Jason is in the manor if he hasn't locked himself away in his room like a hermit. However, Jason does have a pressing need for no one else to find out what he's doing, so maybe a little bribery will help with that.

"If I let you," Jason starts slowly, testing the words even as he says them, "You gotta swear not to tell anyone else about it, okay? Not one word that I was in here or nothin'."

"I know how to keep a secret, Jay." Dick replies, rolling his eyes. He slipped into calling Jason by that nickname as easy as breathing, and something about Dick makes Jason unable to be mad at him for taking the liberty. "I'm not going to tell."
After giving the younger boy a long measured stare to try and ascertain whether he's telling the truth or not, Jason finally nods. "Fine."

He stands as Pennyworth weaves himself around Dick's legs, and the kid wastes no time in scooping the cat up into his arms, carrying him out after Jason as they leave the empty tomb of a room behind them. Jason winces at the sight of three pairs of footprints left in the dust when he closes the door - teenager, boy and cat - and hopes that no one else decides to venture inside Tim's bedroom for at least a week, but it'd be just his luck for that not be the case.

Nevermind, he knew this was a risk from the start.

They walk down the dark hallway, passing portraits of the dourly staring Wayne's of the past, all the way to Jason's room a good four doors away. It's opposite Damian's bedroom, and now next door to Dick's. When he pushes open the door a blast of cold December air from the cracked open window facing the gardens makes both of them shiver.

"Brr." He hears Dick say behind him as Jason ushers him inside. Despite the temperature, the open window helps him feel comfortable enough to close the door properly. "It's freezing in here."

"You don't like it, you can go back to your own room." Jason points out, though privately he agrees. He hates the cold, it's just that in this case it's the lesser of two evils. Setting the box on his desk, Jason pulls open the top drawer and hunts through all the junk inside for his lock picks.

Dick pouts in response, shaking his head and cuddling Pennyworth tighter, until the cat decides that he's had enough of being used as a hot water bottle and squirms free of the hold. Trotting primly away from the two boys, Pennyworth jumps onto the bed and curls up nose to tail on top of Jason's feather pillows. "I'm fine."

"Uh huh." Jason pulls out the chair at his desk and sits down to work on the padlock, aware of Dick hovering at his shoulder the whole time. The kid's fascinated, he can tell that right off the bat, which means Jason can probably expect a request from him to teach Dick how to do this soon enough. One thing he is certain of about Dick so far is that he has all the curiosity of at least two feline Pennyworth's.

Years of practice, beginning long before he was Robin, help Jason ease the small padlock into unlocking itself after only a couple minutes of trying. He pauses immediately after, waits as he considers whether or not Tim would have been the type to booby trap his private belongings prior to his death before deciding to hell with it. Except for the padlock the box looks perfectly normal.

"I really hope this isn't his secret porn stash." He mutters to himself, forgetting present company as he slowly lifts the lid up inch by inch until he's sure it's safe. That's the kind of thing teenage boys are supposed to hide under their beds, right?

... not that he's ever done that himself, of course.

Dick doesn't reply to his words thankfully; whether that's because he doesn't know what porn is and doesn't want to show his ignorance, or because he does, Jason can't tell. He just leans in, head right next to Jason's as the lid falls back and they stare in unison at what's inside.

"Photographs?" Dick says first. "Why lock them up?"

Jason picks up the first stack and turns them over from where they've been laid face down, instantly answering Dick's question. "Because it's Bruce. Batman. Batman and Robin." He holds his breath as he starts to leaf through the collection. He knows that uniform. "Back when Damian was a kid."
"That's Damian?"

"Yeah. Lot smaller, ain’t he?" Jason brushes his finger over a picture of the pair on what looks like the roof of the GCPD headquarters by the Bat signal, with Commissioner Gordon standing off to one side smoking a cigarette. Judging by the angle it must have taken from the fire escape of the adjacent building. "Bruce told me Tim figured out their identities by himself when he was nine."

Dick breaks new barriers on pushing into Jason's personal space at that admission, leaning so far forward to look at the photograph that his nose almost touches the paper. "Really, that's so -" The word cool is on the tip of his tongue, before consideration for present company turns it away. "- crazy. That's crazy."

Jason nods, mute for a second before he finds his own words again. "Bruce always said he was smart. Maybe even smarter than him. Fucking shows doesn't it."

Jason pushes Dick back a bit so he can continue to flip through the photographs. He quickly realises that they've been ordered chronologically, with the dates noted on the backs in a careful hand. With each passing image he watches Damian grow from a gung-ho ten year-old to a towering teenager the same height as Bruce, though built a little leaner. The timeline enraptures and charms him, and for the barest moment Jason finds himself empathising with Tim; if he'd seen Bruce and Damian like this every night he might've sought to be one of them too, instead of just stumbling into it. Unsurprisingly, the pile of photos end right about the time that Damian left Robin behind to fly the coop and walk his own path without Bruce on the way to being Nightwing, only a few short months before Tim himself would take on the role.

Carefully, Jason places the photo's down on his desk, where they don't even sit for five seconds before Dick picks them up to examine more closely himself. Jason lets him, leaning his head forward into the press of his palm as he closes his eyes to feel more keenly the exhaustion throbbing behind them.

What was he expecting to find? Some clue that Tim had been a bad egg all along? That in some way the whole sordid mess of the past month could have been predicted? Jason doesn't even know if that would make him feel better or worse. What would he even be able to do with that information except lay the blame on someone other than himself for not seeing what was coming?

None of them deserve that, certainly not Bruce and Damian. What happened to him wasn't their fault.

"Hey, there's another one."

"Huh?" Jason cracks open his eyes, following the line of Dick's hand pointing down into the box. He leans forward, and sure enough, there's another photo down at the bottom. A polaroid picture lying facedown with a note scribbled on the back in the same neat hand as all the others.

Clone Boy and me. March 15th, 20XX

That's different, all the other photographs had been taken with proper film and developed. The camera on Tim's bedside table hadn't been a polaroid either.

Lips pursed, Jason reaches in, working until he manages to hook his fingernails under the thin edges of the photograph and lift. Then, with baited breath, he slowly turns the picture over.

Tim smiles up at him in the picture. He's wearing the Robin uniform, his version of the Robin uniform, with the hood down and his face bare of any mask. A blush covers his cheeks, and the
reason for his happiness is clear in the way he's wrapped up in the muscled arm of the boy beside him. Conner Kent holds Tim close, grinning at the camera he has pointed at the pair of them, and Jason's heart twists in his chest.

Damian had only told him that Superboy was Tim's best friend. Either he hadn't known the truth or he'd omitted it on purpose, because Jason knows people, and even if he's never experienced it himself he knows the way people look at each other when they're in love.

No wonder Tim got so angry with him when Jason brought up Superboy.

After staring at their faces for a long time his eyes track downwards on the picture. Tim has something cupped in his arms, squished between his chest and Superboy's. It's a teddy bear, with warm brown fur, a squashed up face, and...

And a red Superman symbol on its chest.

Jason drops the photograph like he's been burnt. His chair is knocked to the floor in his rush to stand, startling Dick to the left of him.

(Oh God.)

With clumsy awkward steps he makes for the window, pain shooting up his foot and through his face as he stumbles. Hands grasp at his shirt, but Jason can't hear the questions Dick's asking him over the sudden buzz of white noise roaring in his ears. It drowns out everything else as he throws himself against the windowsill and thrusts his head out into the cold crisp December air.

(He can't breathe.)

Jason doesn't know exactly what happens in the next minute, but when he comes to seconds later, hyperventilating and shaking, it's to see Dick's pale and wide-eyed face staring down at him. The kid looks freaked out as all hell as he puts his hands on Jason's shoulders and shakes him, "Jason? Jay? Hey! C'mon, snap out of it!"

He's on the floor next to the window, Jason realises. How did he get down on the floor? He tries to ask Dick, but the only thing that comes out of his mouth is short, sharp, constricted gasps. Someone must've put a vice around Jason's chest when he wasn't looking, it's the only explanation for why he's choking on nothing.

(The bear. The God damned bear.)

"I... I'm going to get Alfred." Dick stutters at his lack of response, and those words galvanise Jason into action, breaking through the walls his mind erected in the face of his horror. He lunges before the kid can run for the door, pulling him back by his wrist to the floor. Dick yelps, but all Jason can think about is that if he tells Alfred, then Alfred will tell Bruce, and if Alfred tells Bruce -

He can't ever let them know about this.

"Don't..." Jason manages to wheeze out. "Don't... I - I'm fine."

The walls are where they've always been, they're not closing in around him. Not even a little bit.

"But -"

"I'm fine."
Dick shakes his head, hair flying around his head with the movement. "You don't look fine, Jason." He looks scared, terrified even. "You just... you freaked out, like - like you were gonna fall out the window. I had to pull you back."

Christ, no wonder the kid seems so afraid. The last thing he needs is to see another person fall to their death.

(All this time he'd been -)

Jason grits his teeth, making a concentrated effort to calm down. He forces his lungs to remember how to function and draw in air so that he can talk and stop shaking. So that fucking itch will go away from his wrists. Eventually Jason loosens the hold he hadn't realised he still had on Dick's arm and forces himself to meet the kid's eyes. *Get a God damned grip.*

"Sorry." he finally manages to squeeze out. "Shit... I... I didn't mean to scare you."

In the warm artificial light coming from Jason's ceiling Dick looks pathetically small. The dark circled eyes and pinched look to his mouth paint a depressing picture as the kid shakes his head, and God knows how Jason looks to him right now with his bruised face and throat. Both of them are a mess, he realises, maybe that's why Dick keeps following him around.

"Wasn't scared." Dick says softly in turn, rubbing his arm awkwardly as he looks down at the carpet. "Do you, um, want to talk about it?"

Jason almost laughs, but it's really not funny. Instead he shakes his head before letting the back of his skull thunk against the wall. From the bed Pennyworth's eyes are green slits watching him. "Not really. Thanks for the offer though."

"Okay."

He starts in surprise when warm arms wrap around his neck, freezing him in place. "Dick, what... what are you doing?"

"What's it look like." Dick mutters, not pulling back from the hug he's initiated. "You said you didn't want to talk."

"Yeah, but -"

"You need it."

"Kid, I..."

"You need it. Don't lie to me."

Somehow, Jason doesn't think he's the only one Dick's talking about here. Clumsily, he slowly wraps his arms back around the slender pre-teen, feeling the surprising strength in limbs made firm by years of acrobatics as Dick tightens his grip around his neck. It hits Jason again just how young Dick is and what he's suffered, yet here he is still trying to go out of his way to comfort another.

*Selfish,* Jason admonishes himself as he sniffs against Dick's shoulder, the action making his broken nose throb anew. Dick needs comfort far more than he does. "I'm okay, Dick. I promise I'm okay."

Some of the photos have spilled onto the floor, presumably dropped there by Dick when he rushed over to help Jason during his... Jason guesses the correct words are 'panic attack', though he hates the clinical shape of them in his head. They make him sound broken when he's anything
but. Still, Bruce and Damian's faces stare accusingly out at Jason through mask and cowl, across
time and space from the floor, and he sighs before closing his eyes against those damning looks.

Against his shoulder Dick shakes his head, and Jason knows the faint tremble in his shoulders isn't
solely because of him.

Gently, he starts to rub the kid's back, doing the best job he can to drive the horror of both their
situations away. "It's okay."

He'll make it so. Somehow.

*

Dick falls asleep in the end. Not having the heart to wake him, Jason instead gets Dick situated on
the bed next to Pennyworth and tucks the blankets in tight around his shoulders so he won't catch
a cold from the open window. Jason sighs as the cat levels him with a sour look. "What? It's my
bed." he mutters, scratching Pennyworth behind the ears. "Watch him for me for a little while, will
ya?"

Taking a slow blink as a yes, Jason turns away and gathers up the fallen photos from the floor to
put them back in their box, doing the best he can not to look directly at the pictures while he does.
The polaroid he hides once more at the bottom of the pile, before closing the lid and fastening the
padlock back into place. Then he shoves the whole thing away in the bottom of his closet.
Tomorrow he'll sneak it back into Tim's room where it belongs. Tomorrow, because there's
something else he needs to do tonight. Now, before his resolve runs out on him.

Slowly, Jason bends down and pulls the bear from it's customary hiding place under his own bed.

Only last night its face had seemed warm and welcoming, comforting him through the dark as the
fear of nightmares kept him from sleeping. Here, today, it's beady eyes look more malicious than
gentle, and the worn fur that had always felt so soft before now scratches against Jason's skin with
the knowledge of its previous owner.

Slipping out of his bedroom, Jason heads downstairs, keeping a weather eye out for Alfred as he
does.

The fire in the den has already burnt down to embers, but it only takes Jason tossing on a couple
extra logs from the pile stowed next to the mantle and stirring it with the poker for the flames to
build back up again. He squeezes the bear tight in his hands, taking one final look into its worn,
squished up face.

"Just had to poison everything, didn't you." He whispers bitterly, torn on losing one more thing
that should have been a comfort for him. "Well, payback's a bitch, asshole."

The happy smile of a boy long gone haunts him as Jason tosses the bear onto the fire, contrasted
by the memory of the blank eyes and red helmet of the man he'd become. Its old, dry fur catches
fire easily, burning with a readiness that surprises him. The single mad impulse to dive in and take
the bear back seizes Jason for only a moment before he pushes it away. Maybe this won't hurt Tim
in any tangible way - how could it, when he'll never even know Jason carried the act out? - but it
makes him feel better; even if just for a single, petty minute.

Jason forces himself to stay and watch as the bear burns to ashes, until even its black glass eyes
have melted away into nothingness.

Christ, but he could use a cigarette.

*

The fact that it's now December and there's snow on the grounds outside doesn't hit Jason until three days later, when he walks downstairs to find Alfred adjusting a wreath on the front door.

True to his word, Dick hasn't told anyone about what had happened with Jason; the evidence of the bears demise as well as the incursion into Tim's room remains undiscovered. Jason thinks he might love the kid now just for that alone. Certainly he doesn't begrudge Dick following him around the manor anymore like a tiny shadow, which Dick seems more determined to do now more than ever. They play games and watch movies together while Jason makes a show at being a functioning human being to the rest of his family, with middling results.

Damian especially seems to be watching him like a hawk; whenever he's actually around, that is.

"High time we got the manor decorated for Christmas." Alfred says quietly, when he notices Jason looking. "Don't you agree, Master Jason?"

"Uh, yeah." Jason agrees, through the thick black sludge that is his thought process. Everytime Jason blinks the world blurs, the effect compounded by an ever amounting sleep debt. His fingers twitch emptily, his bare wrists burn. "You need some help?"

"I would be delighted." A grateful smile doesn't quite make up for the naked concern in Alfred's eyes when he looks at Jason, but it helps. "Miss Stephanie and Cassandra are with Master Dick, working on the tree in the main living room, if you'd care to join them."

It hasn't been Jason's plan to sign himself up to a group activity, rather just some quiet time with Alfred, but he can hardly take it back now without looking suspicious. He nods, "On it, Alfie." before heading in that direction, straining his ears until he can hear the bright sound of Steph and Dick chattering to one another through the door to the den.

For a moment he waits outside, leaning with his ear held close to the wood and his fingers curled on the doorknob as he tries to make out the individual words they're saying. No luck, either they're speaking too quietly or his ears are too full of cobwebs for Jason to make out anything concrete. He takes a deep breath, opens the door and enters.

"Jason!" Dick's the first one to react to his presence, but only because he's looking in the right direction. Stephanie turns to see him a moment later, a warm welcoming smile blossoming onto her face as she bustles over with a piece of purple sparkly tinsel and throws it around his neck like a feather boa, presumably to match the one she herself is already wearing. Dick follows a step after her.

"Hey kiddo." It's impossible not to smile back at Steph, who had hugged Jason so hard the day after he came home that he'd thought his head was going to pop clean off his shoulders. "How's tricks?"

It's not fair, he thinks, how well Steph seems to be coping in the face of everything. Only the tightened corners of her mouth and eyes say anything about the stress she must be under, knowing what became of the boy she had once loved, then grieved so deeply with the rest of them.
"Y'know, same shit, different day." Jason replies bluntly, with a rolling shrug of his shoulders seconds before a small impact to his temple takes him by surprise. "Ow! Cass!"

"Swear." Says the small ninja who's snuck up on his right, to the accompaniment of Dick's giggles. She smiles softly, with far too much understanding in her eyes as she lowers the hand she'd flicked Jason with back down to her side. The other arm hold a small padded box, full of the beautiful antique baubles that are normally stored carefully away up in the manor's attic. "Hi."

"Uh, hi." Jason tries not to wilt in the face of her perceptive gaze. "You jerks got started without me, huh?"

"We wouldn't have if you'd gotten up earlier." Steph has no hesitations about stealing another hug from him, she just does it and Jason returns the gesture, grateful towards anyone who hasn't taken to treating him like glass this past week. "Don't worry, lazybones, there's still plenty left to do. Right, Dick?"

Dick nods eagerly, bobbing his head up and down like a bird. "Yeah. This tree is ginormous!" He says, with all the awe a twelve year-old Jason had once shared, back during his first Christmas in the manor. "I don't know how it even got in here."

Kid has a lot to learn about rich people, that's for sure.

"If a fat man can squeeze down a chimney anything is possible." Jason jokes as soon as Steph pulls back. Her fingers linger on his shoulders, and when it becomes more than he can stand Jason whips the end of the tinsel around his neck at her, forcing her to dodge backwards with a small laugh. Sure enough, when Jason looks over at the tree he can see there's at least half of it left to decorate, as well as the star to fit on the top. That's not surprising, considering that it takes up an entire corner of the room by itself and stretches from floor to ceiling.

"I'm eleven, not eight, Jay. I don't believe in Santa anymore." Dick rolls his eyes, seconds before grabbing Jason's wrist and tugging him towards the tree, away from the girls, "C'mon!"

He tries not to flinch as small but strong fingers wrap around his skin the same way cool metal did not long before, knowing that Cass will still see it even if no one else does. "Yeah, yeah. I'm coming."

Dick lets go of him to dive for a box once they're close, while Jason takes a moment to close his eyes and inhale the scent of fresh pine. The break in his nose twinges, but otherwise does nothing to distil the wonderfully homely scent.

He's not going to let Tim take this from him too.

"We had a little fake one back in the circus." Dick says quietly to his side suddenly. Jason opens his eyes again to see the kid's arms laden with a fresh haul of baubles. He should probably tell him to be more careful with them, as Alfred will have their hides if they break any like Jason did the previous year, but he doesn't have the heart for it. "It was all we could fit into our caravan."

"Yeah, what was that like?" It's the first real information he's heard Dick offer about his former home since the day Jason met him.

Dick plucks one bauble out from the pile he's holding, gold and red and green, Robin colours, then looks up at the tree. "It was... it was great. Mr Haly would find us a place to stop for the week, and we wouldn't put on any shows the whole time. We'd have a big campfire, put all the tables together, and everyone ate Christmas dinner together. All of us, and we'd sing carols and..." He trails off, blinking his huge eyes wetly for a moment.
This kid... "Can't promise a campfire, but I'm pretty sure we can force Bruce and Damian into singing something if you want."

Dick smiles at him, but it's not the same big, bright smile it was before. Jason knows what's going through his head: it's hitting him that this is going to be his first Christmas spent without his family, his parents, alongside virtual strangers. Jason wishes he could say he relates, but he can never really remember Christmas being a big deal even before he lost his own blood relations.

Dad gone more often than not, particularly the last couple of years; Mom so lost in the glorious plateaus of the fever dreams caused by whatever shit she'd injected into herself that week that even the holiday spirit hadn't been enough to pull her out of it. Not for him, not even to save her own damn life.

He reaches over, taking Dick's elbow and guiding his arm to the lower hanging branches. "C'mon, Dickie bird. Tree isn't going to finish decorating itself."

His touch seems to bolster something within Dick, because he sets to work again with a fierce determination. With a small stiff smile, Jason joins him.

Finishing the tree takes over another hour, it's that big, and by the time the group backs away to admire the results of their hard work Alfred has appeared with refreshments for them all as a reward. Jason takes his hot cocoa and cookies with him to the couch, sinking down into leather worn soft and buttery by years of use. The faint buzz of excitement that carried him through the past hour is starting to wear off, and he can feel his eyes drooping once more as he watches and listens to the others chatting happily to each other across the room.

Steph's bright bubbly tones, Cass' quiet interjections, Dick's piping laughter in response to Alfred's dry humour; they all contribute to a comforting background noise, assuring Jason that he's not alone. If only Bruce and Damian were down here instead of in bed, he thinks, it might actually be close to perfect. As it is, Jason covers a yawn and swears he'll rejoin them in a moment after he drinks his tea. He just needs to rest his eyes first.

*

Later, he comes to with soft light and quiet surrounding him, only the dry sound of paper turning to disturb the silence. There are fingers brushing against his hair, and when Jason breathes in he recognises the rich scent of Bruce's cologne.

"B?" Jason mumbles.

The fingers still for a moment before resuming their gentle motion. "It's all right, Jason, go back to sleep."

"M'good." He moves his hand under the throw blanket someone draped over him, the pads of his fingers grazing the fabric of Bruce's slacks as Jason pushes himself to sit up, cracking a yawn like a gunshot as he does. "Time is it?"

"Almost eight." Eight? Jason blinks slowly as he does the calculations. The curtains are drawn across the huge bay windows, leaving the only light in the room coming from the Christmas tree in the corner and the lamp on the table that Bruce is using to read by. It was two in the afternoon when he sat down.
"Shit." He sighs, rubbing his eyes before looking up at his father.

The soft light does nothing to diminish the signs of aging on Bruce's face, the grey in his hair and the lines that started to appear at the corners of his eyes a year ago. Jason is reminded that Bruce was pushing forty at the time they met, and he went over that hill a couple years ago. It's not so old in the grand scheme of things, but the life they lead is a hard one; Bruce is getting old before his time. That thought makes him feel suddenly queasy. "Jay, it's all right if you're tired."

"No, I'm fine, I'm up." He shakes his head, fighting the urge to lay back down with his head in Bruce's lap this time. "Haven't seen you."

Jason doesn't mean to sound so childish, but there it is all the same.

Bruce smiles, shaving years off his face as he shuts his book and sets it aside on the arm of the couch. "I know. I'm sorry."

"S'okay. You've been busy." Jason can't say for sure whether the six hours of sleep has left him better or worse off. His mouth feels like a spider's nested in it. He frowns, "Everything okay? Did something happen?"

Stupid question. So stupid. But every night this week Bruce and Damian have already been back out in the city again at this time, so the fact that Bruce is home now must mean something. Jason has a horrible suspicion that he knows what it is. He swallows before asking:

"He's gone, isn't he?"

"He's not in the city, anymore." Bruce gently corrects, as if that will make it more bearable. It doesn't.

"You sure about that?" A nod is all Jason needs to confirm it. He looks back down at his legs. "Great. Just great."

"Jason..."

"I'm fine, B." Jason tries to reassure him, leaning forwards and pressing the heels of his hands against his eyes. "I'm just tired."

A hand comes to sit heavy on Jason's shoulder, squeezing tight. It's meant to be comforting, but mostly it just makes his skin crawl. "You haven't been sleeping."

He turns his head sharply to glare up at Bruce, who can hardly talk with his own exhaustion sitting plain on his face. "So what?" Jason tries to shrug off the hand to no avail. "Insomnia's practically a tradition in this family. Even the new kid's getting in on it."

"It's not the same and you know it." Bruce tells him in clipped tones, catching Jason's other shoulder as well and forcing him to turn so they can see each other face to face. His eyes search Jason's, and whatever he finds there seems to displease him. "Jay, we need to talk about what happened."

"It's over." Jason says shortly, trying to head him off at the pass. "I'm good, I told you that already." What warmth he felt about waking up next to Bruce is quickly leaving him. He wants Bruce, but not this conversation, and if one comes with the other then it's just one more thing he'll have to do without.

Tearing himself away from Bruce feels like pulling out his own teeth, yet still he does it. Jason
stumbles to his feet, fighting off the blanket as he moves to leave the room, chest vice tight once more. "Jason -"

"It's really not that big a deal, B. He locked me in a room for a couple weeks. Other than the busted nose he barely touched me at all. I've had worse on nights out with you."

"Solitary confinement is a form of torture all on its own, Jason." Bruce gets onto his own feet and walks up behind him, catching Jason's arm before he can reach the beckoning escape of the door. "I'm worried about you. Alfred says you've barely spoken to anyone. If you would just -"

"What, talk to you?" Yeah, he knows that. Thanks to his thorough education at the hands of the Bat, Jason had learned all about the different depths of depravity one person could inflict on another; including forced isolation. But that's other people, not Jason. Jason grew up on the streets, spent over a year of his life surviving by himself, and now he's Robin; he's better than this, he has to be. "I already told you everything, B."

"You gave me a report. That's not the same."

Jason's lips twist up over his teeth in a snarl. He yanks himself free again, not caring about who might hear as his voice rises, shattering the idyllic festive scene the dolled up den presents to the unknowing gaze. The sudden burst of anger seems to come from nowhere, lashing out at the nearest target. "Well maybe I don't want to talk about it! Ever think of that?! Maybe I'm just fine the way I am!" He whirls on Bruce, who watches him implacably, a multitude of secrets hidden behind his pale blue eyes. "Shit happened, B! The only thing I care about now is catching that son of a bitch."

"Is that why you went into Tim's room?"

Jason freezes.

"I... I just..."

Stepping forward once more, Bruce reaches out to him for a third time. "I saw the footprints, Jay." His gaze gentles, "I swear, I'm not angry. I'm just trying to understand. I know you -"

"You don't know anything." Jason whispers, shying away. He's never felt more the petulant teenager as he rejects the attempt at comfort, stumbling back out of the door and almost tripping over Pennyworth as the cat noses about the hallway. He doesn't run. He tells himself he doesn't run as he stumbles back up the stairs to his room and slams the door shut behind him. His fingers shake as they find the lock and twist it into place.

Fuck.

Like a siren song, the cold winter air beckons. Before Jason even thinks it through he's digging into his closet for his sneakers, shoving them onto his feet and ignoring the way the ends pinch at his toes; either they're an older pair or he's hitting another growth spurt. A cursory search locates a green hoodie, which Jason yanks down over his head before shoving the window open wider and swinging a leg out over the sill. After years of navigating Gotham's architecture, getting down from his second storey bedroom to the ground proves to be pathetically easy.

Focused on getting out of the manor, he completely misses the sound of someone knocking at his bedroom door.

*
Outside the winter air slams into his lungs like a sledgehammer, driving home the yawning, crawling need for a cigarette that's haunted Jason for days and days as he sets off to stalk around the grounds at the back of the house. He ignores the way his feet sink in through the snow to his ankles; his sneakers are useless for keeping it out and soon they're soaked through - not that Jason cares. It's just water, it won't hurt him in any way that matters.

He shoves his hands in his pockets and keeps on walking, past the dark, dead shapes of the flowerbeds and the skeletal branches of hibernating trees, now adorned with garlands of icicles instead of leaves.

It isn't until he's circled round to reach the fencing at the front of the property and his extremities have started to feel numb that Jason's own foolishness catches up with him. His own childish stupidity.

Bruce had been trying to reach out to him, to help him, and Jason had kicked it back into his face. Because why? Because he was angry at Tim? Bruce wasn't Tim, not even close. Bruce hadn't done anything wrong, except for falling into the trap of his former protege. But he couldn't have known, he never could have known.

Except that, down in the deepest darkest pit of Jason's stomach, some part of him whispers that he should have.

The thought curdles now that it's come to light, growing in volume. An ugly epiphany that can never be shared with anyone. It makes Jason want to laugh, hard and bitter, that for all his self-assurance and determination, he's still that kid. That dumb, lonely kid who wanted someone to come and save him, who wanted a father he knew he could rely on to be there for his family without reaching for his belt, and a mother who could bear to stay in reality long enough to hear his pleas.

Jason thought the streets had kicked that kind of optimism out of him, but apparently living with Bruce has brought it right back. Logic never fares well in such circumstances.

"Fuck." he whispers, the word flying out in front of him like dragons breath as he leans his head forwards against cold black iron railings, hating himself for his own unintentional cruelty. "Fuck. I'm such an idiot."

If he's any kind of decent person, he'll head back up to the manor and apologise right now. Instead, Jason lifts his head back up and stares out instead to the bright lights of Gotham beyond the fence, to the distant twinkling lights of the stars above. Somewhere out there is the East End, within it an abandoned building and a room, and inside that...

He swallows thickly.

There's a couple crumpled tens in the back pocket of his jeans. If he wanted to he could use them to get the bus into Gotham, find a store with a clerk that doesn't care how old he is and buy himself some cigarettes. That would be at least one discordant voice in his head silenced.

"No." Jason says aloud to himself, dismissing it after five minutes consideration of the idea. He draws back from the fence and breathes in deep, "You ain't - aren't a kid anymore, you don't need them. Just go apologise. Face the music and Bruce'll forgive you."

He forgave Jason practically killing a guy with his own two hands not so long ago, so why not this?
Steeling his resolve, Jason turns to head back up the front lawn to the manor. But he doesn't even make it halfway before he runs into Damian.

In the dark shadows, lit only by the moon, his older brother has all the bearing of a king in his element - or an executioner. He's holding in his hands what looks like one of Jason's own coats, and... sticks? No, Jason realises with a start, those aren't sticks.

The unspoken gesture becomes so immediately apparent that a tremble runs through him from head to toe, one that has nothing to do with the freezing temperatures they're both standing in.

"Damian..." he starts to say, low and cautious, before Damian abruptly cuts him off, throwing the coat at Jason's head.

"Put that on."

Jason barely manages to catch it before it hits him in the face. Too taken aback to argue, he stiffly slides his arms through the sleeves, fumbling with freezing fingers to catch the zipper and draw it up under his chin. One of the pockets is bulging out with something, and when Jason investigates he finds a pair of gloves inside; not just any old pair of gloves either, they're the one's from his Robin uniform, reinforced with kevlar and metal.

Jason looks at them in his hand without putting them on, stumped by their presence.

"Are you going to stare at them or wear them?"

Looking back up, Jason glares at his brother, even as he tugs the gloves over his hands. Just in time too, because a moment later one of the shinai - the bamboo practice swords Damian had been teaching him to swordfight with because Bruce wouldn't let them use the more dangerous bokken - follows the coats example, flying through the air at Jason's head. He catches it, just the same as he did his coat, flipping the sword around in his hand until he's holding it by the hilt. "Are you serious right now?"

"Deadly." Damian retorts, sinking back into the snow. He holds his own weapon in a practised hand as he stares Jason down. "You've fallen behind on your lessons, it's time to correct that. Come at me."

"Damian, I can hardly feel my feet. This isn't -""That's your problem, not mine." Damian cuts him off before striking at him, forcing Jason to jump back and bring up his own blade to push the blow aside.

Another swing has Jason moving back again, taken aback by the sudden ferocity of it. "You're a fucking asshole!" Jason spits back at his brother, "You know that?"

"So I've been told."

Unphased by the insult, Damian continues to push Jason back across the moonlit field of snow. Each clack of bamboo meeting bamboo has Jason gritting his teeth as his muscles strain to keep up. It's been a while, and his limbs are stiff from the cold as he tries to remember what the hell it is he's doing here. He doesn't think Damian even considers going easy on him; knows he doesn't the first time that Jason slips on something unseen beneath the snow and lands on his ass, cursing, only to feel the reinforced tip of Damian's practice sword catch him under the chin a second later.

"You're dead, Jason."
Jason stiffens at the touch, his fingers clenched tight around his own sword as snow starts to melt through the back of his jeans. "Give me a break." he snaps defiantly, "If you'd warned me -"

"I told you from day one I wouldn't go easy on you, little brother. If you don't like it then you can quit and go back inside."

Heat blazes inside him at the insinuation, driving the cold from his bones as Jason bats the sword away from his throat with his hand. He struggles back up onto his feet with a vicious glare. "Fuck you. You know I won't."

Damian inclines his head towards him, lips curling in something between a pleased smirk and a sneer. "Then come at me."

With a strangled yell, Jason does just that, launching himself across the ground at his brother. Their swords smash together as they struggle, churning up the snow underneath their feet into a grey mess. With every connected blow Jason's fury worsens. He forgets that he can't feel his feet, that the temperature outside is cold enough that there are icicles hanging from the bare branches of the trees; he's focused solely on wiping that smug look off Damian's face.

"Faster." Damian snaps at him over their crossed blades. He barely looks winded, while Jason's arms shake. "Like you mean it."

"Shut up!" Jason growls in return, kicking out at his leg.

Damian slips smoothly away, seizing Jason by the back of his coat as he trips forwards and using it to knock him back down into the snow again, like he's a clumsy child rather than a trained superhero. "You're sloppy."

"I'm fucking pissed, that's what I am!"

He swings his sword at Damian's head as soon as he regains his feet, only for Damian to slap it aside again with his own, almost impatiently. As if Jason's just wasting his time with his pathetic attempts at attacking him. "Why?"

Jason let's out a bleak bark of laughter, incredulous as much as he is angry. "Because my supposed brother decided to ambush me outside in the snow? Come on, Damian, it's not that hard."

"No." Damian growls suddenly, lunging forwards once more. "That's not it." He impacts with Jason so forcibly that the teenager can't do anything but retreat, falling backwards into a small copse of deciduous trees in the face of Damian's assault. "I've seen you, Jason."

"Good for you, you're not blind." He spits, rolling out of the way of the next attack.

"I've seen the way you've been hiding. Skulking around the manor like a ghost." Crack, Damian's shinai hits the trunk of a tree inches from Jason's head. "The way you've been trying so hard to convince everyone that you're okay," crack, their swords cross, withdraw, then cross again, "The way you're afraid -"

"I'm not afraid!"

"- to let anyone see the truth." Damian continues imperiously, as if he didn't hear him, shoving Jason up against one of the ancient oaks that border the gardens. Up this close Jason can feel his body heat radiating outwards, even as he squirms to try and get free. Their breaths mingle into a single hot white plume of smoke between them as Damian leans down closer, his voice dark as the shadows he was born to inherit. "He got to you, Jason."
Jason's eyes widen, before he grits his teeth and turns his head to the side. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Drake. He got to you. He took you, kidnapped you. Held you captive, made you feel weak and helpless as he used you to further his own ends. He made you question who you are and what you are capable of."

His eyes widen, heart skipping a beat. "No, that's not..."

"True? I know you, Jason." For the first time this evening Damian's gaze softens, "I know who you are, little brother. You have not been yourself since you came home, and I will not suffer a ghost to live in your place."

Jason doesn't know what real purpose Damian intends for the words, they only sound damning to his ears; a measurement of his weakness more than anything else. Acknowledging that Jason has in some way failed when he should have stayed strong; the way Damian surely would have in his place. His hand tightens around the hilt of his sword, gripped in the colours of his office even as he shakes his head, grasping for that red pit of rage inside him in the face of worse emotions.

"Shut up!" He hisses, "You don't know a damn thing about how I feel!"

Damian narrows his eyes back at him, "Then prove me wrong. Prove to me you're as well as you say you are."

"I don't have to prove anything to you!" Jason brings his knee up into Damian's stomach and the blow connects, maybe because Damian lets it, maybe not. All Jason knows in that instant is that he's suddenly free to move again; it's not an opportunity that he wastes. His sword lashes out with a speed he forgot he had, and Damian barely blocks it before Jason's pulling back and striking again. The urge to fight, to lash out, to prove that he can takes over everything as Jason lets out a primal scream of anger, pushing forwards like a man possessed. He can barely breathe as he slams into Damian again and again, this time driving his brother back across the icy battlefield with such fury and force that he forgets everything but the fight.

*It's not true* he wants to snarl. Yet it is, and all his best efforts to obscure the self-doubts that have wracked him ever since his escape have not stopped Damian from seeing through him, clear as through a pane of glass. There's no hiding from the single bitter reality of what was done to him.

Any other time Jason might have realised that Damian stopped trying to avoid him moments into his assault, that he's merely blocking on purpose as Jason strikes out against him, but here and now he doesn't, only seeing red as all the emotions he's been trying to suppress this past week finally win out. The blows he lands shake his arms with their force, rattle his teeth, and he yells and curses with them, hitting until finally, with a splintering crack, the bamboo sword splits and breaks.

Casting it aside, Jason lunges with his fists instead, punching with all the grace of a habitual drunk at Damian's face. He can't see properly anymore, and maybe it's the moonlight rebounding up off the snow that does it rather than the unshed tears in his eyes, but reality is always more painful than fiction. Anger comes from pain, and when the anger finally exhausts itself that's what's laid bare for everyone to see.

Jason hiccups as he trips over a root hidden under the snow, bracing himself for another fall, only for a strong arm to catch him around the waist. He tumbles in against Damian's chest, throwing one last blow that connects with his brothers shoulder before his limbs give out on him and he curls in tight, unrestrainedly sobbing.
The hiss of pain Damian lets out doesn't go unmissed, but he doesn't let go of Jason as they sink down together in the snow. His hand cups the back of his head instead, pushing Jason's face in against his shoulder as he sighs, low and tired, waiting until Jason's sobs have quieted to weak gasping breaths before saying, "There you are."

"Fuck you." He hiccups, slurring the words. "Fucking asshole."

"Of course." Damian snorts, in that superior way he has. Normally it infuriates Jason like nothing else, but right now all he can do is close his eyes at the familiarity of that tone. The pad of Damian's gloved thumb brushes over Jason's ear. "But it worked didn't it?"

"Smug fucking asshole." Jason corrects, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand, trying to scrub away the evidence.

"Tt." Jason feels Damian shake his head. "I only did what was necessary."

"... I didn't... what happened..."

"Come on," Damian says after a moment. "If you're willing to speak now, I'm glad, but that is an activity better done inside."

Laughing hoarsely, Jason shakes his head. "Surprised you lasted as long as you did. You hate winter as much as I do, and it's cold as Mr Freeze's balls out here."

Damian lets a disgusted sound at the metaphor, lip curling back over his teeth, "We all make sacrifices for the greater good."

"I'm the greater good, huh? Thanks for letting me know."

"You must be feeling better if you can make such terrible jokes." Rolling his eyes, Damian stands up first, then hauls Jason to his feet after him, but at least he allows him the dignity of making his own slow way back up to the house. They both hesitate when they reach the back door, sharing a wary glance with each other as they try to determine whether the kitchen is currently occupied or not.

"... who do you think Alfred will want to kill more?" Jason whispers; Alfred's hearing is legendary, even through walls and doors.

"Me, I'm sure." Damian sighs. "I'm the eldest, that makes everything my fault."

"Good, because I was gonna pin the blame on you anyway."

Damian shoves him inside first in retaliation for that quip after opening the door, and Jason's tired enough that he can't even be bothered to try and fight back again. He trips a little over the doorstep, blinking at the bright light in the kitchen a second before the familiar exasperated tones of their family's long-suffering butler signals that they are indeed busted.

"If either of you catch pneumonia I am having nothing to do with it." Alfred says, even as he reaches to flip the kettle on.

Exchanging equally tired smiles, the two shrug. "Sorry, Alfred."

"My sincere apologies, Pennyworth."

As far as normality goes, this scenario is more familiar to Jason than most. There's just something
that screams home about being simultaneously fussied over and scolded by Alfred, catching Damian's eye and grinning conspiratorially at him across the table anytime the butler's back is turned. Alfred eventually lets them leave with hot bowls of soup and chai tea, under strict instructions that they exchange their wet clothes for dry ones before doing anything else, or God help him, they will be polishing the manor's entire collection of silverware for the next week.

Even Damian looks cowed by that threat.

*

An hour later they sit in Damian's room, wearing dry clothing, with the empty soup bowls beside them. Jason occupies the futon with Pennyworth (the cat) curled up in his lap and a blanket wrapped around his shoulders, while Damian takes the chair at his desk. A grim silence fills the corners of the room while Jason figures out how to start talking.

"I can't sleep." He finally confesses. It's the world's most poorly kept secret, but it feels good to admit all the same. "I keep having these dreams where I wake up there again. But this time there's no exits, I can't get out." he wants to hug his knees, but can't with Pennyworth in the way. "It's so fucking stupid.

"It's not stupid, Jason."

"Yes it is." Jason grits his teeth. "I got out. I'm home, I thought that would be enough, but I still can't stop thinking about him and that place. That ugly little room and the newspapers and the..."

He hands wrap themselves around their opposing wrists, squeezing.

"The chains?" Damian's eyes are hard flat shards of jade.

Jason nods stiffly. "Yeah."

Damian and Bruce went back to the apartment after Arkham, once Jason gave them the address. They searched it top to bottom, scoured it inch by inch, but there was nothing left behind. No clues to where Tim might have gone; the only evidence he'd ever been there at all was in the dingy little space in which he'd kept Jason and a smattering of DNA evidence in the form of hair and fingerprints.

He was a thorough little bastard, Jason will give him that, yet he didn't burn the place down the way Jason would have in his place. Almost like...

"You have a right to feel pain and anger over it, Jason." Damian is saying, "No one expects anything different of you. Hiding it will only cause you more harm more in the long run. You need to heal, in more ways than just the physical."

"I've been captured by bad guys before and I've been fine, this time shouldn't be any different."

"But they never held you for as long a period of time as Drake did, and..." Damian trails off, teeth gritted. "We always found you before. This time we didn't, we failed. You have the right to your anger about that too, if you feel it."

"I knew you were looking for me." Jason shakes his head, "I knew you wouldn't abandon me,
"Doubtless, the essence of Drake's plan hinged on it. But still..." His brother grimaces, squeezing his powerful hands together as if he's imagining someone's throat between them. No points for guessing whose. "I've never known anything so callously calculated."

"I don't think he even considered what he was doing to me, y'know." Jason distracts himself by playing with the bell on Pennyworth's collar, it helps him talk. "That's maybe the worst thing about it. It wasn't even about me, I was just a pawn, a means to an end. Necessary evil or whatever."

"Are you sure about that?" Damian's eyes narrow, lips twisted in a harsh downward curl.

"No." He shrugs, thinking back to his discussion with Tim on the penultimate day of his captivity. "But I think it's what he made himself believe. It was like..." Jason chews his lip for a moment. "Like he was barely a person sometimes. I thought he might be a robot at first, before I found out who he was."

Damian scowls deeper. "Father has a hypothesis about the Lazarus Pit, one I agree with, based on what I experienced with my Grandfather. The properties of the water that heal also destroy, taking a persons ability to feel empathy in exchange for strengthening their body. If the Pit is truly what brought Drake back to life..."

"Jesus." Jason whispers. Tim would have been saturated in it.

"My Grandfather doubtless would have only made it worse. He always liked Drake, so Father tells me, and would have been quick to encourage any ruthless qualities that emerged in his psyche after his resurrection."

"He made it all sound so reasonable. His plan, what he was doing, my part in it. Like... logic, that's the word he kept using. That it was the only logical solution."

"I don't doubt he believed it. Still believes it. I missed the majority of his confrontation with Father, but from what I saw he was colder than I remember him." A shadow passes over Damian's face, "Of course, I didn't know him that well. He certainly wasn't happy to see me."

"Yeah, all I had to do was mention your name to piss him off."

And Superboy's, but that's something Jason still wants to keep to himself.

"Which I'm sure you did with much aplomb."

"You know me, I have to get my kicks in somehow." Jason flashes a quick grin in the face of Damian's exasperation before sinking down deeper into thought. "... it probably sounds crazy, but I... I think he tried to be nicer to me at the end. Before Ra's turned up." After the nightmare. "Then he acted, uh, guilty about my nose."

"Perhaps time away from my grandfather benefited him, but I doubt it. He still carried out his plan, then fled when we tried to apprehend him." The undercurrent of anger is back in Damian's voice, doubtless at the reminder of how Tim had hurt Jason. "No matter his ultimate intentions, he did wrong."

"I'm not excusing him, Damian. Trust me. I want to kick his ass as much as you do." Jason says bitterly, tucking two fingers in underneath Pennyworth's chin and scratching when the cat noses his hand. The resultant purrs are calming. "I just... I don't know. I guess I thought if I could understand what happened to him and why I'd feel better. I went into his room because I thought..."
I'd find some clue there, but I didn't. It just made things worse."

Damian shakes his head, "The only person who knows the truth is Drake, and, at least for now, he is beyond our reach."

"Where do you think he's gone, back to the League?"

"I have no idea. But for his sake, I hope not." Leaning back, Damian folds his arms. "I have tried to convince Father to allow me to go confront Grandfather, or seek out Mother to see if she knows anything. So far he has refused both."

"They do still have that bounty on your head." Jason reminds him, with a wry grin.

Damian waves his hand dismissively, as if such details are inconsequential. "If Mother has not managed to have me killed after all these years I highly doubt she will succeed now. I am not afraid of her. More likely Father is intending to visit Grandfather alone."

"You going to let him go without you?"

His brother smirks, "What do you think?"

Jason opens his mouth to say exactly what he thinks - something along the lines of how he wants to go along with them too - only to cut himself off with a pained yelp as he sneezes. The sound startles Pennyworth into jumping out of his lap and straight up into Damian's. "Ow, fuck! Ow, motherfucker!" He puts his hand over his nose, "Jesus Christ, that stings."

Arms wrapped around his hissing cat, Damian frowns, "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, yeah. M'fine. Better when this fucker heals." Jason sniffs carefully, wincing at a fresh twinge of pain.

There's a knock, and a second after Damian calls "It's open" the door swings forwards to admit Bruce, peering into the room with a concerned frown on his face. His relief at finding Jason there is palpable. "I thought I heard cursing."

"Jason sneezed."

"That would explain it."

Colour fills Jason's cheeks as he stares at his mentor. He knows he needs to apologise, but he wasn't expecting Bruce to find him here so soon. "B... I, uh... about earlier..."

"Damian, would you mind giving us a moment." Bruce asks his eldest son, who rolls his eyes and stands with Pennyworth draped around his neck after a quick questioning glance at Jason, who nods to show it's all right.

"Yes, of course. I will vacate my room so you may use it to talk. Tt." If Jason didn't know him so well he'd think Damian's disgruntlement genuine. He hides a smile when Bruce takes the opportunity to reach up and ruffle Damian's hair as he walks past him, and a disgusted growl as the door shuts is the last sound Jason hears from his brother before it's just him and Bruce alone together again.

Smile fading, he watches Bruce cross the room, then slowly lever himself down onto the futon beside him. The apology is a heavy weight sitting on his tongue, waiting to be spoken. Bruce doesn't seem to mind waiting for him to be ready though and this close Jason has a hard time fighting the same urge he had before to curl up closer to him. He settles for rubbing at his wrists
instead. "I..."

"I'm sorry."

Jason blinks, "What?"

Bruce sighs heavily, not looking directly at Jason as he says it again. "I'm sorry, about earlier. It was unfair of me to expect you to be ready to talk when I demanded it."

"No, B... I'm sorry. I was an ass. You were just trying to help."

Bruce shakes his head, "After what you went through..." He grits his teeth. "I promised myself I would never lose another partner. That I'd never another of you go through what Tim did."

"You didn't lose me, Bruce. I'm right here." Jason tries to reassure him. "I was never in any real danger, not from him."

"But you could have been. I didn't find you. I should have been able to find you, but I didn't." Bruce's eyes track downwards to where Jason's fingers worry at his wrists. One of his big hands reaches and gently covers them, stopping the motion. "I'm sorry for it, Jay. It shouldn't have been that way."

"Shit happens." Jason gulps at the contact, ignoring the traitorous inner voice that yells in agreement with what Bruce is saying; God damn Damian for knowing him so well. "The important thing is I got out."

"You did." He smiles a little, looking at Jason fully finally. "You saved yourself, Jason."

"Should have done it sooner." Jason mumbles, torn between pleasure and shame at the praise he doesn't know that he deserves. "I couldn't stop him in the end."

Bruce shakes his head, age again apparent in his face. "You did everything you could. It would have been much worse if you hadn't managed to warn us when you did."

*I almost didn't warn you. I almost stood back and let it happen.* He didn't go through with it, but he thought it all the same. Jason stares at their hands together, his own look so small next to Bruce's.

Bruce seems to take his silence for something else, because a moment later he lets go of Jason's wrists and wraps his arm around his shoulders instead, drawing the teen in against his side. Jason squeezes his eyes shut as he leans against him. "I'm proud of you, Jason. For everything you've accomplished, everything you are and will be, you make me proud. I couldn't have asked better of you."

Well that... Jason swallows thickly, overwhelmed by the rare show of sentiment from Bruce.

"I want you to know that, even if you're not ready to talk to me about it yet. You're my son, Jason, all I want is what's best for you. Just know that whenever you are ready I'll be here to listen, however long that takes."

"Thanks, B." He finally manages to rasp out, before sniffling again. "I will."

Bruce touches his forehead with his other hand, his palm is dry and cool against Jason's skin. "You feel warm."

"I was playing out in the snow with Damian. Not smart, I know."
"Playing." Bruce says dryly. Jason expects Damian will be getting some choice words from Bruce later; the thought of that cheers him up a little. "I see. We better get you to bed. The last thing you need now is a cold, and you definitely need more sleep."

"You're telling me, and you know Damian, he hates people being in his room when he's not here. Don't know what he thinks we'll do, there's dick all in here to mess with." Most of Damian's possessions had moved with him to Bludhaven. Aside from a few items of clothing, and the artwork on the walls, Damian's old bedroom is now almost as bare as one of the guest rooms down the hall.

Speaking of Dick... "Hey B."

"Mm?"

"We're keeping the new kid, right?"

He can tell he's taken Bruce by surprise. "Dick?"

"No, Santa Claus. Of course Dick." Jason twists his head to look up at him, shoving all other concerns into the back of his head. "Come on, we're keeping him."

"He's not a lost puppy, Jason."

"No, he's a kid who needs a home. He's got nowhere else to go, and you can't tell me it's not what you had in mind when you brought him here in the first place."

Bruce grits his jaw, "It's not that simple. He may not want to -"

"Trust me, he'll want. You just gotta ask and spend some time with him, Bruce. He's a good kid, you'll like him." Jason insists. Putting Dick and Bruce together will be like sprinkling glitter on a gravestone. Not a combination that would make instant sense to anybody looking, but they all need some brightness in their lives right now. "Besides, we haven't caught Zucco yet."

"We?" Bruce asks slowly, raising an eyebrow as he still works on digesting Jason's proposal.

"Yeah. We. No way I'm not helping with that."

"You're still benched until after Christmas, Robin." Bruce reminds him, not unkindly.

Jason rolls his eyes, opens his mouth to argue, then cuts himself off with another sneeze. Bruce waits until he's done yelping to haul him up to his feet. "M'fine." Jason tries to wave it off. "Don't worry."

"Bed. Now." Bruce says firmly. "If you don't catch a cold, then we'll talk about you going out again."

That sounds like a challenge. Challenges Jason can work with. "You're on, boss."

There's another sigh as Bruce leads him out of Damian's room. The man himself is nowhere in sight, Jason suspects he may have gone down into the cave, so no one interrupts them as they step across the hallway into his room. Bruce lingers as he climbs into bed, tucking his head down against the pillow, and frowns at the open window.

"Don't." Jason says softly when he moves to close it. "Leave it open, please, B."

"Jason..." Bruce starts to protest, then seems to think better of it. He comes back over to the bed
and sits on the edge of the mattress, touching Jason's hair again. "Are you going to be able to sleep?"

"If I can't now, I never will." A yawn works its way out of his mouth as Jason rubs at his eyes. "Don't fuss."

"I'm not. I just want you to be okay."

"Said don't fuss, I will be." At least one of them has to believe that, it might as well be Jason. "Bruce?"

"Yes?"

"When we catch Red Hood..." He licks his lips dryly, staring at a section of his bedroom wall. Why is he asking this? Why does he care? "What's going to happen to him?"

The mattress shifts as Bruce does, giving Jason the impression that he's leaning forward, probably looking down at his clasped hands. "I don't know, Jason. I think it will depend on him."

"You think he can come back from that?"

"No one is beyond redemption."

The memory of Tim saying something similar about Bruce's beliefs flashes back to Jason. He feels compelled to save everyone... even those who don't deserve saving. "What if he doesn't want that? What if he's happy being what he is now."

"Then..." Bruce swallows audibly, reminding Jason that Tim is someone Bruce loved as much as he does any of the rest of them. "We'll deal with it when the time comes."

Numbly, Jason nods, all other words regarding Tim failing him as his exhaustion pulls him into a downward spiral. The drain of a week without any sleep combined with the evening's events finally taking their toll. All the words he said and didn't say mix themselves up in Jason's head as he closes his eyes.

"B?" He swallows when he hears Bruce stand up, pushing down his shame in asking.

"Yes, Jason?"

"Could you, uh... could you stay a little? Just until..."

The bed dips again as Bruce sits back down. "Of course, son." He says quietly, a second before he rests his hand on Jason's shoulder. "I'll be here as long as you need me."

With that assurance, Jason finally gives in to his urge to sleep. The sound of Bruce's steady breathing an unspoken lullaby.

*

While not an instant cure, that night marks a turnaround in Jason's wellbeing. He actually feels like he's starting to recover, rather than lingering in a fugue state. Damian's trial by combat helped purge some of the blackness from Jason's soul, opening him back up to being something closer to the kid he was before Tim got hold of him.
Still, despite his best efforts to the contrary, he does catch a cold, but it only sticks around for a couple of days. Not that his recovery time matters to Bruce, who still refuses to allow him back into uniform for at least another week, but then Jason expected that. In the meantime the bruises clear up from his face and, though his nose still twinges sometimes, it's almost completely healed when Christmas Day rolls around.

His sleeping patterns improve slowly too. Jason isn't sure if Bruce tells them to do it, or if they all just figure it out by themselves, but whenever he passes out downstairs he now constantly finds himself waking up to the presence of at least one other member of his family around him. They don't say anything about it, and neither does he, treating it as complete coincidence every time, but the nightmares that kept him awake start to ease alongside the crushing memories of loneliness.

Christmas itself passes almost too fast, in a whirlwind of gifts, snowball fights and Alfred's ever-amazing food. Jason's ready to drop off again on the couch after dinner, stuffed to the gills with turkey and pudding as he competes in the laziest game of chess ever with Damian on the empty couch cushion between them, but is forced to rouse himself when Bruce climbs to his feet from his red leather armchair and clears his throat in a way that means pay attention. After years of conditioning they all know better than to ignore that sound.

"Everyone, if I may, there's one final gift I'd like to share with you all."

Dick looks up from where he's sat on the floor playing video games. The whole day through he's flipped from one extreme to another, happy and sad in equal measure (the latter usually whenever he thought no one was looking). He's better than he was a week ago though, not least because Bruce seems to have taken Jason's advice to heart and made an effort to get to know the kid finally.

An effort morbidly helped by the fact that there are no big-name villains capable of staging anything across the holidays this year. Christmas without a plot to foil almost feels wrong in itself. (Jason exerts a lot of effort deliberately trying not think about how and where Tim might be spending Christmas, whether he's alone or not. He tells himself he doesn't care.)

"What is it?" Steph asks first from where she's cuddled up with Cass by the fireplace, always ready to leap in where others hesitate. Her head twists from side to side, scanning the room, "Where is it?"

They don't have to wait long for an answer. Bruce turns his head to the door as soon as he's sure they're all with him. "Alfred, you can bring her in now."

The door swings open, and it's Damian of all people who is the first to let out a shocked sound at the skitter of claws on the wooden floor, heralding the arrival of a large and clearly overexcited Great Dane pup. A rather resigned looking Alfred follows the dog inside, empty leash in hand.

"Father." Damian gapes.

"Holy shit, you got us a dog?!" Jason's fully awake in an instant, struggling out of the groove he's sunken into and knocking the chess board over in his haste. Pieces roll onto the floor and under the couch unheeded. "Way to go, Bruce!"

"Language, Master Jason."

Jason doesn't so much as blink at Alfred's disapproval, too focused on the far more interesting and slobberly addition to the family. The pup bounds across the floor, tail wagging furiously in the face of so many new people to meet before apparently reaching a decision and making a beeline for
Dick, who squeals excitedly and throws his arms around her neck as she licks his face.

Jason and Steph lunge to be the next ones in line, hands reaching to eagerly pet at any part of the puppy they can reach.

"I thought you said we couldn't get another dog." Damian says indignantly to Bruce as he too stands, making a slightly more steady, if still hurried pace across the room to inspect the animal. "You said -"

Bruce wilts in the face of Damian's ire, coughing awkwardly. "Yes well, circumstances have changed. It would have been unfair to Alfred to make him care for her full time without help, especially when you're over in Bludhaven most of the time and Jason and myself are otherwise occupied. But now that Dick's here -"

"Dick's staying?" Jason jumps on that, grinning as Dick himself goes down underneath the pup that's already as big as he is. To the side Damian lets out an unsatisfied growl at the explanation. "You're staying, Dickie bird?"

Dick blushes but nods, "Bruce asked me - ugh! hey!" Dog tongue in the mouth, not an enviable situation. Jason laughs at his misfortune as he runs his hand over the pup's back. Dick spares him a glare before continuing. "Asked me last night. I said yes."

"Thank God!" Stephanie says, tugging the puppy back by her collar to give Dick some breathing room. As soon as she's out of the way Jason takes the chance to reach down and ruffle his hair, making Dick squawk anew. "We need someone else cool around here. Good going, circus bird."

Nearby Damian looks at once longing and indignant. He's clearly itching to pet the dog, but is unwilling to wade into the mess of everyone else to do it. Taking pity on him, Jason hauls the pup away from Steph with a groan and swings her over to his big brother. "Jeez, she's huge."

"She'll get bigger, just as Titus did." Damian says, immediately pleased as he kneels down to pet her. The pup jumps to try and put her paws on his broad shoulders. "Though she clearly requires some discipline."

"Yeah, before she frenches Dick again."

"Shut up, Jason!"

"Alas," Alfred sighs, watching the contained chaos morosely from Bruce's side. "My floors, finally clean of drool after all these years, only to be befouled once more."

"I like her. She's sweet." Cass puts in, as she comes over to pet the pup too. She looks to Bruce, "Name?"

Bruce shakes his head. "I thought it best to let you all name her."

A chorus of suggestions follow, steadily increasing in volume as everyone fights to make their voices heard. From the downright ridiculous ("She doesn't even have spots, Stephanie.") to the overly-serious ("Ophelia? Get off your Shakespeare high-horse, Damian. You don't even go here anymore.") before Dick finally pipes up, after five minutes of intense concentration to say, "Ace. Ace is a good name."

As good a name as any as far as Jason is concerned. The kid's now the baby of the family, only makes sense that he gets the honour of naming the dog. "Ace. I like it. Ace the Bathound."

Damian groans as Steph and Cass start to laugh. "It's hardly dignified. She's a Great Dane, not
"Oh give it up, Damian." Stephanie claps him on the shoulder, making him glare at her. "You're outvoted. Right, Cass?"

"Right." Her girlfriend grins, with a tilt of her head that somehow manages to be vaguely menacing and also mischievous, all at the same time.

Damian continues glaring for a moment before giving in with a sigh. Probably at the memory of being smacked down on the training mats by Cass one too many times. "Fine. But she will be properly trained, I will not allow you to corrupt her with your foul mannerisms, Brown."

"Bite me, brat wonder."

Ignoring them, Jason reaches down to scratch the newly dubbed Ace behind the ears again. He's not dumb enough to miss that Bruce's sudden change of heart over bringing another dog into the house is tied intrinsically to both what happened to him and to Dick; who clearly needs some more love and affection than the taciturn Bruce can provide (a fantastic guardian he may be, but cuddly Bruce is not), but he's not going to complain either. Not when Ace licks his hand and butts her head into his elbow, her soulful brown eyes filled with easy affection. He smiles and scratches Ace behind the ears again, her tail thumping against the floor happily as she sits beside him.

The bickering is stopped when Pennyworth chooses that moment to wander into the room; dog and cat halt and stare at each other for exactly three seconds before all hell breaks loose. Damian makes a valiant lunge for Ace's collar, but misses it by a hairsbreadth, giving her more than enough opportunity to charge after Pennyworth, who streaks back out of the door from whence he came with a startled hiss.

Damian swears before running after Ace to defend his cat. It's pretty much the funniest thing Jason's ever seen, and since he ends up bent over laughing hard enough to cry it means he's also the last one out of the room when he, Dick, Cass and Steph also race for the door in hot pursuit of the animals. The last thing Jason hears before exiting the den is Alfred's long suffering sigh and Bruce's deeply amused chuckle.

"Really, sir..."

"Don't worry, Alfred. I'm sure she'll tire them out soon enough."

* 

Damian leaves for Bludhaven on the cusp of the new year, the morning before the day that Bruce finally relents and lets Jason be Robin again on, after making him promise to keep up his swordplay. Likewise Steph and Cass are already out doing their own thing that night, but there's still an audience to watch Jason slip back into the uniform for the first time in almost two months.

"You look really cool, Jay." Dick says, awed as he sits on the floor of the cave with Ace draped across his lap. She's drooling on his jeans, but Dick doesn't seem to mind. He's completely ignored every instruction Damian had tried to give him on how to train her so far.

"I'm Robin." Jason says cockily, fiddling with his cape until it sits right across his shoulders. The suit feels tight across his body, and the boots pinch a little at his feet. Maybe he really is hitting another growth spurt after all. Looking over at Dick, it's hard not hard to see the clear envy in the
kids eyes as he finishes suiting up, something that surprisingly doesn't bother Jason as much as he thought it might; being the third Robin has made him well aware that the title is transitional, but for now Robin is still his, and that's the way Jason intends it to stay for a good while yet, until he's ready to move on to his own name. "Of course I look cool."

Dick rolls his eyes, "So am I."

"What?"

"My mom." Dick continues quietly, "She calls - called me Robin. Because I was born on the first day of spring."

That's a bombshell Jason doesn't expect, and it certainly manages to cement his earlier thought that Dick will someday be standing here in his place if he chooses to. "That's... huh. Weird" He tries to say casually, acting like it doesn't trip him up. Stranger coincidences have happened.

Dick shrugs, mixed sadness in his eyes, even if the overwhelming emotion on his face is still one of greedy longing. "You're going to help Bruce catch him, right?"

No prizes for guessing who he's talking about. Jason nods at once, resolute. "Count on it, Dickie bird. That's what I do. Now that we're both on the case that Zucco creep'll be behind bars in no time."

Now that there's no other distractions to speak of in Gotham. Jason's home, the big players are either dead or incapacitated, and Red Hood is out of their reach (at least for now), meaning Tony Zucco has just become public enemy number one so far as Batman and Robin are concerned. The leads Black Bat has already been working on have been transferred over to them, and Jason intends to drag him to Blackgate before the week is out, preferably kicking and screaming. Anyone who gives Dick Grayson that kicked puppy look deserves it so far as he's concerned.

A thin smile crosses Dick's face. "Thanks, Jay."

"Anytime, midget." He walks over, reaching down to ruffle Dick's hair. A few weeks of not being the baby of the house have promptly taught Jason the pleasures of older brother-dom; now he completely understands why Steph and Damian constantly do this sort of thing to him. "I'll hit him extra hard just for you."

He dodges Dick's retaliatory slap at his arm. "I want to go with you."

"Yeah, I know." Jason purses his lips before kneeling down in front of Dick, scratching Ace behind one of her floppy ears. He remembers how it felt back when he learned that Two-Face had killed his dad, and Jason's dad had been an asshole. Dick's parents on the other hand had been by all accounts a stand-up couple; if losing a shitty parent hurt bad, losing good ones must be agonising - more like how Jason felt when his mom died. "But we need you to stay out of trouble so you can destroy Zucco in court when we drag him in for trial. You get me?"

It's obvious right away that the reasoning isn't really enough for Dick, but Jason doesn't care so long as he doesn't go trying to track down Zucco himself. "It's not the same."

"No, it isn't." Jason agrees. "But you putting him away in jail with your testimony will be a lot longer lasting than me breaking his arm or whatever."

"... you're going to break his arm?"

Raising his finger to his lips, Jason grins savagely. "Don't tell, Bruce."
Dick's eyes are wide, but he nods. Then he looks up suddenly, which is warning enough that Jason doesn't say anything else damning about his professional conduct where Bruce can hear. He's on thin enough ice tonight as it is.

"Jason."

Jason straightens up and turns round, looking up at the wall of black-armoured metal that is his mentor. "Yeah, B?" He swallows, watching Batman's face as his eyes sweep down over him. Bruce's hands are balled fists and Jason knows that look, that apprehension that he'll never admit out loud.

He swears if Bruce tells him to take the suit off again and go back upstairs...

"Come on." He finally growls, then looks to Dick. "Dick, it's late. You should be getting ready for bed."

"I just wanted to see." Dick complains, though he pushes Ace off his lap and stands up. Alfred appears from the stairs, walking up behind him and gently placing a hand on Dick's shoulder. They make an odd looking couple watching Batman and Robin make their way over to the Batmobile together.

Familiar, excited energy is already starting to thrum through Jason's body as he approaches the car. Putting on Robin again felt more like coming home again than anything else. He feels stronger, as pieces of himself that were missing slide back into place. The suit is magic armour, and with it his wrists don't itch for bonds that are no longer there.

Even the glimpse he catches of Tim's uniform case out of the corner of his eye can't spoil his mood tonight.

"Think I need to get Alfie to let this out a little, y'know?" Jason starts conversationally as the doors on the car lift open. "It's feeling kind of tight."

Bruce pauses, looking appraisingly out at Jason from behind the cowl for a moment. His blunt, chiseled jaw loosens from the tight clench it's settling into as a smile curves his lips. "Hm. I think you're right, you have grown again. I'll mention it to Alfred when we get back."

Delighted, Jason laughs as he jumps into the seat of the car. "I'll be taller than you before you know it, boss."

"Don't get ahead of yourself, Robin. You have a long way to go yet." Bruce says amusedly. He rolls his eyes, "Come on, old man, let's go track this fucker down."

"Language." Bruce sighs, though he's still smiling as he climbs in on the drivers side and closes the doors. The engines fire with an almighty roar that startle the bats overhead, and Jason barely has time to wave at Dick and Alfred before they're hurtling down through the tunnels towards Gotham at terrifying speed.

Not unexpectedly they take it slow and quiet; Jason doesn't mind being tested by Bruce like this, not when it lets him see Gotham again the way she's meant to be seen, a sprawling city of lights under his feet. The wind tugs at his cape and hood when they stand on high, viewing their domain from the top of Wayne Tower.

It feels good, it feels real good.
Ace is a girl in this verse because we need more dog diversity (unless you're Pennyworth, who's not down with that sort of thing).
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Hi! We're back to the age-reversal AU this week, and I'm really excited to shout about this story now having fanart thanks to the lovely and talented Enelos. If you follow my fic blog on tumblr you might have already seen me reblog these, but I absolutely had to share them here too XD

**Damian and Jason patrolling over Bludhaven**

**Jay, Dick and Tim.**

Now onto the actual story! This one's a little more of a relaxed chapter after all the drama of the last two (I'm afraid Tim is not returning yet, sorry guys) but there's still plenty of angst to go around ^^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

April sees a chill wind blowing through Gotham, but it’s one that carries with it the first damp hints of spring rather than the bitter ice of winter.

Robin runs at Spoiler’s heels, following the purple flare of her cape across the squat little buildings and steeped rooftops of stores and restaurants in Chinatown. Up and over, they shimmy along ledges and balance across washing lines before leaping for the fire escape of the next building over, using their grapple guns to clear the spaces their legs can’t, all while laughing and cajoling, egging each other on to greater feats of daring.

It’s a good night to run.

And sometimes (often) Jason needs that these days, he needs just to run. To feel the rush of air through his hair and tugging against the fabric of his hood, tasting Gotham smog on his lips until his lungs burn with it, so that when he goes home he can just collapse fast first into the mattress and sleep and sleep until his alarm goes off and it’s time to go to school.

It’s been a quiet night. The most action they’ve had was breaking up an arms deal between Penguin’s men and some European dealers by the docks as the former tried to expand his territory in the city. It was an easy job, thrown their way by Bruce while he concentrates on bigger prey, but honestly Jason doesn’t mind that dismissal this time round. They all have larger things on their minds tonight.

Steph leads him up onto an apartment building overlooking the Gotham river, and Jason almost trips over his own feet when the smell of freshly cooked Chinese food invades his nostrils. “What…”

Cass waves at him from where she’s sat cross legged next to the hulking shape of the air-conditioning unit, chopsticks in hand. Next to her stands Damian, a huge and lurking presence in the shadows as he chows down on a vegetable spring roll like it’s done him some personal insult.

Jason’s used to mid-patrol snacking, but somehow this feels a little more organised than normal.

He casts Stephanie a suspicious look, “What’s going on?”
“War council, baby bird, that’s what.” Stephanie says as she pulls down her hood and mask, then crouches down by the veritable sea of containers in front of Cassandra, hunting through until with a cry of triumph she finds the sweet and sour chicken. “For tomorrow.” She pauses in the midst of prying the lid off, “Didn’t I tell you?”

“Uh, no.” Jason says, rolling his eyes before moving forward to join them all. “But tell me you’ve got crispy beef in there now.”

Cassandra, ninja goddess that she is, picks up a container and offers it out to him. “Carnivore.” She says teasingly.

“Rabbit.” Jason mocks her back, accepting the plastic tub and a pair of chopsticks before slinking round to Damian’s side. “When did you get here?”

Damian doesn’t answer him immediately, he finishes his spring roll first. Golden flakes of pastry stick to the corners of his mouth as he reaches out his hand to push down on Jason’s head, and Jason squawks and ducks, because there’s grease on the pads of his fingers. “About an hour ago.”

“Ass. Just for tonight or are you staying for tomorrow?” He tries to keep the hope audible in his voice down to a minimum. His brother hasn’t spent any significant time in Gotham since Christmas.

A smirk cuts across Damian’s handsome face at Jason’s reaction, “Staying. It seems prudent given the circumstances.”

“Yeah, circus bird’s practically bouncing off the walls.” Jason confides in him, before realising Steph and Cass are watching him too. “What? He is.”

“We know.” Cassandra nods, “That’s why we’re here.”

“The Dick Grayson Support Club.” Stephanie confirms.

“Tt.” Damian adds, his arms now folded but his face serious as he nods in turn.

Tomorrow the jury will finally be delivering their verdict on Tony Zucco’s guilt in the murder of John and Mary Grayson. It’s practically a shoo-in for the prosecution, what with how fast the trial’s moved since Batman and Robin delivered him to the police shortly after New Year’s Day. In large part that was down to the publicity surrounding the case, but there was also little bit of Bruce Wayne’s influence at work too.

Jason smiles at the group, tired but grateful to hear it. “So all of you guys are going with him?”

“It’s a support club, I told you.” Steph says, giving him a double thumbs up.

“Cool. Wish I could.”

“You really can’t?” Cassandra asks him with a frown.

“Nah, the old fuck in charge of my school says if I miss anymore classes for anything less than a death in the family he’ll be forced to expel me. Doesn’t matter how much money Bruce donates to them.” Jason says sourly, “I told B I could just go to a new school after the trial’s over, but he wouldn’t have it.”

“Ew, private school. Ew.” Steph says, around a mouthful of chicken, sauce now coating her lips.

“Yeah well,” Bitterness wells up in the core of him, an old friend by now. “That’s what happens
when you have to lie and say you missed the last few weeks of class before Christmas because you felt like prancing around Europe instead.” Jason puts on an exaggerated old man voice, “‘So irresponsible, Mr. Todd! Think of your future!’ Add that to all the other days I’ve missed because of this gig and… well.” he shrugs, then take a vicious bite out of his beef.

Secret identities are a pain in the ass, but as Bruce often said, it was part of the job. It just sucked when you had to make people think worse of you for something that really wasn’t your fault. Jason likes school. He likes learning, even if he isn’t fond of most of the rich kids who attend Gotham Academy with him. If he had a choice he’d never miss classes.

If he had a choice.

Even underneath his Robin gauntlets, the skin at his wrists crawls for a moment.

“You got his address?” Steph asks, after a moment of uncomfortable silence passes between the four of them. Well almost silence, Jason’s fairly certain he hears Damian growl under his breath. “We could go egg his house later. You know, for justice reasons.”

The idea makes Jason grin, but he shakes his head. “Forget it, it doesn’t matter. Dick’s still going to have you guys and Bruce around him tomorrow, he’ll be fine.”

“He will be.” Damian says firmly, like he’ll move heaven and earth to make it happen if he has to. “The evidence is clear that Zucco is guilty. There’s no other way for it to end.”

“We all know that.” Jason agrees, “But this is personal for him in a way it isn’t for the rest of us. So he’s freaking out a little.”

“He’s scared. Knows Zucco is guilty, but still afraid he’ll be let free.” Cassandra agrees. “Still thinks he should have done something himself. Should have gone after him.”

Jason bites his lip. “He’s going down because of Dick’s testimony.” But he remembers how he felt with Two-Face and his dad. How he’d wanted to kill him and how good it had felt to let loose with his fists on that double-edged psycho. He’d managed to pull back from killing him at the last second, but some part of Jason will always wish he hadn’t.

Now Two-Face is in a wheelchair for probably the rest of his life and it’s no fault of his.

“Not enough.” Cassandra says, with a small sad smile on her face.

“But we’ll help him through it.” Stephanie says louder, picking bits of rice out of her costume and throwing them at Damian. “The Dick Grayson Defence Squad.”

“I thought we were the Support Club.”

“Don’t expect Spoiler to remember anything she said more than five minutes ago, Robin.” Damian drawls, flicking away the rice with his fingers. “You know she has the mental faculties of an amoeba.”

“Just like we all know Nightwing is a big old jerk.” Steph sticks her tongue out at him, “Don’t forget my ninja girlfriend can kick your ass, ninja boy.”

Dutifully, Cassandra makes a show of cracking her knuckles.

“Letting someone else fight your battles for you, Brown? I should have known you’d be so pathetic.” Damian replies, smirking.
Jason hides a grin. For all the superficial sharpness of their words, there’s something playful underneath the banter. Just a year earlier Steph and Damian might have been going at each other for real with this kind of talk, but since then they’d formed a kind of peace between them - a slowly strengthening ceasefire. Whether it was because of him or just because time healed all wounds, Jason doesn’t know, he’s just glad that the events that happened five months ago didn’t rip that old wound back open again.

“Oh yeah? How’s this for fighting my own battles!”

Another spring roll goes sailing across the rooftop, and Jason ducks out of the way quickly, shoving more crispy beef into his mouth while he still can. It’s hard not to choke on his laughter when Damian snatches the roll out of mid-air and throws it back at Steph like a shuriken, and from there the ‘war council’ quickly devolves into an all out food war: girls vs. boys.

At least until Bruce shows up, a lurking shape glowering at all of them out from under the shadow of his cowl as he steps across a battlefield marked by ruins of spilled rice and discarded fortune cookies to demand they all get back to work. Damian looks deeply embarrassed at being caught acting something like his age for once, while Cassandra and Stephanie don’t look apologetic at all.

Jason’s just about to zipline off after them when Bruce catches him by the shoulder. “Bedtime, Robin.”

“Aw, c’mon, B. It’s only one. I can -”

“You have school tomorrow,” Bruce reminds him, as if that hasn’t been on Jason’s mind all fucking night. “Go.”

He scowls, kicks the rooftop with sauce covered boots that he knows Alfred will scold him for later, then does as he’s told, calling up his bike from where he’d left it and riding back to the cave.

Jason takes a quick shower once he’s pried off his uniform, before saying goodnight to Alfred and heading back upstairs to the manor proper. When he reaches the second floor and his bedroom he’s not at all surprised to find a tangled lump of boy and dog already occupying his bed.

“Someday we’re gonna have a talk about the meaning of privacy, Dickie bird.” Jason yawns, petting Ace on the head when she opens her eyes and whines at him for attention. Her tail thumps lazily against the mattress once he moves his fingers back to indulgently scratch behind her soft floppy ears.

Jason takes the time to check Dick is all tucked in and sleeping peacefully before skirting round to the other side of his bed, lifting the covers and squeezing himself into what little space remains. It’s not as easy a task as it first sounds, considering the growth spurt he started at Christmas has just kept on going, but eventually he manages to get settled into place with his knees bent and his arms tucked in tightly against his chest.

It’s still easier for him to sleep when he has company sometimes, even if they are taking up most of the bed. He has less nightmares this way as well, which is why he’s never seriously told Dick to stop. Not yet anyway.

Jason closes his eyes once he’s comfortable, breathing in deep and steady. The air smells faintly of dog, warm and familiar, and just before he drops off Jason thinks he feels the warm weight of Dick’s head press in against his shoulder.
Morning finds Jason waking up alone, except for the hellish shrieking of his alarm.

He flails his hand out into space until he manages to find the off button, then looks groggily at the empty expanse of bed next to him. No sign of dog or boy, they must have gone down for breakfast already.

Shaking off the temptation to pull the pillow over his head and sleep in some more, Jason pries himself out from under the covers and slouches down the hall to the bathroom to take care of his morning necessities; brushing his teeth and running his hand over his jaw in hope that today’s the day some stubble will make itself known. No such luck yet. He’ll have to endure Steph’s teasing about his baby face at least one day more, but he takes comfort in the fact that he’s finally taller than her.

He steps back into his room to pick up his wristbands from the dresser and slip them on over his hands, catching a glimpse of his freshly pressed school uniform hanging on the back of his closet door in the process. Jason glares at it resentfully before heading downstairs to the kitchen. He’ll get dressed after breakfast, not before.

In the kitchen it quickly becomes apparent that Jason’s not the only one suffering through the repercussions of a late night and early rise this morning.

Bruce looks surprisingly composed, if exhausted, and Jason bets he’ll be reaching for the concealer to do something about the dark circles under his eyes before accompanying Dick down to the courthouse for nine today. He’s parsing the morning paper while across the table Damian is leant forward over a cup of tea, eyes closed as he listens to music through his headphones.

“Where’s Dick?” Jason asks.

“Good morning to you too, Master Jason.” Alfred says, pointedly flipping a pancake as he looks back over his shoulder at him from the stove. “Master Richard arose early today and has taken Ace out onto the grounds for her morning walk already.”

Colour him surprised. Jason isn’t actually sure what he was expecting of Dick this morning, but it wasn’t that. “Oh. Cool.” He looks at Bruce, “So any chance I could -”

“No.”

“Tt.” Jason tutts, in a remarkably good imitation of Damian’s trademark sound, and it’s worth it for the startled look on Bruce’s face. “Guess I’ll take my breakfast to go then.”

Bruce sighs, reaching up and rubbing his forehead. “This isn’t a punishment, Jason, it’s a -”

“Necessity. I know. So I don’t ruin my future or whatever.” Jason still wraps his pancakes up in kitchen roll as soon as Alfred hands him the plate, ignoring the open disapproval he receives for the action. He’ll forgo drowning them in syrup today, just this once. If only because they’d be way too messy to carry if he did. “I’m going to go see how he’s doing while you two finish reenacting Dawn of the Dead in the kitchen then.”

Bruce scowls - whether at his flippancy towards his education or his attitude, Jason’s not sure - but he doesn’t say anything else to stop him. Jason goes to flip one of Damian’s earbuds out on his way past the table, but even in his current state his older brother’s reflexes are close to inhuman, and he knocks Jason’s hand aside before he can even blink - which leaves his tea wide open for Jason to swipe the second after.
Misdirection, you had to love it as a battle tactic.

“You’re going to pay for that later, little brother.” Damian warns Jason, cracking open one eye to glare at him as he makes for the back door.

Jason winks, “Paying is what I do at Starbucks. This I got for free.” He takes a sip from the cup and smacks his lips together in response to Damian’s growl. “Mm, chai.”

“Be ready in thirty minutes, Master Jason!” Alfred calls out after him sternly, already moving round the table to hand Damian a fresh cup of tea from the pot he’s already brewed, “Do not make me come find you.”

“I know, Alf!”

The grounds outside are coated in mist at this hour, and it swirls around Jason’s ankles like water when he steps onto the wet grass, taking bites out of his pancakes and drinking his stolen tea while he looks for Dick and Ace. It’s not hard to pinpoint their general location when the sound of large booming barks echo up towards the house from a particular copse of trees.

Dick’s stood with his hands stuffed deep into the pockets of his jeans, watching Ace bark and dig at something between the roots of one of the trees. Probably a mouse, or maybe even a rabbit, Jason thinks. It wouldn’t be the first time he’s seen one hopping around Wayne Manor in the pre-dawn light, despite Alfred’s best efforts at pest control.

Personally Jason rather likes the rabbits and thinks they’re welcome to stay. They were a sight never seen in the city, not even in the parks. Raccoons and foxes were more the norm there, or maybe a squirrel if you were really lucky.

“Hey.” Jason says, stepping up beside him, making sure to clearly telegraph his presence. “Aren’t you up kinda early for you?”

Dick isn’t much of a morning person. A fact that had become readily apparent when Bruce first enrolled him into Gotham Academy at the start of January and the prospect of a regulated school day had quickly proven a foreign concept to the circus-raised brat. He’d only ever been homeschooled before, and like Jason hated the stiff uniform immediately, though Dick took it a step further and complained about the structured schedule there too.

The more Jason hears about what it was like to grow up in a circus, the more amazing it sounds. It’s not hard to see why Dick misses it so much, and why he was (and still is) so bitter over not being allowed to stay with them after his parents died.

“Didn’t mean to be. I just woke up.” Dick replies shortly. Four months after the fact, he doesn’t look much different from the kid Jason first met. He’s still kind of tiny. Small enough that Jason struggles daily with his natural instinct to protect him. But at least he’s had a haircut, though it took Alfred literally having to order him to sit down to get near him with a pair of scissors. “Then I couldn’t get back to sleep.”

Neither of them will bring up that Dick was sleeping in Jason’s bed last night. That’s just a fact. The same as Dick will never comment about Jason still sleeping with his window open every night. It’s their secret, no one else’s.

“You know he’s going down, right?” Jason cuts right to the chase. There’s no point beating around the bush with Dick. The kid can see through bullshit a mile away.

Dick swallows, watching Ace as she continues to dig. “Yeah.”
“You sure? Cos you look like you’re going to hurl.”

“I’m not going to - okay, maybe, a little.” Dick grimaces. “I couldn’t eat breakfast this morning.”

“I bet Alfred was heartbroken.”

Dick smiles weakly, “He said something about how I’m a growing boy who needs his food.”

“Growing? No, I don’t see - ouch!”

Jason snickers when Dick’s elbow impacts with his side. Sue him, he doesn’t have to be the butt of the short jokes anymore. Of course he’s going to take advantage of that.

“Is it dumb that I’m worried they’ll let him off today?” Dick asks a moment later.

Jason thinks about it, “Yeah, kind of. But y’know, sometimes you can’t help that.” He’s glad both of his hands are occupied right now, else he might do something telling. “The evidence is all on your side, Dick. We’re all on your side.”

Dick looks down and scuffs his foot against the grass. Unlike Jason he’s actually wearing shoes instead of slippers. “I wish you were coming with me today.”

“Me too. And I’d be there in a heartbeat if I could.” Jason admits. He still might, in fact, and deal with the consequences of an angry Bruce later. “But y’know, everyone else is. Damian even dragged himself over here from Bludhaven.”

“Really?”

Jason realises Dick must have left the house before Damian woke up, and it’s amusing to see the way his eyes widen at the news. “Sure, you’re part of the family now. We’ve even got the papers to prove it.”

As of last month, Dick Grayson was officially the ward of Bruce Wayne. Ward, because unlike Jason Dick already had a positive father figure in his life. He didn’t want Bruce to be his dad, but he did need him to be his guardian.

“Oh.” Dick says quietly, his surprise still written across his expressive features, “I... I didn’t think he liked me that much, he’s always so...”

“Grouchy?” Jason grins. “Yeah. But that doesn’t mean anything. I didn’t think he liked me either for the longest time.”

“But you guys seem really close.”

“We are now. But at first...” He shrugs, thinking about more awkward meals and silences than he’d known what to do with when Damian first tried to take him under his wing. The initial mixture of excitement and intimidation he’d felt whenever he was in his presence is a far off memory these days. “Damian’s sort of like a hedgehog. Prickly on top, soft and fluffy on the bottom. You get used to it.”

Dick actually laughs at his analogy, then looks back at Ace when she growls at the hole she’s made.

“What’s she after anyway?”

“I don’t know.” Dick shrugs. “I didn’t see it before she chased it down there.”
“Huh.” They watch Ace dig together for a few more minutes. Jason finishes the last of his pancakes and tea, then crumples up the empty kitchen roll inside the mug. “Hey, tell you what. Tomorrow’s Saturday, how about we go do something fun to celebrate then? Activity of your choice.”

“Could we go to the fairground?”

Jason almost opens his mouth to say no, then remembers that Amusement Mile’s taken on a whole new lease of life these days, with business owners rushing to take full advantage of the fact there are no clowns left in Gotham to infest its darker corners. The promontory is safer now than it ever has been in Jason’s lifetime. “Sure thing, Dickie bird. Now c’mon,” he checks the imaginary watch on his wrist before slinging his arm around Dick’s shoulders, “Time for both of us to go get our monkey suits on before Alfred comes out here to hunt us down.”

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School crawls. Jason twitches in his seat through all of his morning classes, playing with the wrist bands under the cuffs of his shirt and chewing on the end of his pen, as well resisting the urge to surreptitiously slip his phone out of his bag and check his messages at least three times every hour.

Nothing had been more surreal (or unpleasant) after New Year’s than coming back to this place. Jason had been so wrapped up in dealing with his more immediate problems that he hadn’t even thought about the rumour mill he’d come back to; the hearty congratulations he’d receive on being ‘that guy’ who fucked off from school a whole month early and then slept with half a dozen French girls across the Christmas period.

Where these guys get off, Jason will just never know. But at least that version of the story is better than the one where he spent two months in rehab for his meth addiction.

He’d had to improvise his answers to his classmates questions on the spot, hiding how panicky he felt on the inside before he was dragged into the principal’s office and given a stern talking to about responsibility and the future of his education - and how just because his father was Bruce Wayne Jason shouldn’t expect money to buy his way out of every situation.

He’s spent the whole meeting in a dizzy, angry haze, and afterwards Jason had felt so sick he’d had to run to the bathroom, where he spent his entire lunch period trying and failing not to throw up. But at least he’d resisted the urge to run off the school grounds, if just barely.

Now things are more or less back to normal and Jason’s glad for it. He likes school a hell of a lot more when people just leave him alone.

The bell rings for lunch, and Jason snatches his bag up, leaving the classroom so fast that most of the class are still in their seats by the time he’s out the door. He heads straight outside from the main building to find one of his preferred quiet spots under the trees at the edges of the schoolyard before pulling out his phone and checking his messages.

*Guilty :) is the first thing he reads from Steph. The message was sent an hour ago. *We’re taking him out for celebratory ice-cream.*

The smile breaks across Jason’s face, even as he hastens to tap a reply out with his thumb.
Without me? Uncool, Princess Eggplant.

In response Steph sends him a photo of an absolutely gigantic ice-cream sundae with half a dozen spoons sticking out of it, alongside a text assuring him that she’ll eat his portion on his behalf.

Jason laughs, even as he turns to snap a photo of his own smirking face and upraised middle-finger. Given the circumstances he thinks he can forgive her just this once.

They have crab-stuffed mushrooms for dinner that night, a newly discovered favourite of Dick’s from Alfred’s vast repertoire of dishes.

In contrast to his subdued behaviour this morning, Dick is now an animated creature. Bouncing off the walls with irrepressible energy, chattering a mile a minute about this thing and that thing while waving his hands so expressively that the food actually flies off his fork to be gobbled up by Ace from the dining room floor. Jason has to duck at least three times to avoid getting his eye taken out, while Bruce does his best to hide a fond smile behind his glass of water.

He might have been here for less than six whole months, but Dick’s already firmly wormed his way into all of their affections.

After they’ve finished eating, Jason indulges Dick by playing video games with him until patrol-time rolls around. Then the kid follows him downstairs to the cave, trailing Ace behind him, and Jason can’t even pretend to be annoyed when Dick throws himself up onto the parallel bars over in the training area, swinging exuberantly round while he watches the three vigilantes currently occupying the manor go through their warm ups and pull their suits on.

“One day, he’s going to run out of energy.” Bruce murmurs, cowl still down around his neck as he types commands into the computer.

“I think he’s like a wind up toy, you just gotta give him time.” Jason shrugs, fixing his domino onto his face. “You should rethink letting him join in on our training. I bet that’d wear him out.”

“Heh.”

He watches Bruce go over to Dick to try and convince him to come down off the bars before they head out, then feels the heavy weight of Damian’s hand push down onto his shoulder. Jason looks up at once, and it’s weird that the difference in height between them keeps shrinking. Of course Damian still towers over him, just not nearly so much as he did before.

“You’re patrolling with me tonight.” Damian says, phrasing his request as an order.

And Jason, used to it, doesn’t need to be asked twice. It’s been awhile since it was just the two of them, longer still since he last went to stay with Damian in Bludhaven. Long enough that he actually misses that festering cesspool of a city, if he’s honest. Jason wonders if Damian would mind awfully if he came over and invaded his penthouse soon.

“How much longer are you staying in Gotham for?” he asks.

“Just for patrol tonight. Come on.” Damian heads for his bike, and Jason turns his head, waving his hand at Dick as Bruce finally pries the kid off the bars before following him out.
The Batmobile is awesome. Jason should know, considering that the first thing he did when he saw the car was try to steal its tyres, but even that machine, with all its power and beauty, doesn’t hold a candle to the feeling of being on a motorbike. The thrum of the engine between his legs, the open rush of wind against his body and through his hair. Jason laughs as he rides, burning rubber behind Damian as together they zip through Gotham’s streets.

When they’re going this fast it’s like everything else just drops away. All the grief and strife, all the pain and exhaustion of fighting the good fight. It falls away in a haze of speed and adrenaline that leaves Jason hungry for more.

He doesn’t know if Damian has anything specific in mind for tonight or if they’re just roaming around looking for trouble, he just knows that he’s happy to be spending time with him either way.

It turns out to be the latter. Over the course of the next three hours they end up stopping a jewel store robbery, a couple muggings and an attempted assault that almost sets Jason’s blood boiling, except that the girl hugs him tight once she’s safe and Damian has the would-be rapist strung up by his ankles from a lamppost after breaking his nose. Jason sits with her until the police show up, and she’s so grateful to them that his anger abates soon after that.

By the time midnight rolls around they’ve ended up on top of the Sprang Bridge, looking out over the harbour while Jason eats his way through a McFlurry as a poor man’s substitute for the ice-cream he missed out on earlier.

There are no stars out tonight, but then there never are in Gotham’s polluted sky.

It’s nice. And Jason misses this - as fun as it is having Dick around now. He misses it being just him and Damian the way it was when he first moved in with Bruce. “We should do this more often.” he says to Damian, when he’s finished scraping the inside of his ice-cream container clean. “We’re the premier ass-kicking team.”

“It is good to have a partner who actually knows what he’s doing.” Damian agrees, one leg pulled up to his chest with his arm draped across it.

Jason bites down on the pleased grin that wants to spread across his face at hearing that. Damian’s compliments are rare and often backhanded, but each one means the world to him. “You say that like you actually ever partner up with anyone else.”

“Tt. I do have other contacts I work with other than you and father, you know.”

Jason knows. He even knows the names of a couple of them thanks to Steph: Maya Ducard and Colin Wilkes, aliases Nobody and Abuse respectively, who had eventually come together with Damian and a few others to form the first iteration of the Teen Titans, but he’s never actually asked Damian about them personally. He figures his brother’s entitled to some privacy if he wants it. “Yeah, but I’ve never actually seen them. For all I know they could be imaginary, just like your sense of humour. And your love life.”

Damian shoves him hard enough that Jason has to catch his balance on the beam they’re sitting on, losing the spoon from his McFlurry in the process. “Great,” he sighs, watching it fly off across the bay for some seagull to choke on, “Now I’m guilty of littering. Spot me fifty for the fine?”

“I don’t believe in lending money.” Damian says, leaning back in comfortable repose against one of the heavy vertical columns the bridge is built around.

“I always knew you were out to get me.” Jason keeps a grip on the tub so he doesn’t lose that too,
swinging his legs as he looks down at the churning waters of the bay below them. “All these years, you just wanted to lull me into a false sense of security and then, boom! Off I go to juvie.”

“Actually I was thinking Blackgate.”

“You sure? That extreme enough? You could always go the whole way and send me to Ark -”

Jason bites his tongue. Literally. Snaps his teeth shut mid-word, and the sting at the tip of his tongue lingers long after the fact.

It’s quiet up on the bridge except for the howling of the wind and the sound of the occasional car horn below. Jason sucks on his tongue, then surprises himself by being the first out of the two of them to say something about it. “Still no news?”

“Nothing.” Damian admits. He has the good grace not to hide his frustration over that fact. But then frustration has never been one of the emotions Damian struggles to express. “Drake is too good at what he does to be found so easily.”

Jason nods glumly. He finds it hard to know what to say next. How could he, when he still hardly knows what to feel about Tim and what he did to him? Pity, anger, and concern continue to war inside his chest in equal parts, with no one emotion yet the victor. “At least he’s not with the League.”

“That we know of.” Damian corrects him firmly.

“Do you honestly think he’d go back to them? To… you know, Ra’s?” His fingers tighten around the cardboard container his ice-cream came in, threatening to crush it. “He knew Ra’s was using him, and -”

“Drake was using my Grandfather too, don’t forget.”

“I don’t think he was happy about it though, and he already got what he wanted. I don’t think he’d go back if he didn’t have to.” Jason looks very hard in the direction of the bay below him. “Your grandfather probably isn’t happy about that.”

“Grandfather is rarely happy about anything.” Damian acknowledges. “He…” He trails off, and when Jason peeks at him out of the corner of his eye his jaw is clenched tight. “He has very high standards of what he expects from those around him.”

“Sounds like a real prick.”

He hears the rough bitter sound of Damian’s laughter in response. “You have no idea.”

Jason would say he does, in fact, have some idea, considering Ra’s brief appearance during his imprisonment, but he suppresses both the urge to mention it and to ask what it was about Tim in that case that Ra’s found so appealing. What it was about him that made the Demon’s Head do what he had never done before and allow another into the healing waters of the Lazarus Pit. To raise the dead.

If there’s one thing he’s learned about asking questions about Tim and the past in general with Bruce and Damian, it’s that he has to pick his moments carefully if he wants to get any answers. This doesn’t feel like one of those moments.

“He’ll come back.” Jason says eventually, climbing up onto his feet. ”He has to.”

“What makes you so sure?” Damian asks, as he follows Jason’s example.
Jason shrugs. “It’s Gotham. No one ever gets away clean from this city.” He pulls his hood back up over his head and flashes Damian a grin, “You want to take one more run around the Bowery before I turn in?”

Damian looks surprised. “Already?”

“I promised Dick we’d do something tomorrow. Get him out of Bruce and Alfred’s hair for a while, y’know?” Jason hesitates for all of a second before barrelling forwards, “You could come too. It’d be fun. We’re going to Amusement Mile, now that it’s clown-free and all.”

It doesn’t surprise him when Damian says no, but Jason’s still disappointed. “I can’t, there are some things I need to take care of elsewhere.”

Elsewhere. Not Bludhaven specifically? Jason narrows his eyes behind the lenses of his mask, but doesn’t let his curiosity show otherwise. “I’ll come hang out with you next weekend then. B won’t mind.”

“What if I’m busy then too?”

“You don’t have that much of a life, N.” Jason teases, firing his grappling hook onto one of the overhead beams so he can rappel down to the ground. “Don’t forget, you promised me we could start training with real swords now. And besides, Pennyworth’s probably missing me. We all know you’d never disappoint him.”

He jumps off the top of the bridge, hearing Damian do the same behind him before he heads north and back into the Bowery. Jason’s cocksure as they do their final round for the night, brushing away the discomfort of their brief Tim-related conversation by throwing himself headfirst into their work. By the time they call it a night and walk back to where they’ve stowed the bikes he’s feeling like he’s regained his equilibrium, which is probably why he doesn’t suspect what comes next.

Jason’s walking out from underneath the awning hanging out front of one of the local stores, a few steps ahead of Damian, when there’s a sound. A strange and ponderous thud that he doesn’t recognise, and he’s tensing up at the possibility of some unseen threat seconds before he’s doused in cold and dirty water.

He yelps, at an embarrassingly high pitch that he’ll deny for the rest of his days. Jason whirls and faces a smirking Damian, who still has his fist raised up into the bottom of the awning where he punched it, causing the water caught inside the sagging fabric to jump out. “What the fuck, you actual asshole! What was that for?!”

“Payback. I warned you about stealing my tea.” Damian says smugly. He lowers his arm, then moves to stride past Jason. “Constant vigilance, little brother.”

“Spoiler’s right, you are a big jerk. And - did you just quote Harry Potter at me?”

“Harry what?”

Jason stares after him. His hair is plastered to his forehead, and there’s water running down the back of his neck and collecting in the back of his hood as he tries to work out if Damian is fucking with him further or not. In return Damian looks serenely back at him, the corners of his lips still raised in an obvious smirk.

He’s definitely fucking with him.
“I’m telling Alfred to send you the dry cleaning bill.” He grumbles.

Damian snorts. “Stop whining and ride, Robin.”

“You can’t tell me what to do, you’re not Batman.”

“Brat.”

“Ass.” Jason flips him off. “Race you back?”

“Only if you’re prepared to lose.” Damian says arrogantly. He sits astride his bike, hitting the sequence that will start the advanced engine with a practised hand.

Jason shakes his head, spraying water droplets everywhere as he climbs onto his own bike. “No way, this is the night you’re finally going down.”

“I’ve heard you say that before. Yet years later you’ve still never beaten me.”

The engine of his bike thruns as Jason revs it, grinning savagely back at him. “Yeah, but this time I got revenge as a motivation. Ain’t nothing stronger than that.”

Without another word of warning, Jason kicks his machine into gear and accelerates off down the street, dimly hearing Damian curse behind him at his unexpected head start.

*

The next day, Jason follows Dick down the boardwalk of Amusement Mile, marvelling at how different everything looks in the daylight. Less sinister and more… well, fun. The way it’s supposed to be.

In the aftermath of the Joker’s death - and with the official confirmation of cremation from the GCPD and Mayor’s office - local entrepreneurs had leapt at what they saw as a golden opportunity and started working to revitalise the formerly rundown district. Derelict rides had been repaired, old stands and stalls torn down and replaced by new ones, and - even though it had taken a few confidence building months - the notoriously wary citizens of Gotham now felt safe enough to start venturing out onto the Mile again at the behest of the slowly improving weather.

To Dick, who never saw or had to suffer through one of the Joker’s ploys, it’s a veritable wonderland that must remind him strongly of the circus that had been forced to leave him behind.

“What should we do first?” He asks Jason, twisting his head back and forth as he bounces on his heels. “Ride the rollercoaster?”

“I don’t know, are you tall enough to ride the rollercoaster?” Jason teases, pulling out his wallet and checking again how much money Alfred had tucked in there for the pair of them to spend today. He’s got a hankering for some of the delicious fried food he can smell cooking around him, but if Dick’s aiming to try out the more extreme rides first he should probably wait on eating until after they’re done with them.

Jason lifts his hand and holds it up in front of Dick to add emphasis to his words, just above his head, and snickers when Dick knocks it away. “I’m not that short, Jay.” He glowers up at him, in a way that Jason totally doesn’t find adorable.
“Sure you’re not.” he says easily, “But let’s go find out for sure. You know I’ve never actually been on a rollercoaster.”

Dick actually gapes at his words. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.” Jason rolls his shoulders up into a shrug. “Came down here a couple times before Bruce adopted me because people having a good time are easy targets for pickpocketing, but never tried out any of the rides myself. Then later on… well, y’know, Joker kind of put a crimp on the whole thing.”

Dick seizes him by the wrist, and Jason bites back a yelp when he almost pulls his arm out of its socket dragging him forwards towards the coaster. “Then, c’mon! You’re going to love it. And since you spend all night - mmf!”

He starts when Jason hurriedly claps a hand across his mouth, glancing at the crowds around them. It doesn’t look like anyone’s listening in, but you never knew. “Utshay upyay about obinray, upidstay!”

Over the top of his hand, Dick looks back at him without comprehension.

Jason sighs, keeping his voice low, “It’s Pig Latin. Look, just hush up on the superhero stuff in public, okay? It’s safer.”

This time Dick nods, so Jason lets him go. “Pig Latin?”

“Yeah. It’s a language game Alfred taught me after I asked him about that line from the Lion King when Steph made me watch it. You know, the one Zazu says to Simba and Nala at the Elephant Graveyard? It’s fun.” Jason grins, “I’ll teach you how to speak it, if you want.”

“That’s an actual thing?” Dick says, first with genuine surprise, then enthusiasm, “Yeah! Okay. But we go on the rides first, right?”

“Rides first.” Jason agrees, then lets Dick tug him forwards once more, this time at a slightly more relaxed pace.

It turns out there’s a bit of queue for the rollercoaster, so Jason actually ends up teaching Dick the basics of Pig Latin while they wait. It’s actually pretty simple to do for as bizarre as it sounds when spoken; for words that start with consonants you move the letters before the first vowel to the back of the word, then add the ‘ay’ sound. For words that start with vowels it’s even simpler, you just add ‘yay’ to the end. By the time they reach the front of the line Dick’s already picked it up like a pro, well enough that the older teenager working the ticket booth looks more than a little freaked out by the pair of them talking seeming nonsense at each other.

Rollercoasters, as it turns out, are awesome. Jason’s a little apprehensive at first as the cart climbs up the rickety looking scaffolding, but once they crest the top of the rise and start to plummet down the rails at breakneck speed he’s yelling in pure delight as he raises his hands up like the rest of the people on the ride. Beside him Dick is laughing and screaming too, and it comes as absolutely no surprise that they go back round and queue back up for a second go as soon as the cart comes to a halt.

After the rollercoaster they hit the twister, pirate ship and waltzer, among other rides, before stopping to let their heads and stomachs rest. Jason finds the greasiest looking dive he can, his judgement backed up by Dick’s expert opinion, and there he buys them chilli dogs and fries with all the works. They sit and devour the whole lot on one of the nearby benches, and Jason knows without a doubt he was right to save this until after they were done with the more extreme rides.
He’s so full he feels like he might burst apart at the seams, but that doesn’t stop him from purchasing a couple sticks of cotton candy from a nearby vendor for them as dessert.

They eat the sugar-spun treat while enjoying the more leisurely pace of the carousel, before deciding to walk further down the Mile to where the ferris wheel and haunted house are located.

Dick’s chattering away, telling Jason all sorts of stories from the circus as he compares Amusement Mile to the various places he visited growing up, and Jason’s just sort of half-listening when he glimpses someone familiar out of the corner of his eye.

Jason stops in his tracks, while Dick walks on a few paces ahead of him. The kid’s taller than he was the last time Jason saw him, and nowhere close to being in costume, but since he’s privy to almost every superhero’s secret identity as Robin Jason has no problem picking Roy Harper out of a crowd. He’s standing at one of the stalls, some kind of darts throwing game, and there’s no doubt that he’s taking the unsuspecting attendant to the cleaners right now.

What is he doing here? Both in Gotham, and at Amusement Mile of all places. Jason can’t think of an immediate answer. Does this mean Oliver Queen is in town too? Does Bruce know? And if he does, why didn’t he tell Jason?

There’s a lot of questions, and -

“Who’s that kid you’re staring at? Do you know him?”

Right. He has Dick here with him too.

“Sort of.” Jason’s forced to admit. They’d only really met once, when he and Damian joined the Teen Titans to help fight off a robot invasion, and since then Jason had only seen Speedy in passing the couple of times Bruce let him come along on one of his Justice League missions that required more than the normal number of hands on board.

Dick squints, giving Roy a closer look, “Then why aren’t you going to say hi?”

That… that’s a good question actually. It’s certainly the easiest way for him to get the answers he’s looking for. Jason straightens his shoulders, “Who says I’m not?” then strides boldly over to the stall where Roy is playing, not bothering to hide his approach.

Dick trots at his heels, curiosity brimming, and he’s right at Jason’s side when Roy knowingly turns round to greet them. “Hey.” he says, smiling the same gap-toothed, freckled grin that Jason remembers from before. The one that made his stomach do that weird flip-flopping motion over a year ago. “Fancy seeing you here.”

“Hey.” Jason replies, hearing Dick echo him a second later. He’s taken aback by the way Roy greets him as if they’re old friends. “Isn’t that a little unfair?” He nods towards the boards at the end of stall. Every dart Roy’s thrown so far has hit a perfect bullseye, and the poor teenager Manning the store looks like he’s in desperate fear of losing his job.

Now they’re stood face to face, Jason’s surprised to find that - despite being two years younger -, Roy is actually a couple inches taller than him. Lankier too compared to Jason’s stocky build, but otherwise he looks much the same as he did the last time they met, with a thin face and narrow nose beneath a pair of sharp blue eyes. He’s also noticeably lean from the workouts he gets as a superhero, and the muscles on his biceps are strongly defined outside of the sleeveless shirt he’s chosen to wear today. Very strongly defined.

Jason’s somewhat unnerved to feel his stomach twisting in on itself again. He swallows and forces his eyes to stay fixed on Roy’s face, rather than anywhere else.
“Lot of these guys are crooks anyway.” Roy shrugs, “I just see it as evening the odds.” As he says this he tosses another dart with a sideways glance. It sails across the expanse of air behind the counter of the stall to join its brethren in the centre of the nearest dartboard, and the kid manning the stall lets out another pained groan.

“You’re Dick Grayson, right?” He asks next, looking down at Jason’s side.

“Yes, that’s me.” Dick confirms, eyes wide at the blatant display of skill. “Who’re you?”

“I’m Roy Harper. Nice to meet you. I heard about you on the news, but I guess Jason never mentioned me, huh?”

He sticks out his hand for Dick to shake, while Jason stands to the side, a little nonplussed as to why Roy thinks he ever would have. They met once. Just once. And it was fun, but it was just… okay, he needs to focus on the present, not the past. “Opportunity never came up.” He mumbles as a feeble excuse. “What are you doing here?”

“Ollie had a business trip, so I decided to tag along. There was nothing else interesting going on this weekend at home.” Roy replies, a little too casually for Jason’s taste. “Heard about this place and thought I’d come check it out while he’s locked up in board room meetings all day.”

“Oh. Cool.” Jason says, fighting against the words he really wants to say. He glances around them, puts his hand on Dick’s shoulder, then begins to speak, “Look, you -”

“Wait, hold up a second.” Roy interrupts. He turns round and throws the rest of his darts in quick succession. This time Jason hears Dick let out a openly delighted gasp.

After Roy’s been handed a huge - and overstuffed - fluffy bat toy with a yellow Batman-symbol sewn onto its front by the vendor (because what the hell else would they give away as a prize in this town?), he steps away from the stall, then beckons for Jason and Dick to follow him around the back to where they can climb down from the decking and onto the rocky shoreline underneath.

Despite being on the coast, Gotham doesn’t have a beach. Instead its shore is a series of stone outcroppings; no good for sunbathing maybe, but usually in summer when the tide’s out kids try fishing or crabbing off the largest rocks, and there’s at least one idiot every month who tries to go diving and needs to be rescued by the coastguard. Dick and Jason hop after Roy nimbly, until they come to an area that’s relatively deserted compared to the boardwalk above them.

“Okay, we can talk here. Assuming your little bro’s in on everything. What’s up?”

“Why are you here?” Jason repeats, this time much more boldly.

Dick looks between them, then finally settles his attention on Roy. “Are you a superhero too?”

“Little bit.” Roy confirms, flaunting his gap-toothed smile again. “I’m Speedy, Green Arrow’s sidekick.” He tips an imaginary version of his hat to Dick, managing to look even more ridiculous considering the giant bat he’s holding in his arms. “That’s why Jay here is acting so suspicious, I guess.”

“Cool.” Dick says enthusiastically, only paying attention to the first part.

“I’m not acting suspicious!” Jason says defensively at the same time. “…okay maybe I am, just a little. But you know you being here is…” He sighs, knowing he’s going to have to explain it for Dick. “Bruce and Oliver Queen bicker like old women whenever they’re around each other.”
“And that’s putting it mildly.” Roy agrees, “But where Star City’s criminals flee, we follow.”

“Does Bruce know you’re here?”

“He’s Batman isn’t he?” Roy says, as if that answers everything, and to anyone outside their family Jason figures it must. Bruce does have a supernatural reputation for being ahead of the curve in almost everything. “I figure you’d know better than me.”

“Yeah, well,” Jason says, annoyed at having been caught out. “Sometimes he doesn’t share everything he knows, even with us.”

“So who’s the bad guy you’re chasing? Is he dangerous?”

“Totally dangerous!” Roy replies to Dick’s question, clearly enjoying his enthusiasm. “He stole a bunch of tech from Queen Industries back home, then murdered all the security guards there on his way out. We were hunting him down back in Star City before he decided to run across the other side of the country.”

“Fleeing to Gotham, that’s smart.” Jason snorts.

Roy shrugs. “With all the upheaval you guys have had over here, I guess he thinks there’s an opening for an enterprising criminal who uses saw blades as ninja stars.”

Dick’s eyes bug out of his head, and Jason winces. That’s maybe a little more information than needed to be shared with the twelve-year old, not that Roy’s much older than Dick is himself. Actually, they’re all a bit ridiculously young for this by any normal standards. He puts his hand back on Dick’s shoulder and clears his throat, “Right, yeah. That’s enough detail, thanks.”

“You sure? I can be way more gruesome if -” Roy starts to say, then cuts off when Jason glares at him. “Uh, actually, you’re right. We can talk about that another time. So, what are you guys up to the rest of today?”

“We’re going to go see the haunted house, do you want to come?” Dick asks.

“Sure. Sounds fun, I -” Roy starts to nod, but then there’s a blast of guitar music from the back pocket of his jeans and he groans before shoving his prize into Jason’s arms so that he can reach back and check his phone. Whatever he reads on the screen he looks bummed out about. “Crap. I’m going to have call rain check on that, Ollie wants me back at the hotel already. Maybe I’ll see you guys later though. Right, Jaybird?”

Of course he can’t miss the significance of the way Roy focuses on him with that sentence, but Jason’s more taken aback by the sudden nickname. He manages a nod, then frowns as Roy starts to hop back over the rocks away from them. “Hey, you’re forgetting your… uh, bat!”

Roy reaches up to grab the edges of the boardwalk, then looks back over his shoulder to grin at Jason. “You keep it! It’s way more you than me!”

Then he’s gone, the loose laces of his sneakers trailing out of sight after the rest of him, and Jason finds himself feeling oddly bereft in the face of his abrupt departure. At least until Dick nudges him sharply in the side. “Hey, Jay?”

“What?”

“You’re blushing.”

Jason starts, registering the heat in his cheeks before he snaps defensively back at Dick. “I’m not.”
“Yeah, you are.” Dick says again, “You’re totally blushing.”

“No.” He repeats irritatedly, “I’m not.”

“Then why’s your face all -”

“Dick, I swear if you don’t shut up right now I’m going to kick your ass all the way to Metropolis and then let Superman kick it back again. You get me?”

Dick gives him a startled look, like he doesn’t understand why Jason’s so annoyed about it, then shrugs. “Fine. But if you do something cool with him later you better tell me all about it. And seriously, can we go see the haunted house now?”

Jason sighs, all the fight draining back out of him. “Sure. Sure. Let’s go see the damn haunted house already.”

He follows Dick back up onto the boardwalk, still carrying the stupid oversized bat in his arms. He keeps thinking he should toss the damn thing away, give it to some little kid or even to Dick, but he doesn’t. He keeps hold of the stuffed toy the rest of the day through, and when they go home sneaks it upstairs into his room before stuffing it under his bed into the same spot Tim’s bear used to occupy before.

Chapter End Notes

p.s I know in a strict age!reversal AU Roy should be Dick's age or a little younger, but I wanted him to be closer to Jason's age for reasons, so please forgive me for cheating here XD
Hi! You all have no idea how excited I am to post this chapter today. I've done a lot of plotting for this AU since the last update, and all I can say is that there's some fun angsty times ahead.

There's also more amazing fanart by Enelosdraws to check out for this AU! These sketches of the ending scene of the last chapter, and this one of Jay, Dick and Tim!

Enjoy!

“So how come you never came back?”

Ten hours after meeting Roy in Amusement Mile, Robin and Speedy sit on top of the Gotham National Bank building, watching and waiting for the signal to come from their respective mentors to move in.

Just as Jason had suspected, Bruce was completely unsurprised by his news that Oliver Queen was in town with his ward, and the fact that he hadn’t seen fit to tell Jason beforehand had ended up being a sore point between them all night. He’d followed Bruce in stubborn silence as they tracked down the other hero and sidekick team, interjecting themselves into their business as Bruce seethingly reminded Green Arrow whose city he was in and Roy pulled faces at Jason the entire time behind him, flapping his hand in a ‘yap yap yap’ gesture whenever the adults weren’t looking.

Jason had to lift his cape up over his mouth to hide his grin, and once Bruce and Oliver finally agreed to work together to bring in ‘saw blade-shuriken man’ (patent still pending) he and Roy had ended up trailing along behind them together, happy to stay out of the firing line and talk amongst themselves.

Well, mostly Roy talked. Which Jason had been just fine with. He liked listening to him, even if he didn’t always understand everything that was being said and ended up a little tongue-tied as a result.

“Never came back where?”

“To the Teen Titans, of course.” Roy says, scratching the side of his nose.

Jason blinks, the motion concealed by his mask. “Was I supposed to?”

Well over a year ago now, Jason had accompanied Damian out on a mission to help his former team fight off an alien robot invasion. It had been the first time he’d met Roy; the first time he’d ever felt that uncomfortable squiggly feeling in his stomach when the other boy smiled at him. There’d been a girl he’d gotten along with too, though not quite in the same way: Starfire, the exiled princess of a far away planet. But to the rest of the Titans Jason had remained largely indifferent.
Mostly. Superboy had been another matter. Though much less complicated in Jason’s thoughts then than he was now.

But the point was, is, that even when Damian had asked him if he wanted to, he’d never given much thought to joining the team properly.

Roy keeps scratching at what must be a particularly stubborn itch. “You’re Robin. Robin’s always been a member of the team.”

“Just because there’s been more than one of us doesn’t mean we’re a single-minded collective, you know.” Jason says dryly. He shrugs, fingers tapping out an impatient drumbeat against his knees while his feet dangle over the drop below. “I don’t know. It was fun with you guys but… I like it here in Gotham. Mostly.”

“Mostly?”

Jason sucks on his teeth. “Sometimes it’s complicated.”

“I think that’s the nicest way I’ve ever heard anyone describe Gotham. Usually they say way ruder stuff.” Roy snickers.

Jason thumps him in the arm. “It ain’t that bad. You just gotta look at it right. There’s a lotta good people here too besides the bad.”

Though nowadays the ratio was skewed a little more towards the good, thankfully.

“Well, I would’ve liked it if you came back,” Roy says brazenly, rubbing his arm. But at the same time he’s not looking directly at Jason anymore. “Still would in fact. Star too.”

Jason feels his cheeks warm beneath his mask. “Really?”

“Yeah. I - she… you know, she thought you were cool. So even if you don’t want to join the Titans properly, you should come hang out with us sometime.”

The idea is tempting, for the possibility of seeing Roy again more than anything else. Jason doesn’t have many friends, and none of the ones he does have live outside Gotham (and that is what he wants Roy to be, he tells himself, a friend). Gaining another would be good for him, in the words of Steph and Alfred, who have always viewed Jason’s relative isolation with the most concern out of anyone. Even Damian and Bruce have more people they would call friends than he did.

So does Dick, and he’s barely been here five minutes.

There’s just one super-sized deterrent when it comes to accepting that offer.

“I don’t know. Maybe. I’ll think about it, anyway.”

Roy’s smile temporarily loses its edge, but a moment later it’s back in full force “That’s cool. But in the meantime you gotta give me your number, so that you can keep me informed. I won’t know when you change your mind if you don’t.”

“My… my number?”

“Yeah. Or your email address, snapchat, whatever. Just hold on a sec. I know I’ve got a pen or something in here somewhere.”
Jason watches Roy root around in the compartments of his utility belt for a few seconds, before pulling out the kind of stubby pen Jason didn’t think existed outside of bank cubicles and post offices with a triumphant “Hah!” which quickly turns to indignation when he realises he doesn’t have any paper to write on.

“You know I could just -”

“No, no. I got it.” Roy undoes one of his gloves and presents the back of his hand to Jason with a flourish. “Here, lay it on me.”

Jason can’t help grinning. “You’re a moron.”

“No, I’m resourceful. Come on. Hurry up.”

Roy wriggles his fingers insistently until Jason gives in and takes the pen, squinting down to write his cell phone number on the back of his hand. He has freckles here too, as well as the ones on his cheeks, arms and neck, and Jason has the ridiculous urge to play connect the dots with them before he gets ahold of himself. Once he’s finished Roy tugs his glove back on, safely hiding the breach of secret identity from sight.

Right on time too. Jason has just handed the pen back to him when both their comms crackle with the sound of Bruce’s voice.

“Robin, Speedy, the target’s attempting to flee. Get ready to block his escape route.”

“We’re on it, Batman.” Jason responds quickly. Beside him, Roy’s already on his feet and knocking an arrow to the string. In place of a traditional arrow head, it has a large bulbous tip, and Jason still can’t wrap his head round the physics of how something like that is supposed to fly straight. “What’s that one do?”

“Something special, Jaybird. You’re going to love it.”

If he didn’t know any better, he’d say for sure that Roy was winking at him under his domino mask.

Jason rolls back onto his feet, avoiding stepping on the end of his cape by merit of long practice. He tries not to react to the nickname again, tries not to show how much he’s starting to like it as he hooks his grapnel to the edge of the bank’s roof and prepares to swing down.

“Yeah? I’ll believe it when I see it.”

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“And then what happened?”

“And then,” Jason easily sidesteps Dick’s tackle. He’s fast, but too eager to make contact, lunging before he can be certain of catching his opponent. “Our bad guy comes haring out the door, him and the couple guys he’s still got left out of his gang. And he’s cussing up a storm, right? ‘I’m the new king of Gotham! This city is mine now the clown’s dead!’ All that bullshit.”

Dick grins even as he misses. He turns round and tries to go in low, aiming for Jason’s legs this time round the way Jason’s told him to go against larger opponents - which at Dick’s size is most
everyone he’ll come across, except for that crazy puppet the Ventriloquist lugs around.

On the sidelines Ace wuffs and whines, bouncing back and forth on her gangly legs as the two boys wrestle on the carpet.

“So Speedy shoots his arrow, and it just explodes when it hits the ground, right? Turns into all this pink gooey stuff and sticks the two henchmen right to the floor!”

Roy had called it a chewing gum arrow, which Jason thought was the lamest name ever. Dick, he suspects, would think the opposite. Which is precisely why he doesn’t mention it.

“Cool!” Dick says right on cue, before grabbing for Jason’s arm when he seizes him by the back of the shirt. “What did you do?”

“I,” Jason says, staggering back a few steps across the carpet. “Swung down and tackled Saw-dude by myself.” He manages to grab Dick by the waist and lift him off the floor before his squirming causes Jason to fall down onto his back with the kid on top of him. “Oof! Kicked him right in the chest and knocked the wind out of him.”

They roll around the carpet, kicking and squirming. Jason tries to pin Dick down with his larger weight, but he’s a squirrelly little bastard, and ridiculously flexible despite not being properly trained in the ways of combat, making it an even match until finally Ace gets tired of waiting for them to pay attention to her and jumps on top of the two boys, abruptly bringing their wrestling match to an end.

“Urgh, gross! Dick, get your damn dog off me!”

Dick laughs as he grabs Ace by her collar, then wraps his arms around the Great Dane’s thick neck. She sits down as soon as he does, panting and pacified now that she thinks the game is over. All Jason can smell is her horrible dog breath as he wipes his face clean of drool.

“So go on then,” Dick urges, “How does it end?”

“End?” Jason rubs his face. It takes a moment for him to remember where he was and pick the thread of the story up again. “Right. So the guy goes down, still trying to monologue at me. He throws one of his sawblades but I deflect it.” He mimes throwing a batarang. “Then, before I can move in to knock him out myself, Green Arrow shoots him with this net arrow.” Jason grins. “You should’ve seen Bruce’s face, he was super pissed that Green Arrow was the one to actually get the guy in the end.”

(Jason was too, but he was also still a little sore at Bruce, so it all evened out.)

Dick snorts, scratching Ace under her chin. “Why? You caught him, and that’s what matters right?”

“Yeah. But it’s Bruce. He’s funny about other heroes acting in Gotham, especially without asking first.” Jason wrinkles his nose. “Same as he’s funny about telling people who are supposed to be his partner things until the last possible moment.”

“Are you still complaining about that?”

“I’ll complain about it as long as I want to.” He says stubbornly. “It’s stupid. He’s stupid.”

Dick rolls his eyes at him. He thinks it’s funny now (and okay, in the grand scheme of things Bruce has done wrong this is small fry) but Jason knows he’ll learn one day, whether he ever manages to get into a costume or not. So far as he’s concerned, the worst part of Bruce now is that
he’s not very talkative, which for Dick - who can talk the ear off anyone - is an almost capital crime.

“You’re just mad because you got surprised by Speedy being at the fair yesterday. Which is weird, because you obviously like him, and it’s not like he planned it. It was just a coincidence.”

Jason feels his eye twitch as he folds his arms across his knees and plants his chin down on top of them. “Shut up, munchkin. How do you know.”

“Only the way you talked about him more than anything else through that story.” Dick sticks his tongue out and Jason flushes in response.

“I didn’t know you were paying so much attention.”

“I didn’t have to to hear that.”

Jason grabs a cushion off one of the couches to throw at him. “I changed my mind, we’re giving you back to the circus. You’re becoming way too mouthy to stay here.”

“Why, afraid I’m taking your spot?”

Jason gapes for a moment as Dick ducks the cushion and Ace runs to fetch it from the corner where it landed. He shuts his mouth, then points at Dick, “... okay. You’re only getting away with that because I’m too damn proud of you to be mad. Who woulda ever guessed you’d turn out to be such a smart ass?”

Dick grins and ducks his head, shyly pleased by the compliment. Watching him work through his grief and start to come out of the depressed shell he’d been hiding under when Jason first met him has been a genuine pleasure. There’s a lot to love about Dick, and - as Jason had discovered - about having a younger brother. Without his constant presence at home, Jason doesn’t think he’d be doing half as well as he is either.

In terms of unofficial post-traumatic therapy, they could both be doing a lot worse than each other.

“Hey, Jay?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you think if I asked him Bruce would let me come out with you sometime? Not as Robin, you’re Robin. But I mean, maybe I could, uh, be someone else? Like Robin’s sidekick! You get to go on adventures and do this cool stuff all the time. Help people, stop bad guys. I want to do it too.”

Instantly charmed as he is by the idea of having his own sidekick, Jason still hesitates before answering.

He’d thought only of Dick taking on Robin in a few years time when he felt ready to leave the position himself - hell, he’d even tried to encourage Bruce to start teaching Dick to fight in preparation for that day. What he hadn’t considered was that Dick might ask to become one of them now with his own identity. He’d assumed Dick would want to be Robin first and no one else.

Dick seems to have an innate talent for surprising him.

“... you know it’s not always like that, right? Not every case goes so smoothly. A lot of the time they’re much worse. You’d have to be able to handle looking at some messed up stuff. Dead
bodies, shit like that. And you’d get hurt sometimes. You’ve seen mine and Bruce’s scars. I make it sound fun, and sure, sometimes it is, but at the end of the night it’s work, not a game.”

“I know it’s not a game. But you weren’t much older than me when you started.” Dick says pointedly, and he’s right. Jason was just twelve when he put on the Robin suit for the first time and stepped out at Batman’s side.

For him to tell Dick he can’t at the same age would be damn hypocritical. “True, I just want you to be sure you know what you’re getting into. You know Bruce didn’t let me go out without six months of training first.”

“I can handle that. I can handle anything.”

Jason thinks about some of the things he’s seen as Robin. Worse, he thinks of the things he’s been through as Robin.

After rubbing his thumb against the wrist of his opposite hand, he tucks it underneath the wristband he’s wearing there. The memory of Damian yelling at Bruce for letting Jason put on the suit comes flooding back to him for the first time in years, prompting unexpected empathy with how his older brother must have felt seeing him step into his old position then. The position that had killed the boy who occupied it before him.

Three years. It was only three years ago that he started as Robin, Jason realises. Almost four since he first met Bruce and escaped the streets. To him it feels so much longer.

“Look, I’m not saying you can’t. But honestly, Dick? I have no idea if he’ll say yes or not. The only thing you can do is ask him.”

More to the point, he’s not sure what he wants Bruce’s answer to be.

“Okay.” Dick sighs, disappointed by his lack of commitment either way. “Will you at least come with me when I do?”

To that Jason can’t say no. “Sure, kid, I’ll come.”

“Thanks.”

They both look up at the sound of the door being opened. Alfred raises his eyebrow at them. He looks displeased about something, and Jason’s wracking his brains trying to figure out what it is before he tells them.

“Would one of you young gentlemen like to explain why that beast is being allowed to chew on one of my good sofa cushions?”

As one, Dick and Jason cast a panicked look at each other. Caught up in their conversation, they’d managed to forget about Ace entirely. “Er…”

“I got it, Alfred. Sorry! Here, Ace, here girl.” Jason rolls onto his feet and catches Ace by her collar before grabbing the cushion and trying to persuade her to let it go. Unfortunately, she takes his attempts to be some sort of game and clamps her jaws down tighter, play growling and pulling back. Jason flinches when her teeth tear through the delicate fabric. “Shit! I mean - bad dog!”

Alfred sighs, the sound heavy and ponderous enough to make Jason’s soul feel like it’s shrivelling up into a ball inside his chest. “It’s quite all right, Master Jason. I suppose I shall simply have to acquire a spare.”
“Sorry.” he says still. The apology is swiftly echoed by Dick.

A smile teases at the corner of the old man’s mouth for a moment. “It’s forgiven. This time, anyway. So long as you both swear to be more mindful of her activities in the future.”

“You got it, Alfred.”

“Yeah, for sure!”

Alfred nods in acceptance of their oath. “Now, since time is crawling on, I came to remind Master Dick of the small pile of homework sitting still unfinished on his desk upstairs. One that, judging by the dates attached to it, must be completed ready for school tomorrow.”

The look of revulsion on Dick’s face is no less funny than it was the first time he was given homework to do by the school. “Oh come on, Alfred, it’ll be -”

“Done by dinnertime, if you wish to enjoy any dessert tonight.”

“Told you, you should always get it all done on Friday.” Jason elbows him in the side. Dick makes a gagging noise before climbing onto his feet. When he walks out of the room it’s with his head hanging low like a man going to the gallows and Ace trailing behind him.

Jason - who did do all his homework before patrol on Friday - grins at Alfred. “He’ll get the hang of it soon. Want me to toss the cushion?”

“One would hope.” Alfred shakes his head, “No thank you, I’ll take care of it. You should enjoy the rest of your Sunday afternoon while it lasts, Master Jason.”

“Sure.”

Jason climbs up onto his feet once Alfred’s left, trying to think what to do with himself now that he’s alone when he feels his phone buzz in his back pocket. He’d forgotten it was even in there when he was wrestling with Dick. It’s a miracle it didn’t end up cracked or broken. That or Waynetech.

He pulls the slender cell out, expecting a message from Steph (who’s usually the one texting him at any given time). Instead the message is from an unknown number, and contains only one sentence:

*Plane rides are boring.*

Jason doesn’t have to be a genius detective to know who it’s from. He sucks on his teeth, glancing around the room and then back down at the screen.

After brief consideration, he starts to text back.

***

Come Monday, Jason’s phone is full of texts from Roy. Texts, photos; even a couple invitations to some social media websites Jason’s never given a thought to joining before once he’d been persuaded to hand over his private email address to Roy as well. He doesn’t go through with joining them right away, but he does let the invites sit in his inbox while he checks out Roy’s
profile on every site, smiling as he looks at pictures of him with his friends - some civilians, others clearly Titans out of costume - or more prominently on his own, usually pulling some kind of ridiculous face or gesture at the camera.

In contrast to his own reclusive nature when it comes to his public persona, Roy clearly embraces the spotlight that comes with being the kid of a wealthy industrialist.

They’d talked late into the night, aided by the fact that Sunday was Jason’s usual day off from patrol so long as nothing major was happening, which it hasn’t in months. With his screwed up schedule he can never fall asleep before one in the morning though, and since Star City runs three hours behind Gotham that meant Roy was perfectly awake to keep talking to him the entire time he was lying sleepless in bed, waiting for his brain to realise they weren’t going to get any action that night. A pattern that looks set to continue throughout the coming week.

It’s nice. Different. Even if first Dick, and then Bruce, keep shooting him suspicious looks for the unusual amount of time he’s spending on his phone.

With every text, every photo, Jason starts to get to know Roy, beyond the gap-toothed smile, the arrows and the costume. He gets to know the boy underneath the freckles; to appreciate all the aspects of his personality as much as his appearance. His intelligence, his sense of humour. His sometimes grating displays of ego that cause Jason to roll his eyes from time to time in a gesture that steadily becomes just as fond as it is exasperated.

Even when Roy spouts technical gobbledygook at him for hours it makes Jason smile - as annoying as it is to have to ask for explanations in English every third message or so.

On Wednesday, Roy asks if he can pass his number onto Starfire, Koriand’r, and Jason finds himself agreeing without even thinking about it, reasoning afterwards that it will make his and Roy’s thing seem less… less what it’s not. Just like that, he has not just one new friend, but two - though Kori is not quite as overwhelming as Roy is with the sheer volume of her communications. Things do start to slow down from him by the end of the week (as Jason guesses the novelty of talking to him starts to wear off) but it still seems like his phone never goes more than a couple hours without an update from Roy - not even during school hours.

They’re still at it when Steph barges into Jason’s room after dinner on Thursday night to find him lying back on his bed with his phone in hand.

“There you are, baby bird!” She declares, like it’s a surprise to find him in his own bedroom of all places. “I was wondering where you’d gotten to when I found Dick roaming free of your hip. What’s the matter, the glue finally wear off?”

“Hey,” Jason replies distractedly. Eyes staying fixed on the screen despite her sudden entrance. He gave up on expecting Steph to knock every time she came into his room years ago.

Her eyebrows raise upwards at his lackluster response. “I haven’t seen you in a week and all I get is a ‘hey’? Seriously rude.” Without waiting for permission she walks over to his bed and flops down onto the mattress next to his feet. “So, how’s it going?”

“Mm? Oh it’s fine. Good, it’s going good.”

His phone buzzes with another message from Roy, and Jason snorts when he finds it’s a link to an article about an irate Gothamite trying to sue the city after claiming Batman and Robin broke his washing line last week. They started a competition yesterday to see who could send who the weirdest articles about the other - a competition that Jason is losing, badly. He needs to step up his game if he’s going to claw back some kind of victory from this one.
“Oh yeah, just fine? Nothing exciting happened to you lately? You didn’t go anywhere or meet anyone? Nothing like that I should know about?”

“Nope, just fine.” Jason tucks his tongue between his teeth as he opens up a search engine and types in ‘Speedy’. He almost hits submit before remembering to tack ‘superhero’ onto the end of the tag words so that he doesn’t end up with a list of drug deterrent websites again.

“Well that’s no fun. I hope you’re not turning miserable now that you’ve gotten taller. I mean, I always knew there was a direct correlation between height and the ability to have fun. That’s why Bruce and Damian are so boring and me and Cass are so awesome, but I was hoping you’d stay immune.”

“Oh huh.”

“Maybe we should cut off your feet. Stop it before it’s too late. Sound good to you?”

“Do what you gotta do.”

“Or maybe not.” Steph continues, leaning up from the bed with her hands supporting her. “I mean it would leave a mess at the reception.” She looks over at him, not that he’s paying attention. “The wedding reception, I mean. By the way, who do you think would look better in a white dress, me or Cass?”

“You.” Jason says automatically, squinting down at an article. Someone on a message board is proclaiming that Speedy’s name was meant to be pro-drug propaganda as part of Green Arrow’s libertarian stance. Did that count? They’d made no agreements saying message boards were off limits, but it still wasn’t strictly an ‘article’. Then what Steph just said hits him.

“Wait, did you just say - you and Cass are getting married?!”

Steph rolls her eyes at him as he finally looks up at her, “Nope. But hey, you’re finally paying attention to me now.”

Jason stares at her, “You - oh my God! You are the worst. What the hell?”

“I’m the worst? You’re the one who was ignoring me in favour of your phone. Who’ve you got on the line there, the ghost of Gandhi?”

“No.” he flushes, feeling the tips of his ears warming under her scrutiny. “Just a friend.”

“Just a friend.” Steph repeats, raising her eyebrows next. Her tone is as gently amused as it is curious. “This ‘friend’ got a name?”

Maybe it’s that he feels guilty for ignoring her, or maybe simply that it’s Steph asking him instead of anyone else, but Jason finds himself blurting out, “Roy.” before he’s even really thought through what he’s doing. “His, um, name is Roy.”

“That wouldn’t be Roy Harper by any chance would it?”

Jason gives her a sharp look as he feels the heat in his ears burn higher, before he replays the questions she asked him when she first came into his room through his head and groans. “I’m going to kill Dick.”

“Pfft, as if. You wouldn’t harm a hair on that boy’s head if your life depended on it.” Steph shoves his legs, before scooching further up the bed so that they’re sitting next to each other against the headboard. “Nice blush reflex, though.”
“I’m not blushing.”

“Sure, and I’m the Pope. Anyway, Dick only told me about you guys running into him at Amusement Mile on Saturday, and the case you helped him and Green Arrow out with that night. The rest you told me on your own.”

Jason opens his mouth to protest, then shuts it. Damn it, but she’s right. He quickly locks his phone screen before dropping his face down against his knees. “I hate you.”

“Don’t hate the player, baby bird. Hate the game.” Steph ruffles his hair. “I was just going to congratulate you on making a new friend, but now this blush has got me curious. Is there something more to this Roy character I should know about?”

“No.” Jason says, muffled.

“Are you suuure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“You’re so cute when you’re embarrassed.”

“And you’re so annoying when you’re being nosey!” Jason snaps back at her, harder than he meant to. He sees the shock register in her face when he looks up and feels all the worse for it, “... sorry. I didn’t -”

“No. No, you’re right. I am being nosey.” Steph admits, “I’m sorry, Jason. You don’t have to tell me anything if you don’t want to. I was just teasing you.”

Jason looks away, shamefaced still. “I know.”

He didn’t expect to react like that. Not over something that shouldn’t be a big deal. Especially to Steph, who he’s always felt like he could talk to about anything before. They have similar backgrounds and similar tragedies in their histories: Crime Alley kids with criminal fathers. She knows things about him that he’s never told anyone else; probably never will tell anyone else as a matter of fact - they’re too horrible for him to be able to think anyone other than Steph would be able to look at him the same way again if they knew the truth.

With that in mind, it’s no wonder his reaction this time took her so much by surprise.

The thing is... the thing is, he’s never felt this way about anyone before. Whatever that means. Despite all the hours they’ve spent talking since Saturday, Jason reflects that he still barely knows Roy. Oh sure, he knows his favorite movies, music, hobbies and so forth, and yeah, he knows about the other secret side of his life too. But in the grand scheme of things that’s probably nowhere near everything. He doesn’t even really know how much Roy likes him in return, except for the fact that he asked Jason for his number and hasn’t stopped talking to him since. Not yet, anyway.

It scares Jason when he stops to think about it, how unsatisfied he is with that. He wants to know more, about Roy and what Roy thinks of him. And beyond that? He also wants to see Roy again, real and in the flesh, more than he does his name on a screen.

He’s never felt this way before, and honestly? He has no idea what to do with that.

Steph must pick up on some of what he’s feeling, because she suddenly hugs him, wrapping her arms around his steadily broadening shoulders and tucking her head in against his neck. “You
don’t have to tell me now.” She repeats, “But you know you can talk to me about anything you want to whenever you’re ready, okay?”

“Yeah, I know. I just…” He bites his lip. “It’s nothing bad. I just… I don’t know if there’s even anything worth talking about yet. It… it’s um… complicated.”

“That’s up to you to decide, baby bird.” Steph says acceptingly, though he doesn’t miss the tiny note of triumph in her voice when he lets slip that there is something going on with him. “Though as far as I’m concerned, anyone who can make you pay that much attention to your phone must be worth something.”

“I guess.” With a sigh he lets his head lean against hers. Being taller than Steph is something he’s still trying to get used to. He licks his lips. Maybe there is one thing he can talk to her about. “You know, he, um… he asked - well, he suggested that I, uh, I should go hang out with the Titans sometime. Maybe try being a member.”

“Do you want to do that?”

Jason shrugs. “Could be cool. And you and Alfred are always saying I should get out more.”

“I have. I have said that.” Steph agrees, “But only if you want to do it, Jay. If you’d rather just stay in Gotham, that’s your choice too.” Then, because she knows he needs it, “I think you’d be an amazing Titan though, if you did decide to go.”

“I’m just worried, if I go I’m... Robin.” That was what Roy had said when he’d brought it up, You’re Robin, and there’d always been a Robin with the Titans until Tim died and Jason came along. “What if they expect me to be like... like him?”

Steph shakes her head, hair twisting beneath his cheek. “You’re not Tim, Jason.” Unlike the rest of them, she never has any qualms saying his name. “You’re not him, and you’re not Damian either. You’re your own Robin, and if you decide to try the Titans out you’ll make them see that. The same way you showed everyone here in Gotham.”

Jason can’t stop his small pleased smile when Steph gives him her vote of confidence. “Yeah, you’re right, I did.”

“You bet your ass.” She says confidently. “Just think about it. You can always try it out, and if you don’t like it, or they don’t like you, then screw ‘em. You’ve always got a place here.”

He laughs. “Have I told you you’re my favourite person, lately?”

“I could stand to hear it a few hundred more times.” Steph lifts her head up. “Are you still planning on going to Bludhaven this weekend?”

“Damian hasn’t called to cancel on me yet, so looks that way.”

“Great. I’ll see if Cass wants to do something with Dick this weekend then. Maybe we’ll even bully Bruce into it too. You know he’ll be bummed out without you otherwise.”

“Shut up, he’ll be fine.” Jason nudges her as his phone buzzes again.

She smirks, “Looks like your ‘friend’ wants your attention again.”

“He can wait if you want to hang out.”

“Nah, it’s okay. We’ll talk more tonight once we’ve changed outfits. You have fun.” She ruffles
his hair, “Dick might appreciate a little more of your undivided attention before you leave tomorrow, though. Just saying.”

Jason nods. He supposes he has been a bit unfair towards the kid the past few days with Roy distracting him. “Sure, tell him to put on whatever game he wants in the den and I’ll be down soon.”

“Wise choice, baby bird.” Steph winks at him before climbing off the bed and sauntering back out of his room.

***

The next day, Jason comes home from school with a skip in his step, eager to begin the weekend and head over to Damian’s place right away. His excitement had only been heightened last night when his elder brother called him briefly over the comms, telling Jason to bring the sword he’d given him for his last birthday to Bludhaven as well.

Finally he was going to get to practice against Damian with a real blade, and though Jason’s expecting to come out of it bruised and possibly a little bloodied, he can’t wait to begin. There’s only one thing he has to get out of the way first.

“Don’t forget,” Dick says to him as soon as they’re heading up the stairs away from Alfred, “You promised.”

“I know, I know. I promised. It’s okay, Dick. I swear I won’t go until after we’ve talked to Bruce, okay?” He rolls his eyes. “He shouldn’t be more than an hour, keep your pants on.”


Jason snorts, “Maybe you could make it go faster by making a headstart on your homework this time around instead of leaving it to the last minute.”

Dick makes the same sickening gagging noise he did before as they go into their separate bedrooms to change out of their school uniforms. Jason takes the time to check the bag he packed ready last night one more time as well. His sword has been taken off the hooks in the wall where it’s normally displayed and stowed carefully in a special carrying case, disguised to look more like he’s touting around an instrument in public rather than a deadly weapon, which means that once Dick’s had his talk with Bruce all Jason will have to do is go down to the cave, collect his uniform and then take his bike to Bludhaven. Easy peasy, just as soon as Bruce gets home.

Despite Jason’s attempt at giving Dick some sensible advice, they end up walking Ace around the grounds instead to fill the time once it turns out the kid is way too anxious about asking his question to settle down and focus on homework. He makes sure to put his phone on mute too, figuring that the least he can do before he leaves for the weekend is give Dick his undivided attention again - though come to think of it, he actually hasn’t heard much of anything from Roy since last night. Not since he mentioned something going off with the Titans today (apparently Roy’s school was much more forgiving about his sudden absences than Jason’s was).

They end up talking about the newest action movie Dick wants to go see at the cinema, one Jason is almost certain he’ll get roped into going and watching with him next weekend if Dick doesn’t drag Bruce along with him first. Ace bounds around their feet in between trying to dig down into more rabbit holes, but at least the ground’s dry today. If she got covered in mud then Alfred would
make them stand outside and clean her off before he allowed them back in the house again.

Fifteen minutes before Bruce is due home, they head back up to the manor, entering through the kitchen door. The smell of whatever Alfred is cooking makes Jason’s stomach rumble, and he considers delaying leaving further so he can stay for dinner before shaking his head. If he wheedles Damian enough he knows he’ll give in and order them pizza, and there’s a takeout place in Bludhaven that’s more than worth going hungry a couple extra hours for.

At around half-past five, Bruce comes in the door. He’s wearing a suit, fresh out of some hellish Wayne Enterprises meeting that saw him locked in a board room for the entire afternoon. Probably not, Jason reflects, the best time to ask him something like this, but Dick’s determined to do it with Jason present, so now it has to be.

He follows Dick at a more leisurely pace down the stairs as he rushes down to meet Bruce, trying to think exactly how he’s going to play his part in this conversation.

Does he stay impartial? Take Dick’s side? More importantly, does he try to find a middle ground if Bruce says no? It’s something he should’ve given more consideration to before this moment, that’s for sure, but it’s been a weird week thanks to Roy. He’ll just have to improvise.

Then, before he can think on it any further, everything goes to hell.

The fact that Jason chooses to take his time while Dick runs on ahead is precisely why he’s in the perfect position to watch as the front doors of the manor explode inwards only seconds after Bruce closed them, throwing him forwards and showering the entire entryway in splinters.

Instinct and training kick in before anything else. Jason throws himself forwards, leaping down the last half dozen steps to seize Dick by the back of his shirt, spinning them around and down into a crouch so that he’s shielding the smaller boy with his body from the debris. Bruce, his mind reasons, can take care of himself, even when he isn’t Batman. Dick on the other hand is twelve, and untrained for anything but the trapeze.

Ace is going crazy, barking and growling from where she’s cringing down in the corner of the room as parts of the masonry the door was fixed to crumble as well. Jason dares to look back over his shoulder, keeping Dick pressed against his chest as he tries to identify the threat responsible for breaking down their door and formulate a plan of attack.

The threat now holding Bruce up from the floor with red glowing eyes and an expression of betrayed rage.

“You!” Superboy snarls as Bruce grabs at his wrists and Jason’s heart sinks in his chest. “Why didn’t you tell me Tim was alive?!”

Chapter End Notes
*steeples hands together*
Hey everyone, a short note before you all continue with this chapter (unless this is your first time reading the fic). I belatedly realised that in the time skip between chapter 3 and 4 Dick should have had his 12th birthday, so I've now amended the last couple chapters so that any mention of his age reflects that. This story has so many details to keep track of that one just kind of slipped through;;;

Anyway, hope you enjoy!

The ringing in Jason's ears doesn’t stop with the end of Superboy’s shout. Only grows, louder and louder, until it feels like his entire head is buzzing with the angry force of a kicked hornet’s nest. He barely feels Dick’s warmth against his chest anymore, or the shocked trembling in his body as he tries to peer over Jason’s shoulder at what’s happening behind him.

“Jay, that’s… isn’t that..” Dick whispers, eyes startlingly wide in his rapidly paling face. “Wait, why’s he attacking Bruce? What’s—”

Across the room, Bruce’s hands are locked around the Kryptonian’s thick forearms, but Jason knows that no matter how strong he is, he has no hope of breaking that grip. Not alone and certainly not without Kryptonite. Superboy’s muscles are steel beams welded into human form, the same as Superman’s, and he’s angry, which makes it even worse.

Angry, and blaming Bruce for the source of that anger.

Not that anyone would ever be able to guess what a dangerous combination that is from the icy look in Bruce’s eyes as he meets Superboy’s volcanic gaze. His ability to remain calm and in control no matter how volatile the situation is one that Jason himself has never been able to emulate, and maybe never will; no matter how much he envies it. His own emotions always run too close to the surface to let him shut them down so completely. Not like Bruce, who — when he finally does respond to that angry shout — speaks with words that might as well have been hewn from granite.

“Put me down, Kon-El.”

“Not until you tell me the truth!” Superboy snarls, slamming Bruce against the wall before lifting him higher into the air so that their heads almost brush the cracked ceiling. “What the hell happened to Tim?! How long have you known he was alive without telling me?”

To his credit, Bruce doesn’t allow so much as a grunt of discomfort to escape his mouth. Only his clenched teeth and straining hands give away the pain he must be in after being thrown from the doorway and then snatched up from the ground. “I’m giving you the chance to do the right thing, Kon-El, put me down now. Don’t do anything you’ll regret.”

“Do the right… do the right thing?! You of all people are…” For a moment, the rage turns to incredulity, and then back again. “Answer the question, damn it! How long have you known about him? How long have you been hiding this from the rest of us?!”
“Hey, knucklehead!”

It takes Jason a moment to recognise the shout as his own. Eyes fixed on the scene before him, he lets go of Dick and stoops to the ground to grab the nearest object to hand: a broken piece of masonry from the door, then, without hesitation, pulls his arm back to throw it with all his strength across the hall at Superboy.

On its own, the stone can do no harm against thick Kryptonian skin, but the impact should still enough to get his attention. “He said, put him down!”

Superboy growls when the fragment rebounds off his back. Then he starts to turn his head, brow furrowed about the still-unnerving red flow in his eyes. “What the...”

In response, Jason snatches another chunk of stone from the floor. “What, are you deaf as well as dumb? Need me to say it slower? Spell it out for you in crayon?”

“Jason, don’t!” Bruce shouts as he pulls back to throw again.

Jason ignores that order. This time the rock hits Superboy on the thigh. “You think you’re some big tough guy breaking in here like that? Well, news flash, asshole! We don’t scare so easy. You want answers? Then maybe try knocking on the door like a normal person! You realise you could’ve killed us, right?! And for what, your psycho-zombie boyfriend?”

“ROBIN!” Bruce’s order is all Batman this time, which cuts through Jason in a way nothing else can. “That’s enough!”

Superboy’s grip is still like iron in Bruce’s jacket, but Jason can see the tide of his anger starting to turn towards him now instead. It was the last comment that did it, he realises, as a sudden outbreak of cold sweat across his skin signals that he’s gone a step too far. That maybe, just maybe, he’s about to find out what it’s like to suffer a direct hit from a Kryptonian himself.

What am I doing? He should have run for the cave with Dick the moment Superboy broke in. He should have gotten the Kryptonite out of the safe instead of standing here throwing rocks and mouthing off like an idiot. That would have been the smart thing to do, and now—

Jason grits his teeth. If Superboy comes at him, then he’s just going to have to improvise. Though he wishes he’d thought far enough ahead to get Dick out of the way first.

Speaking of Dick, he uses that moment to grab hold of Jason’s arm, dragging him back and adding his voice to Bruce’s in a desperate plea. “Jay, stop! All of you, stop! Stop fighting!”

From the corner, where she’s been cowering unnoticed until now, Ace whines before slinking nervously to their side, and as she does, Superboy seems to do a double-take; looking between her, Dick, and Jason like he hadn’t even realised the three of them were all standing there before.

So much for x-ray vision. Jason would kill for a camera to get a shot of the look on his face right now if only the situation wasn’t so dire.

“This is neither the time or the place for us to fight, Kon-El.” Bruce grunts, taking the opportunity to call the clone’s attention back to him. “I’m willing to give you your answers, but only if you put me down. Otherwise, I promise you, you will get nothing out of me.”

“Don’t you dare try to refuse me! I could make you talk, Batman.” Superboy seethes, the fading glow in his eyes flaring back up again for one brief second at the idea of going home empty-handed, but Bruce is implacable. “I could...”
“No, Kon-El.” he replies, stone cold in every way his opponent isn’t. “You couldn’t.”

Dick’s fingernails dig sharp little crescents in Jason’s forearm while they wait it out. Now Superboy’s arms are shaking — though with anger or distress is hard to tell, but finally he bows his head before none-too-gently allowing Bruce to drop the four feet back down onto the floor below him.

“Bruce!” Dick calls out instantly, scrambling past Jason to his guardian’s side and latching onto his shirt. He puts himself between them before looking at Superboy, as if he alone can protect Bruce from the superpowered clone. “Are you okay? Did he hurt you?”

“Fine. I’m fine, Dick.” Bruce’s hand settles on Dick’s shoulder as he talks to him, but his eyes stay focused on Superboy. “You?”

“I’m good, Jason protected me.”

Jason shifts uncomfortably where he’s standing, still glued to spot he was in before. Just like Bruce, he can’t take his eyes off Superboy; not the scowl on his face as he floats down to land on the rubble strewn floor, nor the angry clenching of his hands against his elbows. They haven’t seen each other since the last time he and Damian fought alongside the Titans, and he’s been fine with that. Would have been fine with never having to see Superboy again considering everything that’s happened since then.

How long has he known about Tim, he wonders. The rage he’s carrying looks new and unfettered, and if that’s true, then that means—

“Master Bruce!” The door to the left of the stairway bursts open as Alfred Pennyworth comes running through, trusty shotgun already locked and loaded in his arms. “What’s going on? I heard —” his eyes catch on the broken threshold of the main entrance and the resulting mess that’s been made of the hallway, “Goodness gracious! What happened to the door?!”

Quickly, Bruce lifts a hand in his direction to calm him, lest violence can erupt all over again. “It’s okay, Alfred. We simply have a… unexpected guest, this evening.”

“Unexpected guest? Good lord!” He looks at Superboy next, who actually has the decency to look ashamed in the face of the butler’s ire. Certainly it can’t be the shotgun that’s bothering him (though Dick’s eyes have gone the size of dinner plates at the sight of it). “Conner Kent, what on Earth were you thinking?”

“I… er…”

“Kon-El and I have some business to discuss, Alfred.” Bruce says. His tone is businesslike, but his stance is that of a man expecting another fight. “We’ll be going down into the cave to talk.”

Alfred straightens himself up, sniffing haughtily as he lets the barrel of the shotgun drop to point harmlessly down at the floor. “I see. And what am I to do about the front door in the meantime?”

Bruce pats Dick’s shoulder lightly before letting go. “I’m sure you’ll think of something.” Then he looks towards Jason, “Jason, I want you to go upstairs with Dick.”

For a second, Jason think he must have heard him wrong. “What?”

“Upstairs with Dick, now.”

“Bruce… B, you can’t be serious. I need to… I have a right to—”
Bruce’s eyes narrow dangerously in his direction. “I said, upstairs. Don’t disobey me again.”

Jason feels hot all over as anger boils up through his skin to settle behind his eyeballs. They itch, as if barely containing a wave of heat vision all his own. He can’t believe this. Bruce is going to talk to Superboy of all people about Tim, and he wants him out of the way for it. Him, the one who’d seen more of the former Robin since his return than anyone else outside of Ra’s al Ghul.

Ace leans against his leg as she whines again. Without thinking, Jason reaches down his hand and wraps it around her collar.

“Fine.” he spits, turning his eyes to glare once more at Kon-El before jerking his head back towards the stairs. “Come on, circus bird.”

Dick casts nervous glances between the three of them before scampering back across the floor to follow at Jason’s heels. His hand rests on Ace’s shoulder, just below Jason’s own grip on her collar, and Jason resolutely does not look back as they climb the stairs together, heading towards his room.

* 

As soon as the door shuts behind them, Jason releases Ace’s collar to walk over to his bed, flop aggressively down on his stomach, and then bury his face in the nearest pillow. He’s still seething from the dismissal, and the incursion of one superpowered problem into what is supposed to be the sanctity of their home.

It was a miracle that neither he nor Dick had been hurt when the doorway was destroyed. The rain of rubble as loud as any explosive as wood shards flew through the air. Immediately afterwards battle instinct had kicked in, and it’s still there for him now, pumping adrenaline through his veins with no suitable outlet around for Jason to go release it on.

The Kryptonite, he thinks again. He should have gone for the damn Kryptonite.

“Jason? Did you hear what I just said?”

Jason starts at the sound of Dick’s voice close by his head. The bed has dipped slightly with the addition of his weight, and Jason can feel the kid wiggling closer across the mattress until he’s sitting right beside him. “Uh, what?”

The pillow muffles his voice, but Dick still seems to hear him just fine. “I asked if you knew Alfred had a shotgun. I didn’t know he had a shotgun.”

“Oh. Yeah. Keeps it for emergencies.”

“Where?”

“Don’t know.” Jason mutters. “Nobody does.”

“But I thought Bruce hated guns. If he hates guns, then why does—”

“Dick.” he grunts, turning his face just far enough from the comforting blackness beneath him that he can peer at the kid out the corner of his eye. “Not now, okay?”
“... sorry.”

Apology given, Jason closes his eyes again, and gets about thirty seconds of peace before Dick asks his next question.

“Hey, Jason, are you... are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Dick.”

Dick sighs as he sits back on his knees, the mattress bouncing with the motion. “No you’re not, you’re lying again. That guy, he was...”

“Superboy.”

“Yeah. The kid from the photo, right? The one we found when we snuck into Tim’s room before Christmas.”

Great, Jason thinks, another reminder he didn’t need. He refuses to look up this time.

“He’s his—”

“Dick, don’t you have your own room to go to?”

Jason can’t see it, but he can imagine Dick pursing his lips in disapproval. “But Bruce said...”

“That we had to go upstairs. Not that we had to stick together.”

Jason isn’t so self-absorbed as to be unaware of how cold that comment is, but he’s also not in the mood to play twenty questions with him right now, and that’s exactly what Dick is gearing up to do. Once he gets going, he never stops. Seeking out answers with the kind of dogged determination that would make Bruce proud out in the field.

“You’re not going to do anything stupid if I leave you alone, are you?”

“What?”

This time Jason does look up, frowning as he watches Dick move to hug his legs tightly to his chest. “If I go, you’re not going to do anything, right? Like try and sneak down into the cave to spy on Bruce and Superboy.”

“Dick...”

In truth, he hadn’t got to thinking quite that far ahead yet, though he can see why Dick’s mind would go there. On the grand scale of bad ideas, it does sound exactly like something Jason would do.

Especially considering the subject matter Bruce and Superboy will be discussing.

But this time he shakes his head. “Even if Bruce isn’t watching the stairs, Alfred will be. And besides, even if I could make it past those two, Superbitch will see me coming. Kryptonians have x-ray vision and super hearing.”

“What about the other entrances?” Dick asks him shrewdly.

Jason nearly laughs, that queer sort of almost pride rising up in his chest again despite the gravity of the situation. They’ll make a real bat of him yet. “I’m pissed off, Dick, but I’m not going to go tramping a mile out across the grounds and then back again just to eavesdrop on them over it.”
“Are you sure?”

This time he has to bite his lip to hold the laughter back. “Yes, Sherlock, I’m sure.”

“And you’re sure you—”

“Dick.” He sighs before sitting up, “I swear, I’m not going to do any of that. I just… I just want to be alone right now, okay? Can you do that for me, please?”

“Fine.” Dick mumbles. He slides off the bed before patting his thigh. Ace immediately pads back over from the corner of Jason’s room she’d run into to join him (chewing on a pair of his shoes, it looked like). But just before he opens the door, Dick stops again. “Hey, Jay?”

Somehow he restrains another sigh. “Yes, Dick?”

“Um, thanks. For protecting me downstairs. That was actually kind of scary, y’know?”

Jason’s fingers tighten in the pillow. He realises suddenly that Dick is still paler than he should be, his eyes a little too wide. He’s just a kid, one who barely ten minutes ago witnessed his new guardian be threatened by a half-alien powerhouse and doesn’t yet have the same resilience knocked into him that Jason does when it comes to handling these sorts of situations. He’s freaked out, as much as he’s trying to be brave and hide it.

“Yeah, I know.” Sitting up, Jason extends his hand towards Dick, crooking his fingers back towards his own chest as he beckons, “Hey, come back over here for a moment.”

After a few seconds of rocking back and forth on his toes, Dick does as he’s asked, Ace padding after him with her tail still dragging low against the floor — as if boy and dog are together united in their emotion. Once he’s close enough, Jason doesn’t hesitate to loop his arm around Dick’s shoulders and draw him down into a crushing hug.

“It’s going to be okay, you know.” he knows immediately that he’s done the right thing as Dick latches back onto him like a limpet. “Bruce is okay, I’m okay, and so are you.”

“The door’s not okay.” Dick mumbles, trembling against him. Through the hand he has resting on his back, Jason can feel his heart hammering, quick as a rabbit’s.

He snorts at the comment. “Luckily for all of us, Bruce is Scrooge McDuck levels of rich. He’ll have it all fixed up in no time.”

“Are you sure?” Dick asks him, in a way that Jason knows means he’s talking about more than just the door.

“Yeah, I’m sure.” He moves his hand and ruffles the kid’s hair, which is starting to grow out of the neat cut Alfred had forced it into again. “Don’t worry about Bruce, Dickie. I promise you he knows what he’s doing.”

Jerkily, Dick nods, then presses his head in even harder against Jason’s collarbone.

Somewhere along the way, Jason realises that he’s become used to the idea of hugging. He never had it much as a kid, and out of the rest of the extended Wayne household, only Steph was prone to sharing spontaneous human contact outside of life or death situations. Alfred seemed to view it as a breach of protocol, while the less said about Bruce and Damian the better.

Dick’s arrival had changed that for all of them, in the same way as it had changed a lot of other
things.

He waits until Dick has calmed down before gently urging him to leave the room again, with even more assurances that he himself will be all right beforehand. Only once the door has finished closing completely does Jason give into the building urge to tear the wristbands off his arms.

The flesh underneath them is a pale and unblemished as it ever has been, with no marks or red raw abrasions in sight, but still he can feel the phantom itch of the cuffs he’d worn during his imprisonment crawling across his skin. It digs into the spaces between his bones and the pathways of his brain, exactly as it has at every mention of Tim’s name since December.

Almost six months have passed since he escaped that room in the East End, but still Tim stands like a ghost at the back of his mind; a shadow glimpsed in the darkest parts of the night, taunting him with his own conflicted feelings. Feelings that refused to—even now—settle one way or the other in regards to his former captor and predecessor.

It was the uncertainty that was killing him. That was killing all of them, even if no one ever spoke about it out loud. Not Bruce or Alfred, not even Steph most of the time. The fact that, in the wake of the Arkham attack, Tim had managed to disappear so completely that not one of them had any idea of where he was or what he could be doing.

That’s why it’s so frustrating to Jason that Bruce has shut him out of his conversation with Superboy. Because for Conner to know that Tim was alive meant that he must have seen him in person somewhere, and recently too. The only other way he could have found out was from people in the know, and since it’s already been established that Jason’s family hadn’t told him anything, the only alternative that left was Ra’s al Ghul and the League of Assassins.

Somehow, Jason just can’t see Ra’s being at all interested in sharing that information with anyone. Particularly Tim’s ex-boyfriend.

And if he did see him, then even now Bruce could be getting the first solid lead they’ve had on Tim in months. As well as, potentially, a new chance at tracking him down. It’s knowledge that fills Jason with both anticipation and a creeping sense of dread.

There are questions he wants to ask, demands he wants to make, and with them beating at the inside of his skull, Jason knows he won’t be satisfied gaining the information about Tim’s reappearance in the world secondhand. He needs to hear it directly from Kon-El’s lips, and that thought alone is what decides his next course of action for him.

Pushing himself up from the bed, Jason gets up and crosses over to his window.

It’s already cracked open, the way it has been ever since December, but now he pushes the glass out further, widening the gap between the window and the wall until it’s large enough for him to slip through. Then foot by foot, he starts to climb up the outside of the building.

*It’s cold on the roof of the manor, and wet. April has been living up to its reputation over the last week, sending regular showers of rain down on Gotham and its surrounding areas, but Jason doesn’t let that fact discourage him. It’s not raining now, so all he has to put up with is a little dampness soaking into the seat of his pants while he waits.*
Every so often, in-between rubbing at the exposed flesh of his forearms, Jason says, “Superboy, I want to talk to you.” out loud to the open air, counting on the Kryptonian’s super-hearing to catch the words as soon as he’s free of the largely soundproof walling of the cave below.

It might take anything from minutes to hours for the message to get through to him depending on how long he and Bruce talk, but Jason can be patient when he wants to be, and the longer it takes the more time he has to calm down from his initial anger and panic, which means he has a better chance of acting reasonably if and when the moment does come. It’s also the only way he can think of to get what he wants without disobeying Bruce or breaking his word to Dick, the latter of which is far more important to him than the former.

Bruce’s anger he can take, he’s had practice at it. Dick’s disappointment, not so much.

Eventually, after over an hour of waiting, his perseverance pays off.

“Just so you know, you didn’t have to keep asking. I was already planning on coming to talk to you.” Superboy says as he floats up and touches down on the sloped rooftop of Wayne Manor, no more than five feet away from where Jason sits.

He looks a lot different now than he did when he first came crashing into the manor. It’s not just that the anger has been wiped off his face, but that his entire posture has changed; going from something taut and angry to a dejected slump. Every inch of him sags downward, from the corners of his mouth to the broadness of his shoulders. Even his knees bend, as if gravity itself has become strong enough to pull him down.

He looks like a man gravely wounded, and Jason has a good idea why.

Wiping his rear clean of the moss that grows between the tiles up here, Jason stands up to face him. He keeps his stance loose and easy, ready to move at a moment’s notice.

Superboy purses his lips at that. “Batman, he told me everything. About Tim, and…” It’s like the words are sticking in his throat. Disbelief making each syllable sticky and cloying as he tries to work up the strength to say them out loud. “About what happened. To you. With… with Tim.”

“You mean about how he kidnapped me, locked me in a cell alone for three weeks, and then went on a one-man murder spree at Arkham?”

Jason’s response is purposefully blunt, because if he doesn’t get to hide from the truth of what happened, then neither does anybody else. Superboy jerks like he’s been shot before stuffing his hands in his pockets, clenching his jaw hard enough to grind wood to sawdust as he nods.

“If you’re expecting me to tell you B was lying about any of that, you’re barking up the wrong tree.”

“No! No, that’s not what I’m expecting. I know he wasn’t…” Superboy holds his up hands in front of him to ward off Jason’s accusation. “I know he wasn’t lying. I was listening to his heartbeat the entire time. I know.” He draws in a deep breath, “That’s not the reason I want to talk to you.”

Jason narrows his eyes. “Then what is?”

“Well, you…” His feet shuffle awkwardly, then he sighs. “Look I… there’s no easy way to put this; you spent time with Tim. Unwillingly, I know. But you did. And that means you’re the only person there is that I can ask.”

“You want me to tell you about him. About what he was like.” Jason correctly surmises as
Superboy nods.

He’d expected something like that, knowing that he was very unlikely to be able to get the answers he wants without giving something in return. But still, it’s not an easy thing for Jason to face; the prospect of talking about Tim with someone who is a virtual stranger to him, and who also knew Tim so very well.

He grimaces. “You won’t like what I have to say.”

“I know.” Despite that, there’s still something painfully earnest in Superboy’s gaze.

Jason steels himself against it. “I want something in exchange though, and more than just an apology for the way you broke in here and threatened Bruce.”

At that Superboy’s face shutters, turning guarded. “He lied to me.”

“No, he just didn’t tell you.”

“That’s the same thing!” Superboy argues, “Tim was my… he... I had a right to know he was back. We all had a right to know. And Batman kept it to himself. All of you did.”

“And that gives you the right to break into our home and threaten us?” Jason folds his arms across his chest, staring back at Kon-El stonily until finally he groans, muttering something under his breath that Jason doesn’t quite catch before shaking his head.

“No. No it doesn’t. You’re right.” he sighs. “Look, I’m sorry. I lost my temper, okay? I didn’t mean to put you and that kid in danger. Just finding out about him that way… it...” His bones creak as his hands tighten into fists.

Jason hates the twinge of sympathy that comes along with Conner’s words. His own shock at discovering Tim was alive had been bad enough, and he certainly didn’t have the emotional connection to him that Superboy does. “How did you find out?”

“What?”

“How did you find out?” Jason repeats. “That’s the other thing I want from you; I tell you what I know about Tim from when I was his prisoner, and you tell me how you know he’s alive. You saw him, right? I want to know where, and when. What he was doing. Everything.”

Conner scowls at him, “I already told—”

“I don’t want to hear it from Bruce, I want to hear it from you.” Jason says insistently.

The scowl deepens, until it almost seems like Conner’s face is about to cave in on itself, but then — just when Jason is expecting him to argue further — he gives in, saying, “You really are like the other Bats.” as if that comparison is one Jason wouldn’t take as a compliment. “But fine, if that’s what it takes for you to talk.”

Abruptly, Superboy sits down, rattling the roof tiles underneath him. After a moment of hesitation, Jason follows suit — though not without making sure to keep a safe amount of distance between them first.

“So?”

“You first.”
Conner grits his jaw at his obstinance, then with each word sounding like a tooth being pulled, he repeats the story he must have already told Bruce.

“Los Angeles.” is how it starts. “That’s where I saw him. It was today, only… damn, only five hours ago now. That’s why I was so…” he gestures emptily for a moment, before his hand closes into a fist. “We—the Titans and I, that is. We’d heard rumours about a homeless shelter that some of the kids in the area suspected was actually a front for a kidnapping ring; turned out they were right. They were luring children in with the promise of finding new homes for them, but in actual fact, using them for genetic experiments. Cloning, forced metahuman mutations, that sort of thing.”

Jason watches his jaw tighten. He supposes crimes of that nature must hit extra close to home for someone like Superboy.

“With the kid’s help, we were able to find their underground research facility and break into it. Only when we did, it turned out we weren’t the first ones there.”

“Tim.” Jason murmurs needlessly.

Conner nods stiffly. “Right. Not that I knew it was him at first. Just looked like some guy in a red helmet. A lot of the guards were already dead on the floor, others wounded or just knocked unconscious. He was in the process of releasing the kids from their cells when we found him.” his hands tighten together now in his lap. Jason doesn’t like to think about how much force they must be exerting between them. “I… I used to know the sound of his heartbeat, you know? I could recognise it from rooms away. But not this time. It’s changed. He’s changed, he…”

“What happened?”

“He seemed surprised we were there, guess he wasn’t expecting company. If it had just been Speedy and Ravager, I think he might have fought—” Jason steadfastly ignores the little flutter in his stomach at Roy’s name, and doubly resists the urge to interrupt Superboy to ask if he’s all right. “—but then I came in, and when he saw me I heard his heartbeat jump right up; he ran. And you know what we do when bad guys run from us.”

Instinct kicks in. Adrenaline rushes. If anyone wanted to compare superheroes to dogs chasing squirrels, they probably wouldn’t be far off the mark. It became ingrained that when someone ran from you you chased them down; the very act of fleeing automatically associated with wrongdoing.

“He was fast. Must’ve had his escape route planned out already, just in case, because he knew exactly where he was going, and he had enough toys on him to slow me down even though I was using my TTK. That’s—”

“Tactile telekinesis, I know.” Jason interrupts impatiently.

“Yeah, well. That was only the first part that felt familiar. Then there was the way he moved.” Conner shakes his head. “I caught up to him finally by the exit. Didn’t even think before I yanked his feet out from underneath him. He went down, I grabbed him, broke the helmet…”

He leans forward. “Fuck, if I’d just… if I’d only kept hold of him. But I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. I let go, and you know the only thing he said? ‘Don’t follow me, Kon.’ That’s it. Don’t follow me. Like everything we…” A grimace. “One explosion later and he’s gone. It only took me twenty seconds to recover and break through the rubble, but I was still too late. Again.”

“Didn’t you look for him after?”
“Of course I did!” Kon-El snaps back at him for what was, admittedly, a rather thoughtless question. “I looked for over two hours, all over the damn city, but he’s one of you. Looking for a Bat when they don’t want to be found is like looking for a needle in a hayfield, nevermind a stack.”

Was. Jason thinks but wisely doesn’t say. He was one of us. “Sorry.”

Conner glares a moment longer, before shaking his head. “That everything you wanted to know?”

“What did he look like?”

“What did he—I don’t know. He… like Tim, I guess. Like Tim. Older than I remember, but still… tired. Like he hadn’t slept for a while, but that was normal even before he…. Thin, as well. Probably hasn’t been eating properly.” For a moment Conner’s expression softens before he laughs bleakly, “He always was terrible at remembering to take care of himself when he was working.”

Jason inhales deeply, thinking of Tim as he was before. “Doesn’t sound like much has changed since December.”

At once, Conner’s attention is zeroed back in on him. The hungry, desperate light in his eyes impossible to ignore. “Tell me.” He entreats. “Come on, it’s your turn.”

Jason tries to keep a lid on his disappointment. He was hoping for something more than a brief chase and a single spoken sentence; in a way he feels short-changed.

At least, he supposes, they now know for sure that Tim’s still alive; that he’s still trying to do good, in a way. Even if it is by his new lethal standards.

“You won’t like it.” Jason warns Conner, one final time.

“I already don’t like it. What Batman told me made that pretty damn clear. I just have to know, okay? I have to.”

And in that respect, Jason understands him perfectly.

It’s no easier to recount his time as a prisoner of the Red Hood now than it was before, and the only consolation he has is that Bruce has already given Superboy the bare details. What Conner wants from Jason isn’t a blow by blow retelling, but a focused assessment on his captor. He wants to know about Tim. To try, as all of them have since that time, to understand how and why it had ever come to this.

By the time he’s done talking, Conner has his head in his hands, staring down at his knees. “I don’t understand. I don’t… Tim was… sure, he could be a little ruthless sometimes towards the bad guys when he had to be. But he was never cold. He’d never hurt anyone who didn’t deserve it, and he’d never kill. What he did to you was…”

Jason shifts uncomfortably, resisting the urge to scratch at his wrists by tucking his arms under the bends of his knees.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.” Jason says carefully. “None of us saw this coming. Not you, not me. Not even Bruce. He’s not the person any of you knew before.”

“I don’t believe that. I can’t believe that.” Kon-El shakes his head. “He has to be… there has to be
some part of who he was still in there.”

Jason swallows around the dryness in his throat. “He died, and the Lazarus Pit—”

“Fuck the Lazarus Pit!” Kon-El growls, getting to his feet before starting to pace back and forth along the rooftop, the sound of his footsteps loud enough to make Jason dig his fingernails into his thighs. “That’s not Tim. He was stronger than that. He is stronger than that,” he then corrects himself, as if the present tense is a foreign object in his mouth. “I just… I need to find him, okay. I need to talk to him. If I can just get him to listen to me…”

“You’ll what, make him see straight? Bring him back to the light?”

Conner stops walking to scowl at him.”Yeah, actually, I will. I refuse to believe there’s no hope at all. And if you’d known him like I did, you’d feel the same way too.”

Maybe he does have a point there, but even if he wanted to, Jason can’t believe that the solution could be so simple; not in the same way that Kon-El can. He recalls all too clearly Tim’s conviction, his complete assertion that what he was doing was the only way, and that because of it he could never come home again. Every reasoning Jason tried to use to convince him otherwise had been thrown back in his face, ignored, and...

_That person you’re trying to talk to, Jason, he’s gone._

The taste of copper is strong in his mouth as he swallows at the memory, accompanied by the phantom drip of blood running down his face from his nose. If Tim doesn’t believe that the person he was exists anymore, how can anyone, even Superboy, have a chance at bringing him back again?

Across the roof, Conner is watching him with some concern, which is enough to clue Jason into the fact that an uncomfortably long amount of time has passed since he last said anything. Quickly, he breaks the silence, before the clone can do anything so heinous as ask him if he’s all right.

“You’ll have to find him again first. And good luck with that, we’ve looked for months before now without success. Then the one time someone does see him, it’s by complete accident.”

“So I’ve heard.” But despite that grim pronouncement, Conner doesn’t look daunted, only determined. “Look, I… thanks. For telling me that. I know it can’t have been easy for you, and I…”

Jason shrugs, goosebumps making themselves known on his arms as a colder breeze starts to blow across the roof.

“I know I was an ass to you when we met before. But Speedy hasn’t shut up about you this past week. Thinks I should offer you a formal invitation to join the Titans if you want to. So, I…” he rakes his hand back through his short hair. “I just want to let you know if you want to do that now or anytime in the future, you’re welcome.”

It’s not what Jason was expecting from him. “Is that because you feel guilty, or because you genuinely want me on the team?”

“Because I’m _grateful_. And as much as it’s not easy seeing anyone else in that uniform, you’re good at what you do,” Conner admits. “Robin has a right to be a part of the Teen Titans.”

Jason clenches his fingers for a moment. “I’ll think about it.” He’s already been thinking about it, as a matter of fact, but he’s not going to tell him that. It’s not like he needed Superboy’s approval
anyway. “Hey, if you find Tim again… I want to know about it, okay?”

Conner looks appraisingly at him. “Why?”

“Why do you think?” Jason retorts. “After what he put me through, I’m involved in his shit. So whatever goes down with bringing him in, I deserve to be a part of it. At the very least I want a fucking explanation.”

The words inspire a flinch in Conner, but nothing more. “An explanation, that’s all?”

Jason narrows his eyes, “What else are you implying?”

“Nothing. I just… forget it.” Conner shakes his head. “Look, I can do that. But only if you promise you’ll do the same for me too.”

Jason tightens his jaw, but nods. He can agree to that. Maybe only after he gets the chance to talk to Tim first himself, but he will.

“Even if Batman tells you not to?”

This time Jason’s slower in answering. Conner was smart to ask him, because there’s honestly a good chance Bruce will do exactly that, if only out of a desire to try and get through to Tim himself before letting anyone else near him.

Yet so far, all that policy has gotten them was a broken door and a missed chance to be called in by Superboy right away when he saw Tim. If agreeing to this deal heightens their chances of catching the former Robin, then Jason thinks he can face dealing with Bruce’s anger later on.

Finding Tim is what matters, more than anything else.

“Yeah.” he says finally with another nod, wondering if Conner is listening to his heartbeat to see if he’s telling the truth too.

“Okay. Deal then.” Conner says, obviously relieved. “But when you find him, if you do find him before I do, before Batman does, I want the chance to talk him down before you do anything else, okay? He’ll listen to me, I’m sure of it. I just need to get close enough to—”

He cuts off suddenly, looking to his left and the nearest attic window. Jason follows his gaze to see why, and his heart speeds up all over again when he identifies the person climbing through it.

Not Bruce. Not Dick. Not even Steph, who Jason half-expected to show up at any moment, but Damian.

“Kent.” His older brother’s eyes have a distinctly unfriendly tint to them as he regards the clone, and it suddenly occurs to Jason that he was supposed to be in Bludhaven well over an hour ago.

“Nightwing.” Conner says back shortly.

“I see your manners are just as atrocious as ever. Did they not teach you what doors are for in whatever backwater test tube it was you crawled out of?”

Quickly, Jason scrambles up onto his feet, not wanting to be the odd man out between the three of them. His heart is pounding with what Damian might have just overheard. “Dami, it’s okay, he—” he starts to say, before Damian’s hand landing heavily on his shoulder cuts him off.

Conner clenches his jaw, but otherwise doesn’t rise to the bait. “Whatever you’ve been told, I’ve
already apologised for that.”

“That should never have happened in the first place.”

“Well maybe if certain things hadn’t been hidden from me in the first place—”

“If you think that’s any excuse for—”

“Hey! Stop!” Jason forces himself to twist out of Damian’s grip and places himself between them. With one hand held out in either direction, he makes his position clear. “It’s over okay? It’s done. We’ve talked it out already, there’s no need for you guys to fight now.”

Damian growls, “He could’ve hurt you and Richard. He certainly hurt Father.”

“Could’ve, didn’t. And if Bruce is over it, you can be too. Let it go, Damian.” Jason implores.

Damian stares at him for a long time, searching Jason’s face for some sign not to believe him, Jason’s sure, but finally he relents. Albeit in a very Damian-fashion.

“Do anything like this ever again, or hurt a member of my family in any way, and I will personally hunt you down and make you swallow every piece of Kryptonite there is in existence, clone.”

Jason winces at the threat, while Conner only nods as if it was what he was expecting all along. “Understood.” He turns, lifting up from the roof with a clear intent to leave. But before he gets more than five feet into the air, he turns back round to look at Jason, “You’ll…”

“I’ll remember.” Jason replies swiftly, to stop him from saying anything more.

Another nod and then Superboy is gone, swallowed up the night sky before Jason can even blink. He breathes in deeply, ready to let out a sigh of relief that the encounter is over, except then Damian’s hand clamps back onto his shoulder again, squeezing tight before forcibly wheeling him back around to face the window.

“Let’s go downstairs, little brother.”

* 

They barely make it out of the attic before something hard impacts with the back of Jason’s head. He turns on the spot as he yelps, raising one hand to cup the resulting sore spot while glaring hard at Damian, who’s holding up Jason’s phone with an unimpressed look on his face. One click of the power button to show the notifications on the screen later, and Jason’s irritation swiftly turns to guilt.

“You know you have this device for a reason, don’t you?”

Jason groans. “Fuck, I’m sorry, Damian. I didn’t think. With everything that happened I just…”

Damian shakes his head. “Of course you didn’t.” he almost seems amused as he hands the phone back to Jason, though the relief in his eyes shines clearer, if only for a moment. “I expect at least one text message from you the next time someone decides to break into our home, however. As it is, Richard had to be the one to inform me.”
“You talked to Dick?”

“I called him asking if he knew where you were, since Father chose not to respond to me either.”

Jesus, no wonder Damian is pissed.

“Would it help if I apologised again?”

Damian grunts noncommittally. “What were you and the clone talking about?”

Jason looks back away, stuffing his phone and his hands in his pockets before scuffing his feet along the paisley rug covering this section of the floor. “What you do you think? Tim of course. Didn’t Bruce tell you? He’s the entire reason Superboy broke in here.”

“Eventually.” Damian says, expression dark as Jason starts walking again, leading the way to the nearest staircase down. “Are you sure you…”

“Not a scratch on me, Dami.”

“You know that’s not what I meant.”

“I’m fine.” Jason insists, resisting the urge to scratch his arms again. “I just want… tell me Bruce didn’t go off chasing after him without me while I was up there.”

“Not yet.”

Jason nods, satisfied with that. But Damian catches him by the elbow before they can go any further. “He won’t be there.”

“We won’t know if we don’t try. This is a lead, Damian. The first one we’ve had in months. Don’t try and tell me you don’t want to follow up on it either.”

Damian looks disgruntled. It’s a far cry from the weekend of crime fighting in Bludhaven they originally had planned together, but there’s no denying this news has to take precedent. “For different reasons than you and the clone, I’m sure.”

“If you’re implying I’m not going to punch the guy in the face the moment I see ‘im, you’re wrong. After what he did…” Jason shakes his head. “If Bruce is going, I’m going. That’s all there is to it. Up to you if you want to tag along.”

Damian doesn’t reply. He doesn’t have to. The implication has been clear for months that he won’t let Tim get near Jason alone again if he can help it.

Downstairs, the ruins of the front door have been covered by a pinned up sheet. It’s enough to maintain privacy — as much as that matters with a mile long drive from the front gates to the house — but does nothing to keep the cold air out. Alfred himself is still there when they arrive, sweeping brush in hand as he talks to Bruce, who surprisingly has come up from the cave already and isn’t in uniform either. Whatever they’re saying to each other cuts off as soon as Jason and Damian reach the ground floor.

“Is he gone?” Bruce asks, eyes fixed on Jason.

He nods, frowning at the mess. His immediate instinct is to grab a broom and start helping Alfred clean it up. It doesn’t surprise him that Bruce knew he and Superboy were talking either. “Yeah. Flew off about five minutes ago.”
“Good.”

“How are we heading to Los Angeles, then?”

“You and Damian are.”

For a moment, Jason’s not sure if he’s heard that right. “Wait… you aren’t coming?”

Bruce shakes his head. “I’m going to look deeper into the group the Titans were chasing while you two search for evidence of the Red Hood at the scene. If they have other facilities elsewhere in the country, we may be able to predict where he’ll strike next, or other places he’s already been.”

It rocks him a little. Until Jason realises that of course, just like Damian said, they’re not actually going to find Tim in Los Angeles. He’ll have already gotten out of the city as soon as he was safely able to after encountering Superboy. That’s why Bruce is choosing to focus his attention elsewhere, and why he’s sending Damian and Jason to investigate the lab in his stead.

Great, Jason thinks irritably, we’re the cleanup crew. “And if there are more?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

He frowns, “How do you know he’ll be going after them? If he thinks we suspect what he’s doing…”

“Tim was always thorough.” Bruce says eventually, after a heavy pause. Beside him, Alfred looks to the ground, the downturned edges of his mouth subtle but infinitely depressing. “He won’t leave a case he’s started on half-finished, no matter what consequences he may face for doing so.”

Damian seems to understand that perfectly, and thinking back to Arkham, Jason has to agree too. “We’ll find what we can and get back to you, Father.”

“Good.” Bruce looks troubled again as he turn his head towards the shattered door, “Because this has already gone on long enough.”

Somehow, Jason bites down on the rest of what he wants to say—his residual anger at being ordered upstairs in the first place, and his concern over Bruce in the wake of Superboy’s brief attack. There’ll be time for that later, after they get back from L.A.

Instead, he lets Damian lead him away from the entrance hall towards the cave, but not before casting his eyes upwards to the top of the stairs, where Dick is now sitting in the space Jason himself would have once occupied when he was younger, peeking between the spokes of the banister to spy on them.

Tempting as it is to call attention to him, Jason quickly drops his gaze back down. He may be Robin, but he still knows all too well what it feels like to be left out of the important goings on in the house.

Chapter End Notes

Kudos/comments/feedback all very much appreciated <3
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Arriving late to a crime scene never bodes well, and by the time Damian and Jason reach Los Angeles and the underground facility where the children were being kept, everything has already been well trodden over by police and Titan alike. What’s more, the LAPD presence in the area is still strong enough that even after they get there, they’re forced to spend an uncomfortable hour waiting on the rooftop of one of the nearby buildings for the investigation team to finish packing up their equipment and leave before they’re able to enter the base undetected.

It’s enough to more than enough to make Jason miss Gotham, even though they’ve been gone from her borders less than three hours at this point. The cops back home would have been perfectly willing to stand back and look the other way while Bats were on the scene. These guys, on the other hand? Probably not so much.

Damian is the one to take the lead through the darkened hallways, examining each scorch mark on the ground and bullet hole in the walls with utmost care while Jason trails after him, hood up and frowning at the mess that’s been left behind after the dual attacks by Tim and the Titans. Only bloodstains and chalk outlines remain of the bodies that would have once lain here, but those grizzly indicators of death aren’t what make Jason shiver — he’s far too accustomed to witnessing murder scenes back home for that.

Instead, it’s the sight of the now empty cells and glass stasis tubes that reach out to tug on the ends of his frayed out nerves. Even though the kids that once occupied those spaces have already been saved and relocated to the local hospital, the implications of the suffering they went through before that happened is still enough to set a low angry fire burning in his stomach.

Jason knows all too well what it feels like to be trapped; helpless. And perhaps out of consideration for him in that respect, Damian doesn’t linger very long in the cell block.

Further on in the base, things only get more depressing.

“Fuck.” Jason sighs as they pass through another one of the labs. His voice echoes loudly even to his own ears, despite the fact he’s whispering. “They really did take everything already. We’re going to have to break into the cop’s evidence room after this if we want to get anything useful on these guys.”

He’s not even exaggerating about that. The computer towers for every machine have been removed, leaving only black screens behind. Paperwork, if there was any, has been collected and taken away. Even the trash cans have been emptied, for all the good that picking through the mess inside would have done them.

Damian only grunts noncommittally at his observation, betraying his own sour mood in the way he turns back out of the room and continues on his path through the base with a stomp in his step. He’s been snapping photographs through the lenses in his mask the entire time they’ve been here, and he continues doing so now. There’s no telling what they may find in those images later with the cave computer to enhance them.

Finally, after another twenty minutes of walking, they reach the opposite side of the complex from which they entered, following a steady trail of destruction in the form of explosives and fist-sized dents in the walls. The path began in what was the base’s control room, and ends in a pile of
rubble and balmy air drifting in through a massive hole near the riverside where the ceiling has been broken through.

*This is where it happened,* Jason realises as soon as they reach it. This was where Tim and Superboy had their confrontation, if the exchange of a single sentence could even be called it that.

At first glance, it also looks frustratingly barren of anything they can use.

But attentive to detail as always, he and Damian still search the site for almost an hour afterwards, being as thorough as they know Bruce would demand they be if he were in here with them. They scour over every inch of floor, wall, and rubble there is to see what remains, and eventually all that hard work does pay off.

Jason is the one who stumbles over the twisted and half-melted shards of red plastic embedded in the floor. Either missed or dismissed as unimportant by the cops, they jump out at him as soon as he sees them, because how could they not? That shade of red is painted as vividly in his mind as his memory of the first time he saw blood, and Jason knows without question what they are and where they came from.

Tim’s helmet. At least, all that remains after Superboy broke it.

“Nightwing, here.” he calls quietly after a minute of staring, summoning Damian to his side from across the room.

Without a word, his older brother kneels, using the edge of a batarang to pry loose the pieces and then drop them into the plastic evidence bags Jason holds ready for him. It’s doubtful that any of the circuitry inside has survived in a way that will be useful, but it’s still the best lead they have so far. And any evidence is better than none in this case. *Any* physical sign of Tim’s existence at all.

“Is that all of it?” Damian asks him, when he’s done.

“All that I can see. The rest must be under the rubble, and unless you’ve got superpowers you’ve never told me about…”

“We’ll leave it.”

Damian lifts his head, thinning his lips as he stares up at the opening above them.

“We’re going to go up there and try to find his trail, right?” Jason asks, following his brother’s gaze.

“Of course.” A curt nod, and then they’re both moving forward to climb the debris, stopping only to check that there’s no cops with dogs near enough on the road outside to track their exit.

Damian hauls himself out first, then turns around to give Jason a hand up, which he gratefully accepts. The area surrounding the hole is a collage of cordoned barriers and bold yellow police tape marking the spot as a line that should not be crossed. Once over it, Jason moves to stand up and start searching for further clues, only to abruptly find himself pulled back down by Damian to stay crouched by the edge of the hole instead.

He looks sharply at his brother, who has his index finger pressed against his lips. Once he’s sure Jason’s got the message, Damian then uses that same finger to point back down into the base where they’ve come from.

Jason narrows his eyes, then strains his ears. He doesn’t need Damian’s silently mouthed words to catch on to what Nightwing has already realised.
Somebody’s following us.

Tim? Jason’s heart beats quicker in his chest at the thought, even as he quickly reasons to himself that it can’t be so. After everything that’s happened, there’s no way Tim would be here following them, he’d have no cause to. To slip and let them catch up to him so easily is a mistake someone like Tim would never make, which can only mean that the culprit is someone else. The only question is, who?

As quietly as he can, Jason pulls free a batarang from his belt, while next to him Damian has already loosened his escrima sticks in their holster. Together, they listen and wait, until finally Damian lifts up his hand again, counting down with his fingers from three to one. Then they leap, and the unfortunate soul now exploring the unoccupied chamber below gets the fright of their life as the two heroes come crashing down on top of them.

…or not. The flat of a sword knocks aside the batarang Jason hurls at their stalker’s head, while a flip takes them out of range from Damian’s attempted strike at their shoulder. The quick reflexes are unexpected. The perp’s appearance in light of them, decidedly less so.

The woman is wearing tight black pants under a sleeveless top, as well as a matching scarf over her face. She has tattoos, intricate, detailed, that run down her arms, and as she backs across the room away from them, her tightly braided hair swings down behind her back from her head. All those details paint a pretty unmistakable picture, and Jason doesn’t need Damian’s lowly growled “Assassin.” to identify what she is and who she works for.

Her eyes widen, then narrow at the sight of Nightwing. “You…”

“Robin, take her down!” Damian snaps before she can finish getting out whatever she was about to say.

As one they rush the assassin, who quickly brings up her blade to defend herself from their attack.

…. and she’s good, whoever she is. Jason doesn’t recognise the particular design of her tattoos well enough to put a name or title to her face — Damian would know the League’s individual members far better than he — but still good. Good enough to hold both them off at once, even if it is just for a minute or two.

The sound of weapons clashing fills the small area as the three combatants dance. Jason ducks and weaves, using his greater speed to distract the assassin, while Damian moves after him, taking the opportunities Jason creates to dive in and strike the woman with devastatingly powerful blows. Doubtless he could take her alone if he had to, either of them probably could, but by working together the task becomes that much easier.

One strike of escrima sticks sends the assassin stumbling back, while the next breaks the grip she has on her sword, as well as the bone in her wrist. Jason lunges in next, following up that hit with a punch to her face. The reinforced knuckles in his gloves knock the woman instantly sideways, and though he holds himself back to some extent (they still want her to be able to talk after all), she’ll definitely be sporting a pretty bruise tomorrow.

A quick follow up kick sees the assassin sprawling to the floor, and she barely has time to yell at the pain in her broken wrist before Damian’s yanking both of her arms back, securing her hands in a pair of cuffs behind her back.

“Traitor!” She snaps at him in accented English, Chinese if Jason would have to hazard a guess, and on hearing it, Damian’s lips become nothing more than a hard bloodless line in his face.
“Hardly.” he replies as he hauls the woman up, then pushes her back to sit against the nearest wall. Damian performs a quick search of her person to make sure she’s not hiding any other weaponry she could use to escape the bindings, which ends in a small pile of shuriken, lockpicks and smoke bombs being pushed across the floor to Jason’s feet. Dutifully, he shoves them back with his foot even further out of her reach.

“What are you doing here, Assassin?” Damian demands next, “Why were you following us?”

“That is none of your concern.”

“You’ve come here on the word of my grandfather, haven’t you? I’d say that’s definitely my concern.”

“You are not fit to speak of him,” she snarls, “not after what you—ahh!”

Jason folds his arms across his chest as Damian twists her shoulder. He never has any patience for League members when they find them, especially those who try to bring the fact that he turned his back on Ra’s al Ghul against him (which is practically all of them that Jason has been witness to).

“I’ll ask you again,” he growls, “why did you come here?”

“I will not speak to you.” She snaps, uncowed as she continues to glare over the top of the scarf covering her mouth and nose. “I will never…”

“Never?” Jason takes the opportunity to interrupt then. “Really? I mean, wow. Never. That’s an awful long time. Lots of things can happen in ‘never’. Am I right, Nightwing?”

“You are not incorrect.”

“We’re talking broken bones, cuts and bruises…” Jason counts them off one by one on his fingers in front of him, “I hear there’s even a market for electric shocks going round these days.”

“Is that so?” Damian doesn’t smile, he leaves that to Jason.

“You bet your ass. Can I?”

He takes the escrima stick when it’s handed to him, fiddling with the settings on the handle. “Should really get myself a set of these, someday.”

The assassin turns her face towards him, her eyes like daggers. “You won’t hurt me.”

“Oh no. No, no. You’re thinking of someone else. What we won’t do is kill you.” Jason stresses. “There’s a difference. Well, I mean I won’t. Nightwing I can’t exactly vouch for, you people always make him grumpy, going on and on about how he betrayed the League and all. It just gets a little repetitive after a while, you know?”

Electricity sparks off the end of the escrima and Jason lets out a low whistle before flipping it back into Damian’s hand.

“Nice. You still feeling good about ‘never’, lady?”

She doesn’t answer, but this time her eyes have a measure of fear in them as Damian holds the crackling end of the stick near the same shoulder he twisted before. “Well?” he asks impatiently.

“I wasn’t… I wasn’t sent here to follow… you.”

“Then who?”
She goes silent again. Though they can’t see her mouth, Jason imagines that she has her teeth clenched together beneath the fabric covering her face. There’s good reason for her to try and keep her silence, as Ra’s al Ghul is not forgiving to those who fail him. Still, they need answers, and Damian is not afraid to push hard to get them.

He jams the escrima stick into the assassin’s shoulder, holding it there for barely five seconds before drawing the weapon back again. A time in which she gasps and jolts, her muscles spasming under the effects of the electricity flowing through her. The setting isn’t high enough to do any real damage, at least not yet, but Jason knows how much a shock like that hurts regardless, and hides his hands behind the folds of his cape so that she won’t see the way they clench into fists while he watches.

“Who?” Damian repeats, when she’s done gasping.

If they do their job right, and present enough of a unified force, it shouldn’t have to go much further than this. Just the implication of more violence will be enough. With a trained assassin however, that eventuality is a little less certain, and Jason hopes for her sake that she won’t keep trying to push them.

“I cannot… if I say—”

“You have already failed your master by allowing yourself to be captured.” Damian informs her, “The question now is, how whole do you want to be when he brings his retribution down upon you? I can promise you from experience that your chances of survival long-term will be greater if you tell us what we want to know.”

Jason feels a shiver run down his spine. He wonders how often Damian was witness to such punishments being carried out when he was a child, and more than that, what punishments he himself was forced to endure under his grandfather’s hand. Even after three years of calling him brother, he still knows very little of Damian’s life before he came to live with Bruce, but what he does know is disturbing enough.

It’s a good tactic to try — depending on how much this one values her own life against the will of her master. Judging by the way she freezes at Damian’s words, she’s not quite ready to die just yet.

“I…”

“Was it the Red Hood?” Jason tries, taking a chance in offering an opportunity for her to admit the truth without having to physically say the words herself.

The gamble works. She nods.

“He was working with League.” Damian says, the edges of his mask crinkling as he furrows his brow, “So why now do you follow him?”

Clearly still reluctant to talk, the assassin nevertheless continues to confess her purpose. “He has… abandoned my master’s cause. Betrayed his truth.”

An unexpected wave of triumph floods through Jason. His belief that Tim wouldn’t stay with the League after accomplishing his goal at Arkham was correct after all. Now wherever Tim is, whatever he’s doing, they have confirmation that he’s acting independently, free of Ra’s manipulations and control. That can only be a good thing.

“So Ra’s doesn’t know where he is?”
“Do not speak his name, blas—ahh!” She yelps as Damian twists her abused shoulder again.

“Robin asked you a question, woman.” Damian growls, without mercy or sympathy. “You will answer him.”

“No… no.” She admits. “We have been trying to keep track of him, but his movements… he is very difficult to follow. We cannot catch up with him.”

_Tell me about it._ Jason thinks “Do you have any idea where he might be going next?”

The assassin shakes her head. “I came here looking for answers to that, the same as you.”

Damian raises his escrima again, holding the weapon threateningly close to her shoulder. “If you are lying to us, know that my mother and grandfather were quite thorough in my education when it comes to the art of torture.”

“I swear! All I know is he was seeking these labs, other than—”

“There are more?” Jason cuts in at her use of the plural. “You know of them?”

The assassin’s eyes widen when she realises what she’s betrayed, and Damian is smirking now as he rubs his thumb over the power button on the escrima.

When he presses it down, the electricity lights up his face eerily.

“Tell us.”

* 

“Twelve.” Bruce repeats, after they’ve finished giving their report back in the cave later that night (or more accurately, early the next morning).

“That’s what she said.” Jason replies with a shrug, digging his fingers deep into the meat of his biceps even as he strains to keep his tone casual.

It’s been a long night, he’s tired, hungry and grumpy over the results of their trip. After reeling off what they’d learned in Los Angeles to Bruce once already, all Jason wants to do now is peel off his uniform, climb up the staircase to the house, then bury his face in whatever food is available in the fridge, not go through it all again a second time. Disappointment is at the top of his list of feelings at the moment, with frustration coming in a close second.

The information the assassin on Tim’s tail had been able to provide to them was almost more than they could have hoped for, yet at the same time, it only added more complications to their goal.

Namely, that the organisation Tim is chasing (Chimaera they call themselves) is operating on a size and scale none of them could have anticipated, and by the assassin’s own estimation, they have facilities in at least twelve different locations stretching all across North America, not just the USA.

Which means not _only_ do they have a whole lot of ground to cover in terms of just dealing with Chimaera themselves, but that trying to narrow down which target Tim will strike next without more information will be almost impossible.
“And you’re certain she was telling the truth?”

“If you want to go interrogate her yourself, you can, Father.” Damian narrows his eyes, speaking with the implication that he’ll be highly offended if Bruce does. “But I doubt you’ll find out anything different to what we did.”

Bruce clenches his jaw. On the computer screen behind him, the approximate coordinates of each known facility has been marked by a bright red dot on a map.

“No, that won’t be necessary. I trust both your’s and Robin’s abilities in this matter.”

Jason blinks blearily. For a moment, the ten dots on the screen become twenty, then jump back again as his vision clears. “So what do we do now?”

“Now…” Bruce inhales and holds it, turning round before leaning forwards on his clenched fists against the console while he stares up at the screen.

“We can’t just leave these Chimaera sickos to keep running their operation while we wait for Tim to show his face again and take them down, can we? The things they’re doing… and if those other facilities are using kidnapped street kids to conduct their experiments too, then…”

“No.” Bruce agrees with him, though he’s clearly frustrated about it. Finding Tim would be so much easier if they could in good conscience step back and simply wait for him to act first, but as Jason said, the ongoing suffering of children, of anyone, is one thing they can never ignore. “We can’t. We’re going to have to take them out. However, if we pick our targets strategically we may still have a chance at catching him.”

“You mean attempt to drive Drake where we want him?” Damian interjects, snorting derisively as he folds his arms across his chest. His stance is all defensive, which means he’s going to say something he knows Bruce won’t like. “He isn’t a fool, Father, and my grandfather has probably already tried such methods to bring him back into the fold. He’ll catch on quickly if we start going after all his targets. And if we’re that obvious about it, he may just decide to sit back and let us finish doing his work for him.”

It would be like Arkham and the Joker all over again, Jason thinks. Tim’s whole plan back then had counted on Bruce and Damian following the breadcrumb trail he’d left out for them, spurred on by Jason’s own disappearance at Tim’s hands. With that in mind, it’s not totally out of the bounds of reason that he would be willing to try the tactic a second time.

“Exactly. If we’re that obvious about it.” Bruce agrees. There’s a look on his face that Jason recognises now, that of cogs and gears turning within the great weight of Batman’s mind. “However…”

He taps some keys on the computer and half of the red dots on the screen turn yellow.

“What we can do, is make him think we missed the existence of some of them. Namely, those furthest away from the L.A. facility.”

Jason looks more closely at the map. The red dots, including the already destroyed Los Angeles base, occupy the west and southern areas of the continent, the yellow ones however, are to the east and north — though curiously, there isn’t one in Gotham, which… score one for the city having one less terrible thing going on within her borders, Jason supposes.

Damian looks a little less hostile and little more thoughtful now as he frowns up at the screen as well. “If we follow the course of them linearly… as if we are discovering each location one by
“It can work.” Bruce insists.

“What about the Titans?” Jason blurts out suddenly, then fidgets when the two of them turn back to look at him. “If we’ve managed to find this out, maybe they have too, from surviving workers in the base, or any data that wasn’t wiped from the computers. We won’t know until we’re able to go through it ourselves. And if they start chasing after the rest of Chimaera at the same time we are, and go after different bases from us, it could mess up our entire plan. Tim definitely won’t show if he sees two teams working on this.”

Damian purses his lips at the implication. He’s probably less than impressed at the idea of running into Superboy again so quickly. Bruce meanwhile, is looking back at Jason over his shoulder, face pinched into an expression that is almost, if not quite, a carbon copy of his biological son’s.

“What are you suggesting?”

“I think we should talk to them. Try to find out what they know, and then work with them if we have to. They could be a big enough distraction on their own if we need them to be. Hell, if we just step back and let them do the grunt work of going after the bases without us, Tim may not suspect our involvement at all.”

Damian snorts, while this time Bruce looks openly disapproving. “We can handle this alone,” he says.

“Yeah,” Jason agrees, “we probably can. But after what happened today…” He shakes his head. “Even if Superboy would be willing to step back on this, I keep thinking that if we had let him know Tim was back sooner, he might’ve been better prepared to confront him when they ran into each other in L.A. Then maybe Tim wouldn’t have gotten away today. Or he could’ve called us to go over there straight away and help him search while the trail was still fresh, rather than spending two hours looking for him alone. We might’ve have caught Tim today, Bruce,” he emphasises again, “if only we hadn’t kept his return a secret. If only we’d...

“Jason—”

“If we act in opposition to each other, any chance of this plan succeeding will be screwed before it’s even started. You know that.” Jason doesn’t meet Bruce’s eyes directly, which is a mistake he knows, but it hardly matters now considering how much of himself and his feelings he’s already betrayed on this matter. He turns his gaze towards an empty corner of the cave, instead. “We can’t let Tim get away again, B. We just can’t. And we can’t let Ra’s get his hands on him either. If he does...”

Bruce turns completely away from the computer. A moment later, Jason feels his mentor’s hands come to rest on his shoulders, but he still refuses to look up.

“You’re right,” Bruce says quietly, “we can’t, and we won’t. Not again, Jason. No matter what it takes.”

“Do you mean that?” Jason asks him, his voice sharper than he means it to be.

Bruce sighs heavily, indicating that Jason has scored at least some kind of point in his favour. “Yes, I do. You’re correct that if the Titans start attacking the other Chimaera labs contrary to our own plan, then we won’t get anywhere. However, I’ll still need to consider your proposal further and make sure the legitimacy of it is backed up by the evidence before we make any concrete decisions to involve them.”
It’s not a definite yes, but it’s something.

“Sure. I understand, Bruce. Just so long as we catch Tim and take Chimaera down, I’m good.”

Jason feels Bruce squeeze his shoulders tight before letting go. “We will, Jason. I promise you that. Now…” he finally looks up again when Bruce turns away from him, “it’s late, and I think we’re all tired from the day’s events. It’s time you went upstairs, Jason. We’ll discuss this more tomorrow.”

Too tired to fight him on it any longer, Jason gratefully accepts the dismissal.

*

The kitchen upstairs is empty when Jason reaches it, after changing out of his uniform and taking a quick rinse in the cave’s showers. Contrary to popular belief, even the World’s Greatest Butler has to sleep sometime, but it’s no big surprise to find that even though Alfred himself is nowhere to be seen, he has left some food warming on the stove for when they got back from their trip, and the smell filling the air has Jason’s mouth watering before he’s even finished stepping through the doorway.

Without hesitation or preamble, Jason marches over to the larger of the two pots, picks up a nearby serving spoon, and scoops a spoonful of the venison curry straight into his mouth, choosing to eat it right out of the pan rather than waste precious seconds filling a bowl. The delicate blend of sauce, spices and meat is as delicious as it always is, and Jason barely gives himself the necessary time to swallow that first mouthful before he’s following it up with a second.

“That’s disgusting, you realise.”

“I’m fucking starving, you realise.” Jason rolls his eyes back at Damian, who has followed him up from the cave like an overgrown shadow. He reaches for a piece of naan bread from the covered plate next to the stove top as well. “What are you complaining for, anyway? You’re not going to touch this, it’s got meat in it.”

“That’s not the point.” Damian argues, as he steps over to examine the vegetarian option Alfred prepared for him. “If Pennyworth were here—”

“If he were here, I’d be sitting down with a proper bowl, using a regular-sized spoon and keeping my damn elbows off the table, I know. But he ain’t here, so unless you’re going to go squeal on me, it doesn’t have to be a problem.”

They stare off at each other for a few seconds, waiting to see who’ll give in first. To Jason’s great surprise, it’s Damian.

“You owe me.” He grumbles.

“I don’t owe you shit.” Jason replies shortly, though he does move to make some compromise by carrying the pot over to the table, rather than continuing to eat standing at the stove.

“Really.” Damian collects a bowl from the cupboard, before using a ladle to serve himself a generous portion of what looks like a tofu variant on the curry Jason’s eating and coming over to the table to join him. “Then I suppose I’m free to tell Father about the promise you made to Kent earlier.”
Jason freezes, another spoonful of venison stuck halfway between the pot and his mouth. “You, er… you heard that, huh?”

“I heard enough.”

“And you’re just bringing it up now?” Jason asks incredulously.

Damian is surely toying with him, judging by the way he takes an excessive amount of time in spearing a piece of tofu onto his fork before answering. “It didn’t seem appropriate before.”

“Damian, we just spent literal hours alone in the plane together with nothing to occupy us between here and L.A. How was none of that an appropriate moment?”

“Because we weren’t in the manor.” Damian chews excessively before swallowing. “And I wouldn’t have gotten to watch you squirm half as much at the risk of being overheard. Did you mean it?”

“Which part?” Jason asks, glowering back at him. Belatedly, he remembers to finish bringing the serving spoon to his mouth.

“About disobeying Father if he orders you not to contact Superboy regarding Tim when we find him.”

Jason looks down at the pot on the table. He doesn’t do anything so dramatic as lose his appetite at Damian’s words (he’s far too hungry for that) but they do manage to give him a second’s pause. “I guess I did.”

“You guess?”

“I got something back out of it, didn’t I?” Jason counters. “Superboy promised to tell me if he finds Tim first as well. It’s better than him keeping secrets from us.”

“If he follows through on his word.”

“I think he will.”

“What makes you so sure?”

Jason shrugs, “He’s putting his faith in me to hold up my end of the bargain, isn’t he? He doesn’t seem like the type who’d take that lightly. Kind of like big blue in that way.”

“I suppose you do have a point there.” Damian gives grudgingly. He reaches up to pinch the bridge of his nose before sighing. “I’m not happy about this.”

“You don’t have to be happy about it, just don’t tell Bruce. Plead ignorance, if you gotta. That way the only person whose neck will be on the chopping block if it ends up playing out that way is mine.”

“Is finding Drake really that important to you?”

“You tell me.” Jason holds up his hands for a moment, wrists bare and pale under the flourescent kitchen light. “I just fucking want this to end, okay, Damian? I want it to end, and I’ll do whatever it takes to make that happen.”

“Yes, you’ve made that abundantly clear. I’m only…” It looks like the tofu might have gotten stuck somewhere in the vicinity of his throat. “…worried. About you.”
“You don’t have to worry about me.”

“You say that, yet constantly you give me cause.”

Now Jason really does lose his appetite. He pushes the pan in front of him out of the way before slumping down over the table. “… it’s not my fault.”

“No,” Damian agrees, fingers tightening around his fork. “It isn’t.”

That sits in the space between them for a good two minutes before they can bring themselves to break the silence again.

“I’m going to find him, Damian.” Jason says quietly. “I’m going to find him, then I’m going to kick his ass for what he did. After that…” he examines his fingers, flexing them open and shut again. “I guess we’ll see.”

After that, people like Bruce or Conner can take over. They can do whatever they feel is necessary to convince Tim to come home and give up his wicked ways. Jason just needs his shot at him first, to do, and say, whatever it is he feels he needs to.

Maybe then he can finally move on from this mess.

“Not alone you won’t.”

Jason looks up as Damian leans across the table, pushing the pot of curry back towards him. “That mean you’re not going to tell Bruce?”

“For now.” Damian agrees, which is fifty percent less of the commitment Jason was hoping for from him, but he’ll take what he can get, and if he’s really lucky Bruce will come round on the proposal Jason made to him about making this a joint venture with the Titans, rendering the whole point moot anyway.

“Good. Okay then.” He sits back up. “I promise I’ll make it up to you later, just——”

Damian shakes his head, then uses the fork in his hand to gesture across the table at the pan of food in front of Jason. “Eat.” He commands firmly, “Then sleep. I have the feeling we have a lot of work ahead of us.

* 

The war council, as Steph calls it, convenes the next night.

Every member of the family is here, including Alfred and Dick, who had outright refused to stay alone up in the manor while the rest of them plotted without him. He’s not officially involved in the proceedings, but from where he’s sitting Jason can make out the stubborn jut to the kid’s jaw that’s becoming more and more prevalent these days.

The meeting starts with Bruce outlining the events of yesterday to those who weren’t here at the time, namely Stephanie and Cassandra. Steph in particular, looks equal parts annoyed and guilty at the news, as if she personally regrets not reaching out to Superboy before it could come to this.

Given how close they had both been to Tim in their time, Jason thinks he can understand why.
Once that recap is done with however, Bruce finally moves on to outlining the plan he’s been working on since the early hours of this morning.

Much of what is said hasn’t changed from what Jason knew before. By concentrating on Chimaera’s facilities on the west coast and to the south of the country, they aim to direct Tim’s attention towards the bases in the east, closer to them. And then — with a little luck and whole lot of surveillance — catch him unaware the next time he chooses to attack one.

There’s only one major plot point that’s changed, and it’s the very one Jason was hoping for.

“We’ll be coordinating with the Teen Titans on this.”

“Wait, wait.” Stephanie raises her hand like she’s in school, interrupting before anyone else can.

“Hold up, did I just hear that right? Did you, Bruce Wayne, Batman, really just say you’re going to voluntarily let someone else in to work with us on a case? This case? Because if you did, I think I may just drop down to the floor and faint right here.”

Bruce ignores her dramatics. “Robin,” he takes care to emphasise Jason as the culprit behind his decision, “Made the point that if we truly do intend for this to work as a distraction and take the Red Hood off guard, a lack of open activity from us will be key. He already knows the Titans were investigating Chimaera from his encounter with them in L.A., so their continued involvement in the case will not be a surprise to him.”

“While we what?” Steph asks, “Wait in the wings to sweep down on him the moment he shows his face elsewhere?”

“Precisely.”

Jason stops trying to catch flies with his mouth after hearing that long enough to talk. “You’re using my idea, really?”

Bruce looks disgruntled, but nods. “I used the back doors we have into the Titans computer system to find out what they knew earlier today. Your suspicion was correct; they did manage to learn of two other Chimaera facilities from one of the surviving scientists there, and are already in the middle of making their own preparations to take those facilities down.”

“Only two?” Damian asks, frowning.

“Chimaera apparently has a policy of sharing minimal information with on-site staff regarding their work in other parts of the country. The facilities work in groups of three, sharing information with each other and their leaders only, completely unaware that more exist further afield.”

A smart survival strategy for a villain group, Jason thinks. Even should one set of labs be compromised, the rest will still be able to keep on functioning undetected (which then begs the question, how and why did Ra’s and his assassins manage to find about all of them at once?).

“So do the Titans actually know about this ulterior motive of ours that we’re using them for, or do they think you’re just being generous in sharing this intel with them?” Steph asks. “Because I’m just saying, if I were in their position and you came up to me offering free information, I’d definitely be suspicious.”

This time Bruce sighs at her assessment. However he also doesn’t deny she has a point. “I spoke to Superboy, in the interests of minimising the risk of Tim realising what we’re up to, he agreed to keep those members of the team in the know to a minimum. He, Wonder Girl, and the current Flash will be our key points of contact. The rest only know about Chimaera.”
Cassie Sandsmark and Bart Allen, Jason thinks, somewhat relieved and disappointed all at the
same time. They were Tim’s other friends, the people he’d been closest to among his generation
other than Conner. It makes sense that they’d be the ones who’d be involved in any plot regarding
him, rather than the younger members of the group.

Like Roy, or Starfire.

Maybe he really should just go ahead and bite the bullet about joining the Teen Titans. At least on
a trial basis like Steph suggested, if only to get it out of his system. Talking to Roy when he called
Jason this afternoon had been tough, as he’d been eager to tell him about what went down
yesterday from his own perspective, and Jason in turn had been forced to feign ignorance about
any of it. He was used to lying, but with Roy it somehow felt… it felt wrong.

Why his hormones had to kick in now of all the times is just a prime example of his luck with the
universe.

Not liking where that train of thought is going, Jason forces himself to focus back on the subject at
hand. “Cool.” is all he says out loud, nodding to Bruce.

Bruce eyes him a moment longer, then nods back. “Then if we’re all in agreement—”

“I want to help too.”

The entire group turns as one to look at Dick, whose dangling feet don’t even reach the floor from
the table he’s sitting on.

Too late to stop it, Jason still tries to subtly shake his head and mouth a warning to Dick.

Now is really not the time, kid.

A sentiment that is backed up by the way Bruce is now frowning at him,
like he’s some perplexing twist that came out of nowhere in an otherwise predictable story.

“I can do it.” Dick says, undaunted by all the pairs of eyes that are suddenly focused on him.
Given how he used to perform before audiences of hundreds five nights a week, that’s not
unexpected. “If you just teach me how to fight, I can go with you, I can help.”

It looks like Cassandra is hiding a smile even as Bruce shakes his head. “No, Dick.”

“But I want to—”

“What Bruce means, squirt,” Stephanie interrupts, before Bruce can continue on in shutting him
down and crushing the kid’s dreams entirely. “Is that even with the gymnastics skills you already
have, it’ll still take months to teach you all the stuff you’ll need to know before you’re ready to go
out on the job with us, and that’s time we just don’t have right now for this mission.”

“Spoiler,” Bruce growls, “That isn’t what I was saying at all. You’re too young yet, Dick, and the
Red Hood is a dangerous opponent. I don’t want you putting yourself at risk.”

“But I’m the same age Jason was when he started!”

“Exactly.” Jason finds himself chiming in, because he can’t let Bruce’s hypocrisy there slide.
Searching for some middle ground, he throws out another suggestion. “Come on, old man, at least
let him help Alfred out with research here in the cave. He can learn to use the computer system,
and get familiar with our equipment. What’s the harm in that?”

From where he’s standing with his hands clasped behind his back, Alfred looks longsufferingly at
the ceiling. “I suppose it would be nice to have a hand in keeping this place running while you’re
all out there attempting to get yourselves killed on a nightly basis.”
“Yeah!” Dick agrees, seizing on the opportunity just the way Jason hoped he would. “I can do that. Come on, Bruce. Please?”

Bruce turns his head, looking round the group from one face to the next. “Why do I feel like I’m being ganged up on here?”

Still smiling, Cassandra lifts her hands up and then turns them out, palms up. “Inevitable.” her only contribution.

“Some trends are timeless.” Stephanie agrees.

Standing near Jason, Damian says nothing, only watches the proceedings with his arms folded and a critical expression on his face.

Bruce sighs, pressing his hand to his forehead as if he has a headache coming on. “Fine. But helping out in the cave only. We’ll talk about the rest of what you’re asking for only after this case is over and done with, not before, Dick. Understood?”

“Got it.” Dick grins widely, swinging his feet under the table with barely contained excitement. It’s not what he was hoping for, but Jason’s glad that the kid is smart enough to recognise a stepping-stone when he sees one, rather than continue pushing too hard and get another flat out no from Bruce. The art of compromise was never better practiced than here in this house.

They talk more after that. Specific tasks are given out, agreements and contingencies put in place, and Jason is almost vibrating with anticipation by the end of the meeting. It won’t be quick, or easy, and there’s still Gotham to worry about in the meantime, quiet as she is these days. But they’re closer to Tim now than they’ve ever been before, and that’s something.

“Jason, a moment.” Bruce calls to him, after he’s dismissed the rest of the group, either to the waiting streets of the city or the manor above.

He stops, turning warily. Ahead, Dick is accompanying Alfred up the stairs, talking a mile a minute about all the new responsibilities he’s been given. “What?”

Bruce beckons him closer, and Jason moves to obey, standing next to him by the towering computer. The cold blue light emanating from the screen makes him shiver, even though logically he knows it has no actual effect on the temperature of the cave. “I suppose I have you to thank for Dick’s newfound interest in crime fighting?”

Jason snorts. “I don’t know if you noticed, B, but he’s had something of an interest ever since you brought him home. It’s like Cass said, it was going to happen sooner or later.”

“But you already knew he wanted to ask me.”

Jason nods reluctantly. “He was planning on talking to you about it last night, but then Superboy turned up and... you know.”

“And you’re okay with it?”

“Yeah. I mean… of course I don’t want him running out and putting himself in danger or nothin’, he needs the training first. But you know him, Bruce, he’s a good kid, and we’re his family now. He’s not going to be content staying on the sidelines forever. It’s better if we accept that and start teaching him now, before he takes it on himself to go out unprepared and get himself into trouble.”

“Rather like another boy I know.”
“Hey, that worked out. You only caught Ma Gunn because of me and you know it.”

“Hm.” Bruce almost smiles, but then it’s gone, replaced by a deathly seriousness. He turns to face Jason fully, a broad monolith he still feels painfully short standing against, despite how many inches he’s grown these past six months. “Jason… I want you to know that I understand how much this case means to you. How much catching Tim means to you.”

“To all of us.” Jason corrects him, shifting uneasily at being singled out. “It’s personal to all of us.”

“But not in the same way it is for you, and because of that I need to know that I can trust you to stay objective in this matter. That if you do come face to face with Tim at any point, you’ll be able to maintain control of yourself.”

For a moment, the white hot flash of anger that boils up out of Jason’s stomach is blinding. Hypocrite, he thinks viciously, before shoving it back down inside him. “I’m not out for revenge, Bruce, if that’s what you’re asking. Just answers.”

But as soon as he says it, Jason feels a seed of doubt sprout up inside his chest. He’d told Superboy that he wanted answers, the same as he has now to Bruce, but to Damian he’d said only that he wanted the opportunity to kick Tim’s ass. And, as he searches through the tangled web of feelings inside him, Jason now realises that one option is just as valid as the other.

Why else did he burn the bear, if not out of a petty attempt at revenge?

Clenching his hands tightly beneath his cape to keep them from shaking, Jason hopes that Bruce hasn’t picked up on any of the thoughts that just ran through his head. That was almost six months ago, and he’s better now than he was then. He has to be. If Bruce thinks otherwise he’ll bench him, and Jason can’t let that happen. Not when he’s so close.

“I swear, Bruce. All I want is to catch him. The same as you.”

Seconds can feel like hours under the right circumstances, but eventually time speeds back up again and Bruce nods. “All right.”

He could leave now, Jason thinks, get away scot free from the conversation, but there are a couple questions of his own he wants to ask first.

“Hey B, why did you send me upstairs when you talked to Superboy yesterday? He and I ended up having the same conversation you guys did anyway, so what was the point?”

“You were angry, and so was he. I thought it best to give you both the opportunity to calm down before you spoke to each other.” Bruce taps a few keys, enlarging the portion of the map where Los Angeles, San Diego, and San Francisco are connected together by a bright red line. “I also wanted you to stay with Dick and make sure he was all right after the attack.”

Okay, Jason supposes he can give him that.

“And what about after we catch Tim, have you decided what’ll happen to him yet if he won’t agree to stop what he’s doing?”

“We’ll deal with that when the time comes.” is all Bruce says, keeping his eyes fixed on the computer in what Jason recognises as an abrupt attempt to shut down the conversation.

It’s almost the exact same answer he’d given him in December, back when Jason asked that question the first time, and the lack of change between then and now is something he doesn’t like
“What do you mean when the time comes?” Jason presses. “You’ve got a plan in place for this, don’t you? You have to. You always have a plan.”

Bruce keeps his eyes focused on the screen, though for a moment it almost looks like they flick sideways, over Jason’s head to the costume case that’s still standing next to the central walkway, containing a Robin suit that once belonged to a dead boy.

“How do you mean when the time comes?”

But Bruce just shakes his head. “I told you, Jason, we’ll discuss that when Tim is in our custody, not before.”

He doesn’t know. Jason thinks dizzily, the realisation hitting him like a freight train as he takes first one unsteady step back, then another. He really doesn’t know.

It rocks him, unseats him. Makes the solid floor of the cave feel like quicksand under his feet.

“Fine,” Jason says quietly, voice somehow steady despite how the harder, more viscous parts of him that never left the streets want to lash out at Bruce. “Fine, whatever. Don’t tell me, it’s not like I’m your partner or anything, right?”

“Jason——”

“No, forget it, Bruce. Just carry on with whatever the fuck you’re doing, I’m going out on patrol.”

Yanking his hood up over his head, Jason leaves the computer and heads for the platform on the other side of the cave where his bike is parked next to the batmobile. And though he wishes it was otherwise, Bruce doesn’t say a word to stop him.

Chapter End Notes

We’re almost there, guys. I know it's been a long ride to reach this point, but I promise that we are almost there.

Tumblr
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Sooo this took a little longer than expected for me to get to. Writer’s block and more got in the way after the last update, but finally we’re here. Hope you all enjoy! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Knowing that Bruce has no concrete plan in place for when they catch up to Tim casts a heavy pall over what already promises to be a tense couple of weeks.

Jason tries not to focus on it, but doing so difficult, even with the active distractions of both the job and school not slowing down. Tim has never once strayed far from his thoughts since his escape back in December, and now that they’re actively working to capture him again that fact becomes more true than ever.

The insomnia he so recently left behind starts to creep back in, worsening every waking moment. His nightmares return — though they’re not quite so virulent as before, and Jason follows the progress of every incoming report from the Titans with a critical eye, hoping and searching for even the smallest hint that they’re on the right track. The point of their actions might be to drive Tim towards the Bats on the east coast, but he still hopes that they could — by chance — happen to stumble across and capture him over there instead, without any need for further intervention.

It would save him and his family a whole lot of trouble, that’s for sure. Yet at the same time...

Fuck, he doesn’t know. Jason’s hands ache with the need to lay one across Tim’s jaw, only the idea of seeing him, real and in the flesh... it also puts a tremor in them as well.

He doesn’t think he’s ever felt quite so pathetic before as he does these days.

“You’re not even trying.” Dick complains as if to prove that point, when he beats Jason at the racing game they’re playing for the third time in a row in the family den. Sulking, he drops his controller unenthusiastically onto the floor before flopping backwards onto the cushion behind him. “What’s with you today?”

Like he doesn’t already know, Jason thinks. Everyone knows. He might as well be wearing a damn sign around his neck for how obvious it is. “Maybe I’m just going easy on you.” he still says, instead of the truth.

“You never go easy on me,” Dick rolls his eyes, “You don’t even know the meaning of the word easy.”

“I know the meaning of the word ‘dick’.” Jason replies, as an easy dig, to which Dick pulls a face and shoves Jason’s shoulder with his foot. “Ow, quit it.”

“You quit it.” Dick replies, dropping his leg back down again. “Seriously, are you going to start playing for real soon or should I go do something else?”

Jason pinches the bridge of his nose, “I’m just tired, Dick.”
“Because you’re not sleeping again.” Dick frowns. He reaches to shove him again, but this time Jason’s ready for it. He pushes his hand down over Dick’s nose and mouth, which works for precisely as long as it takes the kid to lick his palm.

“Urgh, gross!”

Dick grins at him for a moment, before his expression immediately turns serious again. “But you really aren’t, I know.”

Jason sighs, barely resisting the urge to roll his eyes. “Of course you know, you’re constantly up my ass every hour of the day.” That’s a grosser sentence than he meant it to be in retrospect, but Jason covers that reality up by not acknowledging it out loud. “I’m okay, Dick, really.”

Dick just stares at him, and eventually Jason lets out a low groan.

“All right, fine, you win. I’m not okay, but I will be as soon as this is over, all right? Just… let me wallow in my misery for now. It’s cathartic.”

“I don’t think that’s what that word means.”

“Do you know what any three syllable word means?”

Dick takes that moment to outright pounce on him, and they wrestle around on the floor for a couple minutes before abruptly remembering Alfred’s last warning about such behaviour when Ace comes bounding into the room, barking excitedly. Dick grabs her collar before she can attempt to destroy anymore of the furnishings, which she of course takes as a signal to clamber into his lap despite being very emphatically not lap sized, especially for a twelve year old. Jason leans back to avoid the blurred whip of her wagging tail. “Your dog is nuts.”

“I know, I love her.” Dick replies, hugging Ace tight around the neck to prove his point. Then he looks sidelong at Jason, “I’m just worried, I guess. Last time you weren’t sleeping, you nearly fell out a window.”

Jason winces at the reminder. “That was different.” That was a panic attack, prompted by the unfortunate discovery that something he’d long considered a secret comfort had now become poisoned by both past and present. “I just need to get this done, Dick. As soon as it is, I’ll be all right, promise.”

Dick leans in against his side. “You can’t promise stuff like that.”

It shows how used he’s become to Dick’s proclivity to touch and reassure himself through physical contact that Jason just wraps his arm around him without question now, even if it means Ace’s tail whacking him in the chest like a battering ram. “No, I guess not. But I know I’ll be better at least, that’s for damn sure.”

“So what now?”

Jason chooses to take that question in its simplest meaning. “Want to go down to the Cave and throw some batarangs?”

Anything superhero related is a guaranteed attention puller for Dick these days, and this time is no exception. He brightens immediately, nodding with undisguised enthusiasm. “Yeah, it’ll be fun to do something you actually have a chance of beating me at.”

Jason snorts as he takes the opportunity to drag his knuckles through Dick’s hair. “Brat.”
Five hours later, he’s out on patrol, looking out across the rooftops of downtown with the wind tugging at his cape. Bruce is out of the city on Wayne Enterprises business tonight (and Damian is over in Bludhaven, of course), so it’s just Robin, Black Bat and Spoiler running Gotham’s circuit. Not that there’s been very much going on for them to worry about lately. The whole city is quiet. With a strange oppressive feeling in the air that makes Jason wonder if they’ve got a thunderstorm incoming despite no weather warnings being in place.

It’d be just his luck for that to be so, and he can only hope that any bad weather decides to hit after he’s already back home tucked up in his bed tonight, rather than out in the open and exposed. Getting sick is the last thing he wants right now.

As if in agreement with his thoughts, somewhere below Jason a dog starts barking loudly. The fifth one he’s heard tonight — not that he’s consciously keeping track — and Jason’s just leaning over the edge of the rooftop to see if the cause of the disturbance is anything he should be concerned about when the warning chirp of an incoming transmission sounds in his ear.

At first, he thinks it’s Alfred calling him, or even Dick, now that the kid’s helping out in the Cave. It actually turns out to be neither.

“Hey, Rob!”

“R—Speedy?” Jason starts, unable to hide his surprise at hearing his voice. Lifting his hand up to his ear, he pushes down on reflex, trying to cut out the whistling sound of the wind around him. Normally, he and Roy only talk through their civilian identities, and it’s been that long since their team up alongside Green Arrow last month that he’d almost forgotten his new friend has access to this method of communication between them as well.

“Bingo.” Roy’s voice sounds warm on the other end of the line. “How’s it going, Jaybird?”

Completely caught off guard by the call, all Jason can think to say is, “You know this channel is for emergencies only, right?” instead of directly answering the question.

“Maybe I am having an emergency.” comes the immediate reply, tinged with amusement.

He snorts despite himself, “You don’t sound particularly urgent.”

“It’s a laid-back emergency.”

“I think that’s an oxymoron.”

“You think I’m a moron?”

Jason bites his lip. He knows Roy is only playing with him, but... “What do you want, Speedy?”

“Nothing. I mean, just to talk. I’m kind of bored over here.”

Tell me about it, Jason thinks, but is still mildly incredulous that Roy called him across the country on an encrypted line just so they could chat. “I’m on patrol right now. I don’t know if I can—”

“Come on, Jason,” Roy interrupts him before he can get any further, throwing aside code names
for a moment, “I’ve barely heard from you the last couple weeks. Can’t you spare me five minutes at least?”

Guilt, whether intended or not, lances through Jason’s belly. With everything else that’s been going on recently he’s admittedly been neglecting Roy and their conversations. Mostly because the thought of continuing to speak to him as they were, acting as if nothing was wrong, had sat ill in his gut.

Withdrawing into himself probably hadn’t been the best way to cope with that, but it’s the most tried and true method Jason knows for dealing with what makes him uncomfortable. “I’ve been preoccupied,” he answers carefully, “You know how it is.”

“Well, are you ‘preoccupied’ now?”

This time, Jason hesitates before replying. He could easily blow Roy off and go back to stewing in his own misery. That’s a thing he could do. One minor lie, and Roy would never know the truth. Gotham is a city of sin, everyone who lives both in and outside of her borders knows that. He could lie, make up some crime, some case he has to get to. Even just a simple mugging would do. It’d be easier than talking, just him and Gotham and the whole empty night stretching out ahead of them…

“No,” is what he says quietly instead, “I’m not.”

“Cool.”

Deciding he might as well take a seat, Jason perches next to one of the gargoyles guarding the rooftop. “So, what do you want to talk about?”

A lot, as it turns out. It’s easy to nudge Roy into talking about himself, which he does with aplomb, sparing Jason the discomfort of sharing details of his own life recently. He talks about his work with Green Arrow, the drudgery of school and a particularly awesome shot he made last week that makes Jason smile and roll his eyes. Then the conversation turns to complaining about how hard Superboy’s been running the Teen Titans lately and his stomach starts to squirm all over again, pretending he knows nothing about it.

“I wish you’d just come over here and hang out with us.” Roy says wistfully, at the end of his rant. “I don’t understand why you won’t.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to,” Jason replies, a tad defensively. He can admit that much to himself these days. “It’s just…” What? What does he say? That he’s chasing a formerly dead ex-Robin? Just the thought of explaining all of that makes him feel sick. “Complicated.” He finishes lamely. “It’s complicated.”

“You mean it’s something you can’t tell me?”

“Pretty much.”

“Jeez, you Bats and your secrets.”

Roy sounds unimpressed, and Jason doesn’t blame him. “It’s not really my choice.” he protests. “If I could I would. There’s just… fuck, there’s a lot riding on this, Roy. More than you could imagine. I need to get it done, then I swear I’ll come hang out with you. I’ll do whatever you want.”

Something in his voice must convince Roy that he means every word, because his own tone softens in response. “Anything I want, huh?”

“Anythiiing I want.”

He groans, “Roy—”

The unexpected sound of a scream echoing up from a few streets over cuts Jason off before he can finish making his excuses. In the space of a second, he’s back up on his feet, looking out over the rooftops in the direction that it came from.

“Sorry, Roy, I gotta go. Something just came up.”

Not waiting for a response, Jason cuts the line and starts running. In this part of town everything is built close enough together that he doesn’t need to bother using the grapnel. He just leaps, crossing streets in seconds. Another frightened shriek helps him pinpoint the exact origin of the trouble, and Jason arrives at the mouth of an alleyway to find a few heavies trying to wrestle some teenagers into the open doors of a waiting van.

No way in hell is he going to let that behaviour stand.

Jason takes a brief moment to assess the situation, noting who among the heavies is armed and who’s not, then makes ready to jump down there. Only before he can, shots ring out down the alley.

The heads of the men holding the kids bloom red first. A visceral, arterial display of flying blood and bone. The other three — the ones guarding the perimeter — have barely enough time to realise what’s happening before they too drop to the ground. Stunned by the sudden, swift violence of it, Jason whips his head around in the direction the shots came from and feels his ribs instantly constrict inside his chest, stabbing deep into his heart.

No.

No, he thinks, struggling for a blind moment to makes sense of what it is he’s seeing. No way. Not here, not now. It’s impossible. After everything they’ve gone through up till now, he can’t just have found him by chance. Not like this.

“Run.”

Jason’s no longer paying attention to the kids or the dead men. It’s been six months since he last heard that electronically filtered voice real and in the flesh, but he feels instantly transported back in time as he watches the Red Hood stalk down the alley towards the van. Instead of crisp night air, there are walls around him, bands of steel constricting his wrists. Rustling paper, the feeling of hopelessness looming in from all side as he tries over and over again to get himself free.

He knows he should call it in. Radio Alfred to send backup. Get Cass and Steph. Bring their shared target in the right way; the way Bruce would want him to if he were here.

Only he’s not here. None of them are. Jason is on his own, watching Tim Drake walk down a Gotham alleyway, and all the anger he’s carried with him since the first day they met explodes anew in his gut, uncontained and uncontrolled.

Before he even thinks about what he’s doing, Jason leaps, rebounding off the building’s fire escape to make a safe landing on the tarmac below. Tim marks him as soon as he leaves the roof, but not fast enough to do anything about it. The moment Jason’s feet touch the ground, he’s slamming forwards into him, one hand raised to land a punch squarely on Tim’s jaw.
The last time he did this, Jason’s hand had been bare, and hitting Tim’s helmet had done nothing but earn him bruised knuckles. Now his fingers are wrapped in kevlar and titanium weave, knuckles braced by steel. The blow snaps the Red Hood’s head back, and even if it doesn’t actually hurt Tim himself underneath that protection, it sure as hell still makes an impact as he stumbles sideways into the nearby wall.

“Robin, wait!” Tim tries to protest, lifting his hands in front of him, but Jason doesn’t give him even a single moment to recover. Hesitating is how you lose fights, not win them, and he feels a certain wicked delight under all the anger that this time he’s the one with the advantage; taking Tim off guard in a flat reversal of their first encounter.

With a hard shove, Jason knocks the gun from Tim’s grip. Slamming his wrist back against brick as he gets in close and personal while narrowly avoiding the retaliatory elbow thrown at his face. And it’s with some shock that Jason realises he’s bigger than Tim now, taller by a good few inches and broader besides.

Of course, he knew that he’d grown some the last few months, but actually being able to look down at his former captor… It’s a surprisingly good feeling, at least until Tim takes that brief moment of distraction to slam his knee into his stomach.

“I said wait, damn it!”

“Fuck you!” Jason snarls back. He’s not helpless this time. Not held back by chains or walls. They’re in Gotham, in his territory, and he’s not about to let Tim get away again. Not without some payback, at least.

Unfortunately, getting away seems to be Tim’s intention. When Jason swings at him a second time, he ducks underneath the blow, ramming his shoulder into his chest. The force of it sends Jason stumbling back a few paces, and that’s all the opportunity Tim needs to shoot a grapple up to the rooftop he so recently abandoned.

Jason doesn’t waste a second in following him, and by the time he makes it up there Tim is already nothing more than a sleek shadow racing northwards across the city. One that — even with his longer legs helping him eat up the distance between them — Jason struggles to keep up with. They bound from building to building, splashing through puddles of stale rainwater and sending formerly roosting pigeons flying. Jason throws a batarang in an attempt to slow him down, but somehow Tim ducks it, wheeling around the large protrusion of an old air conditioning unit before flipping across another gap to the empty office building behind it.

It’s there that he suddenly stops, whirling about as Jason finally catches up with him. With such little warning, it’s almost a collision between them, but Jason digs his heels in at the last minute, skidding to a halt barely a metre away. His eyes dart down to Tim’s hand, which now hangs by the holster of his remaining gun, but he doesn’t draw it. Not yet.

“That’s far enough, Jason.” he says.

Jason growls at the address, “It’s Jason now, huh? Not Robin?”

“No one can hear us up here. If we’d stayed down where we were, the police would have eventually come.”

“Good!” Jason snaps, “They should arrest you. You belong in prison for what you’ve done.”

“Yes,” Tim admits flatly, “I do. But you don’t really want the consequences of what would happen if I did, do you, Jason?”
As much as Jason hates to admit it, he’s right. Even after all this time, Tim is still recognisable enough as the Drake heir that they can’t risk him being picked up by the cops. More than that, if the GPCD did arrest him the League of Assassins wouldn’t be far behind. Public prison is a complete no go what with how determined Ra’s apparently is to get Tim back at his side.

“Take off the helmet.” he demands, gritting his teeth instead of answering the question.

“Why?”

“Because the next time I hit you, I want it to be on your smug face!”

He snarls even as Tim sighs, that electronic buzzing painfully familiar. “I didn’t come here to fight with you, Jason.” he says.

“You just murdered five men.” Jason glares. “Even ignoring everything else you’ve done, I’d say that gives me pretty good grounds to kick your ass.”

“They were kidnappers.”

Stunned by the audacity of what he just said, Jason laughs bitterly. “Which is really rich coming from you! You remember how we met, right? Dart to the neck, locking me up in an improvised jail cell? You are such a fucking hypocrite, Red.”

The slim line of Tim’s shoulders stiffens. “That was necessary.” he says, quietly, in what Jason guesses is a forced monotone. “You know that. Gotham is—"

“Gotham is still a shit hole, even if you killed the worst piece of crap in it.” Jason argues, lifting his hand to point accusingly at Tim’s chest, “And you don’t get to just waltz back in here anytime you feel like playing savior.”

“Jason,” he tries again, seemingly undeterred by his behaviour, “I understand that you’re angry, but you need to listen to me now. The people I’m hunting here are dangerous, and if I don’t stop them a whole lot of kids are going to suffer. Kids like the ones I just rescued. You don’t want that. I know you don’t.”

*Chimaera*, a quiet, reasonable voice in the back of Jason’s mind pipes up, *He’s talking about Chimaera.* Does that mean their plan actually worked? That they’ve successfully driven Tim’s attention away from the laboratories on the west coast to those on the east? It seems that way, yet one detail doesn’t quite match up. The assassin he and Damian interrogated back in L.A hadn’t said anything about there being a base in Gotham (which now that Jason thinks about it, had been odd considering how high the city’s homeless population is).

No, he shakes his head, tearing his mind away from that train of thought. He can’t get afford to get distracted by that right now, or anything else. If there is a Chimaera base in Gotham they’ll find it on their own, as well as take down all the others. The only thing he needs to do in this moment is not let Tim get away again.

“Take off the helmet.” Jason repeats, starting to stalk forward and reaching into his belt for another batarang.

Tim’s hand inches nearer his gun. “You’re being ridiculous.”

“Then shoot me.” Jason dares him, “Because it’s the only way in hell that I’ll let you—”

He doesn’t know where it comes from, the rumble under his feet that cuts him off from what he was saying. A brief second of disorientation that would have sent Jason stumbling right into Tim,
had the other man not taken the opportunity to quickly step back away from him.

“The fuck?” Jason whispers, than louder as he glares at the only culprit he can think of for the strange occurrence, “What did you do?”

“It’s not me!” Tim snaps back at him, his patience seemingly finally at an end.

Good, that makes two of them.

Jason frowns as he watches Tim turn his head, his attention drifting away from the threat in front of him as he attempts to seek out the source of the disturbance himself. Jason wishes he could read his expression, but the blank red face of Tim’s helmet gives away nothing, and his body language only reads tension, the same way it has since the beginning of this encounter. “I don’t see—”

Jason will never know how to accurately describe what happens next. One moment the world is preternaturally still, like someone pushed some cosmic pause button, then — with a great crack like thunder filling the air — everything erupts into chaos.

At first, he thinks the storm he’d been anticipating earlier has finally come, but then it’s with horror that Jason realises that the sound he’s hearing came not from above but below him. The roof of the building he and Tim are standing on shakes so hard that he can’t stay standing, and Jason scrabbles for his grapple gun, instinctively understanding that his only hope in this moment is to get to firmer ground.

Except that when he looks around him he can’t find any.

It’s not just this building, the entire city is shaking.

“Jason, move!” A hand grabs him by the scruff of his cape, attempting to lift Jason up from where he’s fallen. Tim’s hand, he belatedly realises. But it’s too late. The roof under them is crumbling, disintegrating like paper. Even as they try to jump clear of the impending cave in they fall. Amid the rising terror and confusion, Jason is aware of Tim still holding onto him, his own hands reaching out in a desperate bid to grab something, anything, to slow their descent.

But there’s nothing. No solid ground, no wall, and as the sky above them rapidly disappears from view, Jason finds himself losing all sense of direction. He can only scream as together they continue to fall, unimpeded, down into the dark.

Chapter End Notes

Back when I published chapter 2 of this story, someone left me a comment asking if Cataclysm had happened yet in the timeline. Well, six chapters later, now it has.
Jason’s hair is wet. That’s the first thing he registers when he wakes up. His hair is wet, and cold, cast in soaking lines across his face like ghostly tendrils. The second is that he’s laid on some hard, unforgiving surface; unyielding stone that digs painfully into his hip even as he tries to work out the logistics of sitting up.

The third is that he can’t see.

Tamping down on the panic that wants to rise in his chest, Jason blinks a few times just to be sure, but the world continues to remain in pitch darkness in front of him. Immediately, he scrambles his hand downwards to his utility belt while levering himself up on his other arm. It takes a few disorientating seconds for him to find the pouch that contains the miniature flashlight he normally uses for examining evidence, but as soon as he does he switches it on — sighing in heartfelt relief that his eyes register the light — while in the process also getting his first good look at the interior of the pit he’s fallen into.

And pit really is an apt description for it. Jason’s heart sticks in his throat as he turns the light, scouting out the mess of broken rubble around him. Slabs of concrete, loose bricks, entire sections of walls and pipes ring an area that’s maybe ten feet in circumference with dusky alcoves spotted here and there. At certain points, shattered glass glints back at him, and splintered planks of wood stick out from the walls like stakes from the heart of a giant. He has no idea how far they’ve fallen, only that the rest of the office building they were standing on has plainly come down along with them.

… them…

Jason whips around, causing his head to pound with the pain from unwelcomely realised bruises. He knees splash in the shallow puddle of water he was laid in as he searches through the shadows. Looking everywhere for a glimpse of red amongst the grey and brown.

He finds it uncomfortably close. Bare feet behind him in fact. Tim is laid on his back, partially under a cover of dust and what might have once been part of a desk. He doesn’t move as Jason crawls on shaky knees closer to him, shining the point of his flashlight directly in the face of his now visibly cracked helmet.

“Red?” Jason calls experimentally, staying just out of lunging distance until he’s sure Tim really is out. “Hey. Hey, you awake?”

No response. Jason breathes a little easier, though not too much. Tim might be unconscious, but he’s still in a sh*t situation, considering his admittedly small exploration of the hole has yet to suggest there may be a way out.

Reaching into another belt pouch, Jason produces a small glowstick. It’ll do better as a continuous light source than the flashlight. He cracks the end, waits for the chemicals to combine, then gently places it on top of a nearby block of stone as ambient red light starts to fill the area. It’s not especially bright, but it’s more than enough to work with as he turns off the flashlight, tucks it back into his belt, then inches closer to get a better look at Tim.

First things first, Jason lifts and flips the piece of desk off his chest. At this proximity, he can hear
Tim’s breathing, slightly laboured but steady through the filter of his helmet. A good sign overall. Especially in the face of what further examination of his body reveals.

One of Tim’s feet is bent at an angle Jason can instantly tell is wrong. A broken ankle, almost definitely. He chews his lip as he tries to think what to do about it. More than that, what to do about Tim and this entire situation.

He has no idea what it is that happened to bring them down here. His first thought, that it was an explosion, just doesn’t ring true the more he thinks about it. If the building had exploded it would have thrown them out, not caved in on itself. Then there’s the terrible thought he had in the moment before the fall; that the entire city was shaking around him.

Licking his lips, Jason lifts his hand to his ear and does what he now accepts he should have done the very first moment he spotted Tim. He attempts to call home.

“Cave, this is Robin. Alfred, are you there?”

Silence. He tries again.

“Alfred, please come in. I…” he hesitates, “I’ve got myself into a bit of a situation here. I need help.” But there’s still no reply. Jason twists the tiny dial on his comm, turning to a more open channel. Maybe someone closer will hear him and respond. “Spoiler? Black Bat? If there’s anyone listening, I need you to answer me. It’s an emergency.”

Nothing. All the debris must be interfering with the signal. At least he hopes that’s what the cause is. Jason grimaces as he drops his hand, allowing it to join the other in his lap and squeezing both into fists. He needs to stay calm, not panic. Do what he can for now and work the rest out later, no matter how much it seems the universe hates him (which is the only explanation Jason can think of for this: everything going wrong just as it finally seemed to be going right).

First things first, he should disarm Tim, restrain him, and then do what he can for his ankle. Surely he can get that right if nothing else.

Moving carefully, Jason pulls a pair of cuffs from his belt and snaps them around Tim’s limp wrists, wary at every moment for a sign of him waking. Then, as quickly as he can, searches over his suit for hidden pockets, gadgets and weapons. Everything he finds he either tosses a safe distance away or sequesters in his own belt for later examination, since some of the tools Tim has might come in useful later for helping them get out of here.

It’s as Jason’s gently feeling out his ankle, trying to decide whether or not he should try to take off his boot, that Tim finally comes awake. Letting out a pained hiss that gives Jason adequate warning to move back away from him.

“Morning, princess,” he says as soon as he’s sure Tim will hear him, and pouring venom into his voice to cover his unease, “You sleep well?”

“What…” Jason watches as Tim tries and fails to sit up, movements jerky and slow, then stops when he realises there are cuffs around his wrists. “Jason?”

“The one and only.” he replies.

“Where… where are we?”

Whatever cracked his helmet must have done a number on Tim’s noggin as well. It’s almost funny that he sounds more disorientated than Jason is, considering he himself had taken a blow to the head on the way down without any protection at all.
“Where do you think we are, genius?” he replies scornfully, “We’re underground. Buried beneath what­ever’s left of that building we were standing on.”

“I can’t—” The building frustration in Tim’s voice fizzes out as he forces himself to take a calming breath. “The screen in my helmet is broken. I can only see static.”

Huh, that’s interesting. “There’s not much to see.” Jason answers. “Unless you’re into junkyard aesthetics.”

Tim ignores him, and Jason watches as he lifts his bound hands, trying to pry at his helmet. Something that goes on for several minutes before he eventually gives up with a frustrated groan.

“Need some help?”

If he could see Tim’s face, Jason is sure it would be glaring at him right now. “Considering someone tied my wrists together, yes.”

“Necessary precaution.” Jason replies. He’s tempted just to leave him like that, but after a moment’s thought recognises that temptation for what it is: cruel impulse. For all that Tim had put Jason through when he held him captive, he’d at least never left him blind. “Try anything funny and I’ll knock you right back out again.” he warns.

“Duly noted. There’s a catch at the back. You just need to—”

“I got it.”

But even with that instruction, actually finding the damn thing still takes Jason a minute. Especially when he’s so uncomfortable being close to Tim. He ends up pulling out his flashlight again to get a better look, and finally the helmet comes off.

For a moment, Jason just holds it in his hand, staring at the spiderweb of cracks across the front (Alas, poor Yorick), before setting it to one side and turning his head to get his first good look at Tim Drake’s face in six months. The red light given off by the glow stick casts his features in stark relief, highlighting the sharpness of his cheekbones and the circles beneath his eyes, but other than that not much about his appearance has changed. Only his hair has grown, further disrupting the line between ghost and reality that had so disturbed Jason the first time he saw him.

Not noticing his staring for now, or perhaps purposefully ignoring it, Tim tries again to sit up. Evidently it hurts him a lot to do so, as he clenches his jaw and hisses between his teeth the whole way. But he manages it, and Jason shifts back a little on his knees as he watches Tim start to take in their surroundings before turning his gaze down at his twisted ankle.

“Crap.” he surmises.

Jason would use a more extreme word, but that’s just him he guesses. “Yeah.”

Tim licks his lips. As best he can, he presses his bound hands to his right thigh, squeezing it perhaps in an attempt to help with the pain, but still winces. “How…” he breathes in deeply, “How long have we been down here?”

“I don’t know. An hour, maybe.” It’s Jason’s best guess, or maybe more wishful thinking. “I tried calling home, but no one’s answering.”

“It must be the debris.” Tim says, unknowingly echoing Jason’s earlier thought.
“I figured that.” he says, sharply. “Wherever that explosion came from—”

“It wasn’t an explosion.”

Jason narrows his eyes behind his mask, displeased by the interruption. “All right, then, jackass,” he says, “What was it?”

Tim looks pensive. If it weren’t for the red light illuminating everything, Jason could imagine his skin grey with stress and pain. There are tight lines at the corners of his eyes and mouth, and a bead of sweat runs down from his temple to the corner of his jaw. “An earthquake.”

“Gotham doesn’t get earthquakes.” Jason responds, because what else can he possibly say to that?

“Not normally.” Tim replies, now raising his eyes to the precariously wedged together mess above them. “But there is a major fault line that runs under the city.”

“How do you know that?” Jason asks suspiciously. He’s never heard anything about it before.

“Bruce.” Tim answers succinctly. “He has information about it on the Batcomputer. He always believed an earthquake would happen to the city one day. That’s why he keeps a seismologist on staff, and had every Wayne-owned building made earthquake-proof.”

It says a lot about his relationship with Bruce that Jason has no trouble believing that, though he is still disgruntled to learn that Tim had the information when he didn’t. Unwilling to give Tim the chance to lord it over him, Jason skips over asking him more about Bruce’s secret investments in favour of reaching up to rub his aching head, “Great,” he mutters, “Just great.”

As if he hadn’t spoken, Tim continues, “It looks like we’re in a stable pocket for now; we probably fell into what was the building’s basement. But we should try and find a way out as soon as possible, before the aftershocks come.”

Aftershocks… right, of course. Earthquakes have aftershocks. And as much as Jason doesn’t want to believe it really was an earthquake that brought them down here — because what then, does that say about the lack of response he’s getting from the Cave? — he’s not so willing to pursue denial as to ignore the chance that what’s above them could still come crashing down on their heads any minute. Being crushed is not a way he wants to go. Not a way Tim would like to go a second time either, he’d wager.

“I’ll get right on that.” He says shortly. “But your leg—”

“Won’t matter if we’re dead.” Tim diverts him, “Don’t worry about it, Jason. I’ll be fine.”

“Wasn’t worried. Just didn’t want you to slow me down.” Taking the excuse gladly, Jason stands up to start a proper inspection of the pit they’re trapped in. He hates the feeling that by doing so he’s almost following Tim’s orders, but there’s really no other choice. “Don’t go anywhere, will you?”

He says it sarcastically, and not missing a beat, Tim raises his cuffed hands with a sardonic smile.

Jason’s not foolish enough to believe that makes him harmless for a second.

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Exploring every inch of the little space yields no obvious exit. No gaps big enough for more than a rat to run through, in fact. Jason grimaces as he turns back towards Tim, ready to deliver the grim news when a dull rumble suddenly shakes everything around him and sends him falling back onto his knees.
He cringes down until it’s over, terror spiking in his chest as trickles of dust fall through the concrete cracks and land in his hair. But by the time the shaking stops Jason’s still alive, and no more hurt than he was before. He counts that as a win.

“Are you okay?” Tim asks him from where he’s sat, evidently still alive too.

“Like you care,” he bites back, a distraction from the hot feeling of blood pounding in his chest and at the back of his skull. Jason shakes his head to get rid of the dust and then climbs back over to him. “There’s no way out. We’re stuck here until someone finds us.”

“Until someone finds us.” Tim echoes. Jason glances at his face, finds his eyes hooded, and his lips pressed thin.

“Yeah,” he replies, a touch more aggressively. “Which they will. Just might take a little while.”

Tim shakes his head. “You said it yourself, you can’t get a signal out. The city is probably a mess up there. If they can move through it at all, there’ll be a lot of other people needing their help besides us.”

It’s a ruthlessly logical assessment, but Jason still rails against it. “I’m not giving up, if that’s what you’re suggesting.”

“I’m just being realistic.” Tim says, not looking directly at him. “Better to temper your expectations now rather than later.”

Jason’s not ignorant. Not enough to miss that there might be something else fuelling that morbid assessment than a commitment to realism. He bites his lip, but sympathy is hard to come by at the moment for him. At least towards Tim.

“Fuck you.” he says, dropping down onto a dry piece of ground. After a moment, he reaches up and starts to work the mask off his face, finding it suddenly cloying against his skin. With all the distraction so far, he’s managed not to think about it, but being trapped down here with no exit…

Jason wouldn’t call himself claustrophobic, exactly. It’s not the size of the space that bothers him, it’s the fact that there’s no obvious way out. No control. At home, he always keeps either a window or door slightly cracked, just for that simple degree of comfort. The need is nowhere near as bad as it was six months ago, at least normally, but this situation is far from normal.

Normal isn’t being buried under God knows how many feet of twisted concrete, wood and metal with the very man who gave him that need in the first place.

His last words seem to have finally given Tim the incentive to shut up, because no answer comes but the sound of fabric scraping over stone. Jason watches Tim as he slowly, painfully, shuffles backwards across the floor to where he can lean against the nearest wall. He has to twist onto his side so he can use his elbow to drag himself due to his bound hands and needing to keep his injured leg aloft. It looks like it hurts a lot, but Tim doesn’t ask for him any help, so neither does Jason offer it. The movement leaves them sat at opposite sides of the chamber, something that’s for the best so far as he’s concerned.

And so they wait.

An hour passes. Then creeps up on two.

Jason spends the first half hour fiddling with his communicator, adjusting the settings and trying
every frequency he can in hopes of picking up a signal, but to no result. He checks over his equipment, counts how much of each piece he has left, useless as they are for this situation, then spends the rest of the time staring at his feet, trying not to imagine the walls closing in around him. The fact he’s still breathing comfortably shows there’s airflow coming in from somewhere, and he comforts himself with that knowledge as much as possible. At the very least they’re not going to suffocate to death.

But eventually, the silence gets too much and he needs to either talk or go crazy. Jason looks up and over at Tim, who has kept his eyes closed and barely moved the entire time, licks his lips, then asks, “Why did you come back to Gotham?”

He already knows the answer, more or less. But it’s a safe question. A neutral question. Not personal the way so many of them could be. The way Jason wants them to be, but that’s a path he’s not quite ready to tread yet.

Tim blinks open his eyes. Slowly, like he’d been dozing, then shakes his head. “Now you ask me that.” he mutters, though not so quietly that Jason can’t hear him. He clenches his jaw, but before he can say anything in response Tim speaks again, louder and clearer this time. “I’ve been hunting after a criminal group called Chimera for some time now. They deal in illegal genetic manipulation and experimentation on the metagene. Kidnap homeless kids as guinea pigs to do it. Their successful experiments are sold off to buyers wanting their own personal superhuman weapon, while the failures are disposed of in exactly the way you’d imagine.”

Jason’s stomach twists, thinking of the empty cells he’d seen in Los Angeles. “So they’re operating out of Gotham?”

“No. They deemed it too risky to have a laboratory directly in the city with all the vigilantes running about; they’ve been doing raids on the streets and then taking the kids to their bases elsewhere instead.”

Points to the bad guys, Jason thinks. Being wise enough to stay out of Gotham was more than most of their ilk thought to do. It also explains how they didn’t know about it. Not that that’s any comfort to him, or will be to Bruce either. Even a single life lost under their watch is an unforgivable failure, and always will be.

“So not because you ran into the Teen Titans on the other side of the country, then.”

Tim’s shoulders noticeably stiffen, but then he narrows his cool, grey eyes at Jason while rapid deductions go on behind them.

“You already knew about Chimera.” he correctly surmises.

“Hard not to,” Jason replies, “After Superboy broke down our front door.”

Tim draws in sharp breath that has nothing to do with the pain from his ankle. “He always was impulsive.”

That turn of phrase rankles Jason almost more than anything else so far. “Yeah, well, his ‘impulsiveness’ almost got Bruce hurt.” he spits. “Me and Dick too. You know him right? Twelve year old kid who has nothing to do with any of this bullshit. All because you couldn’t be bothered to actually stick around and hold a conversation. But then, I guess that’s a running pattern with you, right? Acceptable collateral damage.”

“That wasn’t my—”

“Your fault?” Jason cuts in before he can finish the sentence, sensing where it’s going. “Just like
“My intention.” Tim sighs, correcting him and meeting his glare with exhausted resignation. “It wasn’t my intention.” He winces as he adjusts his position against the wall while trying to keep his injured leg as still as possible. “Look, just… just say what you want to say to me, Jason. Whatever it is, I probably deserve it.”

On that they agree. And Jason knows it’s petty to feel disgruntled at having Tim both invite and accept his scorn in advance, but of course he still does. He wants his words to cut and wound. Wants them to be felt right down to Tim’s very core, not shaken off like water from a duck’s back. But at the same time, he’s also thought about this moment to the edge of obsession since December, and isn’t about to let it slip away now, no matter their larger circumstances.

“Are you even sorry for what you did to me?” Jason asks him first.

Tim bites his lip, expression growing briefly troubled before smoothing back out into measured detachment. “Of course I’m sorry for it,” he says, “But what you’re really asking is, do I regret it?” he shakes his head. “No. I did what I had to do. I wish there had been another way but… I wouldn’t take it back.”

Jason hadn’t expected anything different. Hoped that time might have given Tim a different perspective on his actions maybe, but that’s all.

“No, you’re not.” He says, shifting his left hand to grip the opposing wrist as he speaks. “If you were really sorry, you’d regret what you did. But you don’t, so you’re not sorry.” He takes a deep breath, and for a moment the shadows around them seem to grow deeper, despite the glow stick’s light being as steady as ever. “I couldn’t sleep for goddamn days afterward, you know? Fucking nightmares about being trapped and not able to get out. You kept me locked up in that room for almost three weeks, chained to the wall like a dog.”

“I was as kind as I could be,” Tim says, words flat like he knows how little good they’ll do. Like he’s reciting something he’s practiced a hundred times before in his head. “But I had to keep you from getting out. You’re too skilled for me to have done it any other way.”

“Kind?” Incredulous, it’s all Jason can do not to launch himself forwards at him again. “You think that was kind? What, did the Lazarus Pit scramble the meanings of words around in your head as well as make you take leave of your senses?”

Tim can’t hide his resultant flinch at Jason’s mention of the Pit. His next retort is truly that, harshly spoken and defensive, “Would you rather I handed you over to Ra’s like he wanted? You’d be lying at the bottom of a shallow grave by now if I had.”

“I’d rather you hadn’t done it at all!” Jason snaps back, chest heaving with the volume of his words.

Inside the small chamber, they echo back and around him. Like the damning knell of a church bell growing ever fainter.

His fingers squeeze even tighter around his wrist.

Tim just closes his eyes. “I’m sorry, Jason. I already explained this to you, it had to be done. There’s nothing else I can say to make you understand.”

Jason’s anger flares hot and tight inside his chest. “Yeah, you killed the Joker. Some of the others too, and fucked over a bunch more with injuries that not all of them will recover from. Got your revenge, knocked crime in Gotham down a few pegs. I guess you must be real pleased with
yourself. Made everything worth it, huh? Throwing over your friends and family, making yourself a fugitive.”

That Tim doesn’t answer. He bows his head forward, the long fall of his hair coming down to cover much of his face from view. He doesn’t look happy or pleased, not the way Jason accused him of being at least. In fact, he looks melancholy and forlorn. Even… even vulnerable. Jason doesn’t like it. Doesn’t like that he can see that. That the sight actually tugs at him, bringing up another emotion besides anger.

“I just… I don’t get it.” he says more quietly, “You could’ve come home. Or gotten a message out to us after Ra’s brought you back. Bruce would’ve come for you. He would’ve dropped everything if it meant getting you back. But instead you…”

“I made it so I can’t go home again.” Tim finishes for him.

“Yeah.” Jason swallows.

He can’t imagine it. Can’t imagine doing that. After everything Bruce has done for him. Alfred and Damian and Steph and Cass, and now Dick as well. They gave him the home he never thought he’d have, and certainly one he never thought he deserved. Jason never wants to lose that sense of security and love from around him. Never wants to betray the people who care for him by going against everything they hold dear, no matter if he sometimes questions those beliefs himself. Without them, Jason doesn’t think he’d be anything. Just another worthless nobody on the street. That’s if he hadn’t ended up dead one way or another first. From cold or sickness, at the hands of the cops or his…

Jason grips his wrist so tightly he swears he hears the bones grind together.

“I wanted to.” Tim murmurs, sounding more like he’s speaking to himself than Jason. “Of course I did. But after coming back from what happened to me…” he lifts his bound hands, runs his fingers over the corners of his mouth. “It was like I saw clearly for the first time. Everything laid out in front of me. I saw how pointless it all was. And I realised that I had to break the cycle. Stop that… that endless merry-go-round Bruce was trapped on. It had to stop. So that’s what I did; I stopped it. Fixed the problem. It was simple. Now the Joker will never murder anyone else. What happened to me will never happen to anyone else. That’s what made it worth it.”

Jason tastes bile in the back of his throat. It’s horrific to hear. He can follow Tim’s train of thought to a tee, understand it on a logical level, if not an emotional one.

“It won’t last forever, you know that right?” he eventually says, pulling out the words one by one. “It’s just a temporary fix. The Joker’s gone, some of the others too, but more will eventually come to replace them. We’ve already seen it start to happen. Are you going to kill them too?”

“I doubt I’ll be killing anyone again after this.” Tim says wryly, offering his shackled hands as an example. “If we don’t die in here, you’ll be putting me in prison.”

“But would you?”

Tim sighs. “Look, the problem is that most of Gotham’s criminals have worked out by now that Batman will never kill them. And there are some who won’t be frightened by anything but death. That’s why they have to know there’s someone out there who won’t hold back. Someone who doesn’t have any restraint in stopping them. It’s the only way to really make this work. So yes, I would.”

“You’d really be willing to have that much blood on your hands?” Jason remembers how terrible
he’d felt after letting just one man die, indirect as it was, by his own hand. How scared he’d been afterwards. Felipe had deserved it for what happened to Gloria, of that he’s certain, but to him it hadn’t been worth the cost of almost losing everything else he cared about in the end.

Tim shrugs, lowering his hands to his lap again. It’s deceptively casual gesture. “Can you think of another way to stop it, Jason?”

Jason licks his lips. They feel dry in the close air of the chamber. “I don’t think you can ever really stop it.” is how he chooses to answer. “Not completely. Not with any kind of threat. Crime’s always gonna be there, so long as people are greedy or desperate. You can solve one of those problems by fixing all the shit that’s wrong with society, but not the other.”

“So you’d just let it carry on?” Contrary to the words, Tim almost looks interested by what he’s saying.

“Of course not!” Jason sharply replies, “But you gotta face the fact that you can’t fix everything. Just do what you can, help the people you can, and hope at the end of the day you made a difference.”

“My way does make a difference, Jason, even if you don’t like it.”

It’s disappointing, but Jason knows he shouldn’t have expected anything different. “Well,” he says, shaking his head as bitterness flows out into his voice, “I guess I know now why Ra’s likes you so much; you’re just as ruthless as he is. Between the two of you you’ll probably burn down the whole world.”

It causes a reaction in Tim beyond anything else he’s said so far.

“I am nothing like Ra’s al Ghul!” he says vehemently.

“Yeah?” Jay replies, staring him down, “I don’t see it.”

Tim grits his jaw and looks away from him. Neither of them say anything more after that.

With conversation off the table, at least for now, Jason is forced to try and find other ways to keep himself calm. He checks over his equipment again, and for the hell of it also does an inventory of the other items he lifted off of Tim. When that’s finished, he moves on to counting the drips of water that are echoing from somewhere outside the chamber until he loses track of where he was, only to then immediately start all over again.

He’s on his third streak of counting when the next aftershock hits.

It’s worse this time. The ground seems to jolt under him, and across the way where he’d seemingly been dozing, Tim actually startles awake with a cry. Jason throws his arms over his head, shielding himself in case something more than dust comes down at him this time. A terrible sound like cracking, splintering stone fills the chamber and he chokes as all of a sudden the walls are falling in on him. The panic attack overwhelms Jason like a dam bursting. Everything he’s held in until now flowing out, locking in his vision, his sense of hearing, and even his lungs into a vice. He can’t breathe. Can’t focus. Not on anything but the crush of rock and constricting pressure surrounding him. Trapping him. And he can’t get out. He can’t get out!

He can’t—
“Breathe, Jason.”

The voice comes from a world away, words buzzing at his ears like flies.

“Jason, breathe!”

He tries, gulping in lungfuls of air. Too fast now. His chest feels fit to burst.

The voice sounds closer, strained as it tells him, “You’re having a panic attack, Jason. You have to calm down or you’re going to pass out. Listen and repeat after me, all right? One,”

Something in Jason cleaves to the tone of authority. He tries to obey, but his tongue is thick and heavy in his mouth, glueing his jaw together. But the voice doesn’t give in, repeating the order.

“One.”

“O-one.” he manages to stutter out.

“Two.”

“... two…”

“Three.”

“T-t-three…”

It goes on. Leading him through number after number. Latching on to the words, Jason finds his focus growing, away from the collapsing walls to the rigidity and order of numbers. Something safe. Something that drowns the panic down, pushes a lid onto it until it turns from a tsunami into only a rough undercurrent, easily ignored if he keeps his attention above the surface.

Jason swallows. He’s alive. He’s fine. The walls and ceiling didn’t come down on top of him. Whatever that sound was, it must have come from elsewhere, because he’s still here. And when he looks up from the concrete underneath him, so is Tim.

His face would be ghost white under a normal light source. As it is, Tim only looks an oddly wan shade of pink. He’s dragged himself across the floor until he’s almost next to where Jason is hunched over, and the source for his off colour appearance — as well as the sweat running down his temple and the glistening wetness in his eyes — is likely due to the pain that action must have caused him.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

Jason can only stare at him for a moment. “You…” he starts to say, only to trail off. Still tongue-tied, and feeling weak and shaky in the aftermath of what he just went through. “How did you…?”

Tim has an uncomfortable of understanding in his eyes. “It’s what helps me get through mine when I have them,” he answers, carefully, before his eyes dart to the side, “Most of the time, anyway.”

“Oh.” Jason is dumbstruck for a moment. It makes sense that Tim would have flashbacks of his own, PTSD in horrendous form, after what happened to him. But it still… “Well, I wouldn’t have them at all if not for you.” he mutters, drawing back defensively.

Now that the attack itself is over, mortified embarrassment rises to take its place. This isn’t like the
odd couple times he’s gone through this around Dick, who always stepped in to help him with an unavoidable hug. Dick is trustworthy, Tim is not. And as his spiteful words just showed, he’s the one who gave Jason this flaw in the first place.

Tim doesn’t deny it either. “I guess not.” he hisses as he lets himself roll onto his back on the ground, putting his hands up to cover his face. Maybe he doesn’t have the energy to pull himself back from Jason again. God knows Jason doesn’t have the energy right now to move away from him either.

“You know,” Tim says, after a minute of silence, “It was… easy at first. Everything. I saw the path I had to take and I followed it through. I had all the knowledge and resources I was going to need. Nothing mattered to me back then but succeeding.” he licked his lips, “You, especially. You were just… just the boy who was wearing the Robin suit now. I could take you off the board and I knew everything else would fall into place. Bruce, Damian… they’d do exactly what I wanted them to do. It never occurred to me to think that what I did, locking you up for all that time, that it would hurt you.”

Jason’s throat is dry. With dust and discomfort. The scratchy claws of memory raking his vocal chords.

“It wasn’t until it was too late that I realised the damage I was doing.” Tim continues, “By then I’d come too far to turn back. I couldn’t stop. Not without losing everything I’d already worked so hard for.”

It was after he had that nightmare, Jason remembers. The one about being lost in the city, abandoned and alone. Tim’s treatment of him had changed dramatically at that point, as he allowed him luxuries like the shower, and disconnected his chain from the wall so that he could actually walk around. At least until Ra’s showed up and ruined everything by catching Jason listening in on their conversation.

“Would you have done things differently if you had?” he asks, instead of any of the hundred other things he wants to say.

Tim’s answer is brutally honest. “I don’t know.”

Jason thinks about that for a moment, lead weights sinking further down into his stomach. “Bruce and Damian told me that the Pit does more things to those who use it than just heal them. They said that it also takes away your empathy, makes it easy to do things you never would otherwise. Did you know that?”

Letting his breath go in a shuddering sigh, Tim nods. “I did,” he says, moving his hands from his face to his chest instead. “I just didn’t care.” He blinks up at the debris above them. “I don’t think it’s as simple as that, though. Ra’s told me the Pit enhances what’s already inside you. Brings out your… true potential.”

“And Ra’s wouldn’t have any cause to lie to you about that.” Jason huffs, forcing himself finally to sit back up straight. His spine cracks along the way, reminding him of how long he’s spent hunched over.

Tim’s lips quirk into a bone dry smile. “No, no reason at all.”

Jason almost laughs. Almost. Only he knows that if he did it probably come out as an almost hysterical giggle, given the situation. “I figured you probably weren’t that stupid, considering that you’ve been on the run from him ever since.”
“He wants me to stand by his side and help him rule the world. I’m not really a fan of that.”
There’s something else in Tim’s eyes then, glazed over and haunted. “Now that I’ve betrayed him,
he’s probably keen to show me how much he doesn’t appreciate being used.”

Jason has a feeling that sentiment goes both ways. “We won’t let him take you back.”

Tim chuckles softly, shaking his head like Jason’s said something that’s amused him. “I’m not
worth the risk of you facing up to him.”

“Bruce would disagree.” Jason says in rebuttal, “So would a lot of other people, I think.”

“Including you?”

A good question. Jason chews on it for a moment before answering, “You’ve pissed me off, and I
might need to hit you in your face a few more times before I really start to feel better about that,
but yeah, me too. You fucked up, doesn’t mean you deserve to be handed back over to that
megalomaniac.”

Tim is quiet for so long Jason wonders if he’s not going to say anything else at all. But then he
does, words that Jason doesn’t expect spoken so quietly he almost doesn’t hear them. “You’re a
much kinder person than I am, Jason.”

Jason doesn’t know about that. He doesn’t feel very kind right now, just scared and a little angry.
“Yeah, well,” he shrugs, “You may change your mind about that once we get out of here. I’m still
planning on making sure you stay locked up for what you did.”

“If,” Tim says softly, “You mean if we get out of here.”

The reminder of their immediate circumstance is the last thing Jason wants to hear. He doesn’t
want to think about how meagre their chances are, how they shrink more and more with every
passing minute. Worse, what that might say about his family. Bruce and Damian should be safe,
they weren’t in Gotham when the earthquake struck, but the others…

“You’re a real miserable bastard, anyone ever tell you that?” Jason says, through newly gritted
teeth.

Tim smiles back, “More people than you might think.”

He snorts, shakes his head. “There’s a way out. There has to be. If not, they’ll find us.”

Filled with a new urge to prove that, Jason lurches to his feet again to explore the chamber anew.
Maybe the last aftershock knocked something loose that he can pry at, and it sure as hell beats
sitting around doing nothing and waiting to die.

When he eventually glances back over his shoulder to check on him, Tim has his eyes closed and
looks to have fallen asleep again. Right there, in the middle of the floor.

Jason tries not to worry about what that might mean for him.

“So what does Bruce plan to do with me?”

The question comes out of nowhere, almost another hour after their last talk. Jason blinks at the
unexpected sound of Tim initiating conversation, then looks up from where he’s been picking at
one of the small snack bars he carries in his utility belt to frown at him. “What?”
His attempts to pry at some of the broken stonework earlier to find them a way out had gotten him largely nowhere before it started to creak a little ominously. Forced to face defeat, at least for now, Jason had quickly pulled back, not wanting to hasten death if it was coming for him. He’d tried his communicator again instead, before growing hunger prodded him to where he is now.

If he rations them carefully enough, the small calorie dense bars will keep him — and by extension Tim if he decides to share — going for a couple days. They won’t help with the problem of thirst, however, which is by and large a far greater concern. What water there is in here definitely isn’t clean enough to drink.

“You said you intend to keep me locked up if we get out of here,” Tim clarifies, eyes staying fixed on the ‘ceiling’. “I was just wondering if that’s Bruce’s plan as well.”

Trust him to land on the same thing that’s been bothering Jason the last two weeks. He takes another resentful bite of the snack bar, chews it and then swallows before answering. “Yeah, of course it is.” he lies.

“Where?”

“Does it matter?”

“To me.” Tim says. He lifts his hands, then starts to extend fingers one by one as he lists names. “Arkham is gone, while Blackgate would be child’s play for me to escape from, which means there’s no place near Gotham he could send me. Belle Reve is Amanda Waller’s recruiting ground for the government’s Suicide Squad, which immediately puts it out. Of course, he could ship me to Iron Heights, but only if he can stomach the thought of what the warden there does to his prisoners. Maybe even Stryker’s Island if he wouldn’t mind the company I’d keep.”

Dropping his hands, Tim shrugs uncomfortably. “After those, there’s not many other choices left.”

Jason is forced to consider that he’s likely right in that assessment. He rubs his thumb over the snack bar’s wrapper to hear it crinkle before answering, “I think that depends on you.”

Tim smiles thinly. “You mean if I repent and swear to change my ways?”

“Pretty much.”

“That’s more sentimental than I’d expect of him.”

Jason narrows his eyes, ticked off by the tone of the words more than anything else. “Would you rather he didn’t care?” he asks, “That he just shoves you in the deepest, blackest pit he can find like you never meant a thing to him?”

Tim’s gaze flicks to him, dissecting. “It would feel less hypocritical.”

“Yeah, well, sorry. That’s not how emotions work.” Jason finishes the last bite of the bar, then tosses the wrapper away from him. This time he talks while chewing, “Bruce loves you; he misses you. How many times have I gotta say that?”

“Bruce believes in justice most of all. He’s not the kind of man who likes to compromise.”

“No,” Jason has to agree, “But he is someone who believes in second chances.”

“And third and fourth.” Tim’s answer is harsher. “Usually to people who don’t deserve them.”

“Are you saying you don’t deserve it?” Jason asks, curious as to Tim’s own opinion on himself.
more than anything else.

“I know what I did. I don’t deny it, I don’t run from it, and — most importantly so far as he’ll be concerned — I don’t regret it.” Those pale eyes flick away from him as Tim quietly adds, “That’s answer enough.”

Jason scoffs at the pronouncement, “You make yourself sound like a martyr.”

“Well,” Tim says dryly, “I did already do the dying part. May do it again, before tonight’s through.”

“Oh fuck off,” Jason mutters. Tim’s sense of humour is proving to be depressingly morbid, and that’s if he even is joking, which Jason has a distinct suspicion he’s not. “You know if you could go five minutes without bringing that up, I’d be real fucking grateful.”

Surprisingly, his response makes Tim’s mouth quirk up into an actual smile. “Sorry.” he says, sounding not at all sincere.

Bouncing off that, Jason rolls his eyes, “I can’t wait til we get out of here, the sooner I can hand you off to someone else to deal with the better.”

The smile doesn’t fade. “And here I thought you wanted to talk to me.”

“Yeah, well, the more I get to know you, the more I’m changing my mind about that.”

Tim laughs hoarsely, before the mirth abruptly dies from his eyes and his expression turns somber once more. “Back when this started, I never would have taken you for the optimistic type. Naive, maybe, but not that.”

Jason supposes he has a point with that. Given what Tim must know of his history, where he came from, what his family was like… who on Earth would expect a kid like that to have a positive outlook on the world? Not himself certainly. “I don’t,” he replies quickly, “I mean, not in most things. I just…” he leans back against the wall, “I got faith in them, my family. They ain’t never let me down yet. They’ll be trying, and if they don’t find me… I won’t blame ‘em for that, and it doesn’t mean I won’t go down giving death the middle finger either.”

He watches Tim turn his head back away from him. “You’re a strange person, Jason. I hope you still feel that way when the end does come.”

So does Jason, but he’ll never say that. “Maybe you should try it,” he says, “Gotta be better than acting depressed all the time.”

“I’m not depressed.”

“You keep talking about how we’re going to die and you’re not worth anything, sounds depressed to me.”

Tim doesn’t say anything, and Jason sighs at the silence before pulling out another snack from his belt. Unceremoniously he throws it at him, feeling a small measure of satisfaction when Tim curses at the hit to his nose. “Here, at least eat something you dweeb.”

The look he gets this time is slightly incredulous, before Tim manages to pick up the snack and fumble it open.

“Thanks.” he says quietly.
It gets harder to mark the passage of time the longer they’re down here, and though he tries not to with every fibre of his being, Jason is forced to admit that Tim may, in fact, have a point about their chances of getting out of here.

He’d fallen back asleep again after finishing eating, and Jason envies him that luxury. He too would like to be able to close his eyes and rest, only his nerves keep him awake. Both about the possibility of more aftershocks and the still potential danger of Tim himself. He can’t trust him, no matter how harmless he might seem chained up and sleeping.

Even when he’s been sleeping for a long ass time.

Jason frowns at the thought of it, and the slightly laboured quality Tim’s breathing has taken on in the last half hour. He hadn’t noticed it at first, quiet as it is, but now that he has he really doesn’t like where it could be heading.

Inching back towards him and wary of a trick, Jason works off his gauntlet and glove before gingerly laying the back of his hand over Tim’s forehead. The last time he did this was years ago for his mom, but he still remembers the feeling of fever heat beneath his hand. Luckily, Tim only feels slightly warm. Jason guesses it may just be an effect of the stress from breaking his ankle at work, but if it gets any worse…

He should have ignored Tim waving him off earlier and taken a look at his foot. But he’d been too angry, and now it might be dangerous to try and take his boot off without a medical profession around to help him.

Sitting back, Jason sighs heavily. This is the last thing he needed, more sympathy for the enemy. Maybe Tim was right about his level of kindness after all.

A small squeak interrupts that train of thought. Jason turns his head, watching as — out from a broken section of pipe — a rat emerges into their hole. It sits on its haunches for a moment, sniffs the air, then shakes its wet fur. Just as Jason’s thinking about killing it, it suddenly jumps and starts to scramble up the wall towards the ceiling, squeezing through a small gap Jason could only dream of fitting through.

“Fuck you too, buddy.” he mutters.

He starts to wonder how desperate he’d have to be to try some of his explosives on the walls when a trickling sound, light at first, then growing heavier, interrupts him.

Jason turns his head back to the pipe the rat came from to find water now running through it. No, not only from the pipe, some of the other gaps in the rubble as well. The puddle he first woke up in is starting to widen to cover the floor. Jason feels a wave of dismay start to overtake him. That cannot be good.

“Hey,” he says to Tim, reaching this time to shake his shoulder, “Hey, asshole, wake up.”

On second thought, waking Tim up in such a manner should have seemed like a terrible idea, but filled with sudden urgency Jason doesn’t hesitate. He pays for that decision in a sudden swipe of Tim’s hands, a hoarse shout in his ear, and a splash of water as he attempts to roll further away from him, only to scream in sudden pain as the motion jars his ankle.

Jason swears as he scrabbles after him, getting himself wet in the process too. “Calm down!” he
“I don’t know.” Jason says, giving up on maintaining boundaries as he scoots forwards towards Tim again, offering him a helping hand in sitting up. “A pipe must have burst somewhere. Could’ve just taken some time to work its way through to us from wherever it happened.”

Tim allows it, but sways in place a little as soon as Jason lets him go again. “If it starts to get deeper…”

“We’ll be fucked even sooner, I know.” Still, for all his doom and gloom earlier, Tim looks in no great hurry to die again. Drowning in particular seems a terrible way to go, though Jason has to admit it’ll be a lot quicker than starving to death, which was the other method they were looking at if no one finds them.

His mind flits back to the idea he was considering before. “I could try blowing a hole in the wall.”

Tim shakes his head, “Even your smallest explosive would be too powerful. We’d just bring the ceiling down on us.”

“Well I don’t hear you offering any suggestions, genius.”

Jason sits back on his heels, feeling his chest start to get tight again as he scrubs his hands over his face. He tries to think what Bruce would tell him to do in this situation. Stay calm first of all, though he hasn’t been doing too good at that all night. He has a rebreather, and so does Tim. That’ll keep them alive for a little longer even if the whole chamber floods. Their suits are insulated, which will protect against the cold, but it’s just a temporary measure. Unless they can call someone, they are well and truly fucked.

If only he’d done that in the first place. Been a good Robin and called Batman for help as soon as he locked eyes on their fugitive. If he’d let Alfred in the cave know, or Steph or Damian… Hell, if he’d even done what he’d promised Superboy he’d do and let him know the moment he laid eyes on Tim.

Wait, Jason freezes for a moment, Superboy.

If anyone will be able to hear them down here, it’s a Kryptonian. Especially a Kryptonian who’s spent the last month listening very hard for one voice in particular.

He turns on Tim so fast that the older man actually flinches. “You need to call Conner.” he tells him bluntly.

By the look on Tim’s face, Jason might as well have just asked him to call down Darkseid himself, instead of his ex-boyfriend.
“What?” he croaks.

“Call Conner.” Jason repeats, “He’s been listening for you since Los Angeles. If anyone can get us out of this, it’s him. He’s got super strength, and that tactile telekinesis thing of his. And if that doesn’t work, he can least tell everyone else where we are.”

“No.” Tim says, “No, I… can’t.”

Jason doesn’t understand. “Didn’t you hear what I just said? He’s listening for your voice! Calling him is only our chance! Especially if this water keeps coming in here.”

Even as he speaks, he can feel it now soaking in around his knees, completely covering the floor and seeping into his boots. Not a problem yet, but give it another half an hour or so and they could be completely underwater.

“What?” Jason asks, when Tim refuses to meet his gaze and doesn’t say anything further. “What’s the problem?” He squints at him in the red light, registering the new lines that have appeared etched onto Tim’s face like someone drew them there with a tattoo gun. Lines that have nothing to do with the pain of his ankle, and everything to do with what comes from within. He looks haggard suddenly, old beyond his years, and afraid.

Jason’s never seen him look afraid before.

“I can’t.” he repeats. “I can’t… not Kon. Try and call Superman if you want, but not Kon.”

God damn it. Against his better judgment, Jason feels a pang of sympathy stab through his chest, eke out through his ribs, then slide down into his stomach. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out what’s going on. Especially not with the insider knowledge he has.

Sloshing through the water on his knees, he moves to where Tim has no choice to look at him.

“Superman’s not listening for us, Tim.” Jason says seriously, “Bruce told me how difficult it is for a Kryptonian to hear a single voice unless they’re already focusing on it. Only Kon is listening, and he’s listening for you, not me.” He bites his lip before continuing, “Look, I get it all right?”

Tim stares at him blankly. “You may not think so, but I do. You and him were close. Closer than close, you were…” he feels awkward saying it, so he doesn’t. “I found your box of photos under the bed in your room. That stupid bear,”

“You found—”

Jason talks over him, pushing the smell of burning plastic out of his nose at the same time. “What you did, you did because you believe it was the right thing to do, but you know he’d never approve of it. So you’re scared, right? Scared of seeing him look at you like you’re some kind of monster. Like you’re… like you’re one of the bad guys you used to fight together.” his hands tighten into fists as his voice grows rougher.

For a moment, Jason is back in the attic of Wayne Manor, alone and terrified of being thrown back out on the street. Hiding from the rejection he knew was coming for both what he did and didn’t do in the face of Felipe’s death.

“You’re convinced he’s going to hate you, because how could he not. Except you’re wrong, Tim. Superboy doesn’t hate you. He’s not happy about what you did, duh. But more than anything he’s worried about you. He was so pissed he didn’t know you were alive that he broke down Batman’s front door. And fuck, not to toot Bruce’s horn or nothin’, but it takes a lot of balls for someone to do something like that for any reason.”
“And what if you’re wrong?” Tim asks him, sharp and hoarse, but not denying it, which tells Jason he was right in his guess. “What if he doesn’t come? What if he doesn’t hear me? He didn’t before, and I’m not the person I used to be. I’m not the boy he knew.”

“He was in space last time. And unless movies and physics have lied to me all my life, sound doesn’t travel in space.” That came out a little unkind, but Jason hasn’t got the time to spare to gentle his words further. “I’m pretty sure he’s spent every day since feeling like shit for it, wishing he’d been there, but this is different, okay? Kon’s on Earth, if you yell for him now he’ll come.”

For a moment, it feels like enough. Jason thinks that he’s gotten through to him, only to be corrected when instead of calling Superboy’s name, Tim instead shakes his head.

“No,” comes the dull reply, “No, there’ll be another way.”

“Another way?!” he says incredulously, “Tim, this place is filling up with water! We don’t have time for another way! I’ve already scoured every inch of it and there is no fucking exit!” His heart beats faster just saying it, the edge of another panic attack threatening.

Tim just looks at him blankly. It’s like he’s shut down, retreated back away from him. Into whatever safe space he needs. “You said the others would find us.”

“And earlier you said they wouldn’t.” he counters. “What, you just change your mind because you don’t want to see him? Give me a God damn break.”

“Jason, you need to calm—”

“No! No, you fucking listen to me.” Jason grabs Tim by the front of his suit, hauling him forwards so they’re almost eye to eye. He’s done playing it nice and gentle. “I am not dying here. And I am especially not dying here because of you! If you want to kill yourself because it’s easier than facing your past, that’s your business, but you are not taking me down with you. Use some of that logic you’re always going on about and think this through! We’ve been here for hours. What are the chances Bruce and the others are going to find us now?”

Tim swallows, shaking a little in his grasp. Part of it pain, part of it emotion. But Jason can also see him doing what he told him to do and thinking it through. It’s no surprise when he finally admits, “Almost zero.”

“Almost zero.” Jason repeats. “You know that, so you need to get the fuck over this and call Kon. Get us out of here.” he takes a deep breath, feeling the water level creeping up to his hips, “Not like you wouldn’t have to face him eventually anyway, whichever way we escape this. I caught you, no way he wouldn’t demand to visit wherever it is Bruce puts you.”

Tim’s eyes flicker at him in the red light, still hesitant, but considering. So Jason plays his final card.

“You said you’re sorry for what you put me through, even if you won’t take it back. As far as I’m concerned, that means you owe me.” He digs down, doing the best Bruce impression he can. “Call. Him. Call him and I’ll consider us even, all right?”

Like the final pin of a lock sliding into place, it works. Tim sighs, then reluctantly nods his head. “Okay. Okay fine, you win. You’re right. There’s no other way. And I can’t...” he swallows thickly, looking down a moment at the water. Jason doesn’t know what the end of that sentence was meant to be, and he doesn’t think he’ll ever know, but it doesn’t matter so long as Tim does as he says.

He lets him go, putting a small amount of distance between them again. “Well?” he prompts, “Go
on then.”

Tim steels himself. The line of his shoulders going rigid before he lifts his face up towards the ceiling, inhales sharply, and then — at a volume that reverberates against the walls — yells, “KON! Kon, I need you!”

Jason rocks back a bit from the force of it, and has to resist the urge to cover his ears as Tim takes in another gasping breath.

“Kon, please! Please, I need…” he trails off, looking down as his voice cracks on the final word, “I need you. Please.”

It takes a moment for the last echo of his plea to fade away. Jason feels his throat tighten, his stomach twist itself into knots as they wait.

How long does it take a Kryptonian to fly from one side of the country to another? If that is indeed where Kon is right now. How long for him to exactly pinpoint their location. To dig them out of this without causing the whole thing to collapse down and crush them to death. Not to mention, if he’s wrong about Kon being able to hear Tim…

“Keep going.” Jason encourages him, as the water continues to steadily deepen.

Minutes pass, during which the surface level rises up to his waist where he sits. After that Jason is forced to stand up, pulling Tim along with him when it becomes abundantly clear that he can’t stand on his own. Jason holds him steady with one arm looped around his waist, flinching a little as Tim continues to call intermittently, voice growing hoarser by the second.

His shaking worsens as the water makes it up to their shoulders, and Jason holds the rebreathers ready in his hand just in case.

“This isn’t working,” Tim says finally. His eyes are wide as they stare down at the water, openly terrified. “He didn’t hear me. He’s not coming.”

“Don’t give up yet.” Jason says through gritted teeth, “We’ll still have time with the rebreathers. He’ll find us.”

Tim shakes his head wildly. Having him so close is a thing Jason never imagined himself willingly allowing, and he certainly never believed he’d be the one in control in such a situation. “He’s not. He won’t. He—”

“Tim!” His heart beats wildly. Not because of the water, but because over the sound of Tim’s panicked words, Jason could swear for a moment he hears something. “Stop. Listen.”

Amazingly, Tim obeys him, shutting up and allowing Jason to focus on what’s going on above them. The sound of cracking, grinding. Stone scraping against stone. It keeps growing closer, and he clenches his teeth, scarcely able to believe it despite the whole thing being his plan, when the slab of broken concrete that sits immediately over their heads is suddenly ripped away, revealing a familiar and deeply worried face.

“Superboy!” Jason cries, genuinely delighted to see him for the first time in his life. “Get us out of here!”

For a moment, Conner just stares downwards, his gaze distinctly focused on Tim more than Jason or the situation he’s found them in. Then, in a jerky motion, he nods his head. “I’ve got you.”

Two powerful hands plunge down, seizing them both by their arms, and lift them first out of the
water, then up into the air. As they fly, Jason glances down, just in time to see all the rubble
Conner must have been supporting with his TTK suddenly slide down and crash into the hole
they’d been trapped in.

Fuck, that was close.

They keep going upwards. Flying through the now skeletal remains of the office building and into
the open sky. It’s dizzying, and Conner goes too fast for Jason to make out much more than a blur
of their surroundings before they’re suddenly setting down on a flat wooden surface.

As soon as his arm is released from the Kryptonian’s, Jason falls onto his knees, overwhelmed at
first by the feeling of the wind whistling openly around his ears, then the scent of sea salt in his
nose. He’s out. He’s out. He’s free and he’s alive. Oh Christ, he could kiss the ground right now
(if he had any less self-control, that is).

But then Jason looks up, and any sense of relief and joy he feels is quickly wiped away by the
evidence of smoke and devastation that fills his senses.

Tim was right, he thinks, body gone numb with shock. He knew that. Knew it was an earthquake
that struck Gotham from the moment the first aftershock hit, but this… he can hardly believe what
it is he’s seeing.

The city is burning. The familiar skyline gone. Only Wayne Tower still stands as a single
recognisable landmark amid the hellish reality Gotham has become, and the longer he stares at it,
the more Jason feels his heart stutter and twist inside his chest.

He needs to go home.

Chapter End Notes

*falls over*

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