## Milestones

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## Milestones

by chibi nightowl

## Summary

"Okay, rich boy, ready for your nickel's worth?"
A ghost of a smile appears on Tim's face before disappearing. "But I've already told you this sob story. Shouldn't you be laughing in my face?"
"Nah," Jason says as he leans in towards Tim. "I like you. Besides, this shit storm's not entirely of your own making."
"You like me, huh? Nice to know someone's not afraid to say it."

Notes

Tuesday Nights is back! And there is no way in hell I'm doing the insane posting schedule of the original again, so look for weekly postings instead. The wonderful and amazing GoAwayOlivia is my beta this time around too!

For those new readers out there, go read Tuesday Nights first. You'll be glad you did.

# Milestone One: The First Date 

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jason stands in his kitchen, slowly mixing up the batter for waffles. It's midmorning already, but he hasn't been up for very long. Across the loft, Tim is still sleeping in Jason's big bed.

It hadn't been easy telling Tim about Bruce's visit to the bar the day before. The younger man was very visibly upset over what he was told, tearing himself from Jason and pacing about the loft while Jason watched from the bed. After five or six laps, Tim abruptly went to the kitchen and downed a couple shots of the whiskey they'd brought up from the bar earlier in quick succession. He gasped between each shot, not used to the straight burn.

That seemed to be the worst of it, as Tim then stumbled to the bathroom, and then returned to the bed not long after.

The whole time, he didn't say a word.
Whisking the flour into the batter, Jason watches Tim's still form. It could be worse. He could have left. Still can for that matter. That was quite the load I dropped on him earlier. Not sure how I would have processed something like that. Hit something probably. Wonder if I should show him my punching bag? Does he even know how to throw a punch at someone? If he doesn't, he'll learn soon enough around here. Football playoff games can get a bit intense. Roy and I've had to break up more than one fight before.

It's not until the batter is poured into the hot griddle and the smell of waffles baking wafts through the loft that Tim rouses himself. He sits up slowly, rubbing at his eyes. Seeing this, Jason turns to get the hot water started for Tim's French press. He's on his second cup of tea already, a chamomile and mint blend he usually uses to try and relax after a long night downstairs, but he's now drinking to calm his fried nerves.

What is he thinking? He's got to be mad that he misread things. Gotta be mad at me a bit too for not telling him right away.

The kettle whistles by the time Tim comes shuffling across the loft to the barstool he likes to perch in on the other side of Jason's kitchen island. He's pulled on one of Jason's t-shirts, but that's it. It seems to be a thing with him, which Jason doesn't mind at all. He sets the French press and the ground coffee in front of Tim, along with a spoon for the grounds. It takes a few moments before Tim pulls off the top of the press and opens the coffee bag. He ignores the spoon and starts pouring.

After what Jason thinks is a long time, he stops and seals the bag. Wordlessly, Jason grabs the hot kettle with an oven mitt and pours the hot water into the press. "Stop," Tim says hoarsely when it's almost full. It's the first thing he's said since last night.

Jason stops pouring and turns back to the stove to set the kettle down. The timer on the waffle iron pings and he opens it up, flipping out a perfectly golden waffle onto a plate. He pours more batter in and closes it. The plate he sets in front of Tim. There's already butter and syrup on the island, along with flatware. "Want some bananas?" Jason asks quietly. "I ground up some pecans and mashed a banana into the batter."

Tim nods, eyes focusing on the waffle for a moment, before returning to the press. He's put the lid on it again and focuses on moving the plunger up and down a few times to stir things up.

Fuck it, just say something already, Tim. I know you need your coffee in the morning, but dammit!

It's not until Tim's halfway through the waffle and most of the way through his first cup of coffee that he finally says something to Jason. "I'm mad. But what's really pissing me off is I'm not sure if I'm more upset at Bruce or myself for misreading everything." He sounds frustrated and the glare he's giving the waffle would have it burned to a crisp if he had laser vision.

Jason heaves a huge, yet silent, sigh of relief. Glad he's not the kill the messenger type. "You two need to talk."
"No shit." Tim shovels another forkful of waffle into his mouth.
Wisely keeping his mouth shut while Tim stews, Jason finishes the waffles and chugs the rest of his tea before it gets any colder.
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They hadn't made any firm plans for the day, so while Jason's washing up, Tim takes a shower. I'm getting the distinct impression Tim doesn't want company right now. Give him his space. I bet he's not gonna be staying for much longer either. He sighs as he finishes the dishes and dries his hands on a towel. I was really looking forward to today too. Not often I take a day off in the middle of football season. But goddammit, I am not going to let Tim deal with this shit on his own.

Decision made, Jason stalks across the loft and enters the bathroom, knocking quickly before he does. "Just want to brush my teeth," he says as he enters. Tim's in the shower, but with the closed stall door and the steam, Jason can't see him too clearly.
"Fine," Tim's voice echoes out of the stall. "When you're done, you can get in here with me."
Jason doesn't say anything, his toothbrush in his mouth already. Not sure that's a good idea, Timmers. I was up for angry sex once the other day, but I'm not right now. He finishes quickly and rinses his mouth out. "You sure about that?"
"Yes," Tim says in a firm tone, but there's a hint of desperation in it. "I need a distraction. I'm getting too lost in my head."

Well, when you put it that way...at least you're not angry. I can deal with this. Jason takes off his shirt and sweatpants and opens the shower door.

Tim is standing directly under the showerhead, his hair dripping wet and falling into his eyes. He's just standing there, shoulders slumped. He looks almost as defeated as he did the night he walked into the bar after Damian fucked up everything. The sight made Jason's heart clench. Time for a pep-talk.
"Okay, rich boy, I've let you mope around enough this morning. Ready for your nickel's worth?"

A ghost of a smile appears on Tim's face before disappearing. "But I've already told you this sob story. Shouldn't you be laughing in my face?"
"Nah," Jason says as he leans in towards Tim, bracing an arm against the cool tile as he crowds him a bit. "I like you. Besides, this shit storm's not entirely of your own making."
"You like me, huh? Nice to know someone's not afraid to say it." Tim tilts his head back a bit and wipes a hand across his face to brush his hair out of his eyes.
"If I didn't like ya, I wouldn't keep closing down early for your shit." Jason presses a kiss on the top of Tim's head. "So here's how I see it. Yeah, you misread Bruce, big time. But he's not mad at you for doing what you're doing. He's fucking proud of you. You should have seen the look on his face when I told him the name of your new company was Drake Industries. If that wasn't pride, then I'll eat Roy's hat."
"That hat is gross looking," Tim says in a small voice. "I'm surprised Kori hasn't tossed it out yet."
"She has. Twice. He goes dumpster diving after it. Next time she gets her hands on it, she's burning it. Anyways," Jason continues, "Bruce is going to support you. I'm going to support you. I'm positive Dickieboy and this Alfred guy are going to support you too. Hell, even Roy, Kori, and Steph'll be supporting you. And Tam sure as fuck isn't going to let you fall." He rubs his hands over Tim's shoulders. Hunched over the way he is, they look even thinner than they usually do. He must not have been eating well on that trip. Little shit's lost some weight. "You are not alone in this, Tim. We're all so fucking proud of you. Some of us just know how to say it better than others."

Tim laughs a bit brokenly at that, but it's still a laugh, so Jason counts it as a victory. He grabs his shampoo and starts lathering up Tim's hair, then his own. Tim just stands there some more, but perks up when Jason goes for the body wash. "Let me," he says, grabbing the loofa. He washes himself quickly, not breaking eye contact with Jason the entire time, then starts on the taller man, going much slower as he works his way up and down Jason's muscled frame. Jason lets himself enjoy it, though he's not sure where Tim's going with it, if anything. Not everything is about sex, nimrod.

When he's done, Tim drags Jason under the warm spray and turns him around slowly, making sure he's rinsed off completely. For a moment, Jason thinks Tim's going to turn off the water, but he takes Jason's hand instead and brings it up to his mouth. "Thank you," he almost
whispers as he plants a kiss in Jason's palm and closes his fingers around it. "I don't want to do this without you."
"I'm not goin' anywhere."
Tim grins as he turns off the water. "Come on. I believe we have a full day of nothing to enjoy, right?"
"You know it."
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About 30 minutes later finds the two men dressed and walking out the apartment entrance to the building between the nail salon and the used bookstore. Tim's red Honda is parked about a block down from the building. It had been busy the night before when he arrived, so it was as close as he was able to get.
"You sure you want to drive this to your brownstone?" Jason asks as he slides into the passenger seat. "Thought this was the car no one knows about?"

Tim shrugs as he buckles in. "I don't really care right now." He lets out a sigh as a thoughtful look appears on his face. "But you've got a really good point."
"How about I drive then? Anyone lookin' will think it's my POS rather than yours."
"Fine."
They switch places and Jason adjusts everything to fit his larger frame. Tim looks amused from his spot in the passenger seat. "You know, out of everything we've done, you haven't sucked my cock yet," he says with a grin. It's the first real smile on his face that Jason's seen since last night.
"Nope," Jason agrees as he finishes adjusting the rearview mirror. "Good thing this isn't your Audi."
"It's parked in the garage at home."
"Hmm..." Jason grins over at Tim as he starts the car and peels out into the street. "I may just have to fix that this afternoon. Now where exactly am I going?"

For something to do, they decided to go to Tim's brownstone so Jason could see where his boyfriend lives. After that, they weren't sure, but Jason is kind of hoping for a first date, even if it's going out for a late lunch or an early dinner. As they drive across town, Tim's pretty quiet, though he does give Jason directions on where to turn. Jason just drives, letting Tim think.

It's not too long before Jason pulls up in front of a nice looking brownstone in the Upper West Side of Gotham. The neighborhood is nice, but not so nice looking as to make Jason feel out of place. I got enough money saved up I could live just about anywhere in this town,
but I like the Bowery. Anywhere else just doesn't feel right. I wonder if that bodes well for my future with Tim. Fuck it, Jaybird, you haven't even had a first date yet. Slow down.

Tim easily walks up the steps to his front door, but hesitates before he unlocks it, looking shyly over his shoulder at Jason. "Um...I just remembered it's kind of a mess. I was in a hurry to pack everything for my trip and I really haven't been home much since I got back, so...yeah." He actually blushes a bit.

So fucking cute. "My best friend is Roy Harper. You ain't seen nothin' until you've seen his workshop. So open up. No judging here."

The door opens into a narrow entry hall with a dark paneled wood across the lower half of the walls and a pale off-white paint on the upper half. A set of stairs is almost immediately in front of them, leading up into the second level of the brownstone. Off to the right is an opening that leads to a living room where Jason can see a bunch of bookcases. The hallway in front of them leads further back into the building to what Jason thinks is a kitchen from this vantage point.
"Come in," Tim says, stepping to the side and taking off his shoes. Jason sees the pile by the door and crouches down to unlace his work boots. The floor is richly paneled in the same dark wood as the walls, broken up here and there by long rugs in various bright colors and patterns, but mostly red and blue. He follows Tim into the living room and starts laughing.

The room looks like a hurricane went through it. There are two large suitcases in various states of unpacking and a pile of suit pants and dress shirts just tossed on the floor. The jackets were at least laid out over the back of the brown leather sofa that sits in front of a large wall mounted TV. Jason could see the game system they'd played with a few weeks ago sitting on the floor in front of a cabinet that he'd bet money on containing the rest of Tim's gaming equipment.
"Fuck, you weren't kidding, were you?"
Tim heaves a big sigh, but doesn't make a move to pick up anything. "This is the worst room besides my bedroom."
"I'll bet. Dare I even ask what your kitchen looks like?"
"Depressingly empty compared to yours. I can cook just enough to not starve, but it's just not fun cooking for one person, you know?"

Jason nods. He gets it. "Yeah, I know. You eat out a lot?"
"More than I should," Tim acknowledges. "Let me give you the tour."
The room down the back of the hallway is Tim's kitchen and dining room combined. There's a set of double doors leading to the living room from the kitchen. Upstairs, the next level is almost a single wide-open room, which Jason discovers is where Tim's gaming equipment is really at, as well as a pretty impressive computer setup with large dual monitors. It's one massive nerd room and Jason doesn't hesitate to tell Tim that. "It's fucking awesome."

Tim looks proud of that as he leads Jason up the next set of stairs. There's a small guest room at the front of the house and Tim's master bedroom takes up the rest of the floor. It too looks like a hurricane went through it, but Jason can just see the blue of Tim's bedspread and the rug under the surprisingly big bed is also blue with some cream pattern swirling through it.

Jason nods as he looks around. Gotta admit, it's not what I expected a rich boy like Tim to have, but it works. It's totally him. "I like it. So how do you keep it clean?"
"I've got a Roomba on each floor and I try to vacuum the rugs at least once a week. I have a maid service come out once a month though as I hate dusting. It's not normally this messy. Well, the bedroom and the living room aren't. The second floor always looks like that." He was referring to the organized chaos that was his game room.
"It suits you. Need some help unpacking?" He raises an eyebrow at Tim.
A sheepish look appears on Tim's face. "I won't say no, but I didn't invite you over just to help me clean up after myself."
"You were gone for three fucking weeks. We've already had sex and I've fed you today. What the hell else are you thinking of doing right now? Your bed's got too much shit on it for round two. Or is that three? I lost track earlier this morning." Jason grins broadly like the asshole he knows he is.

Tim laughs as Jason was hoping he would. "Fine," he agrees. "Most of this just needs to be hung up or folded and put away. Downstairs is where all the dirty stuff is."
"Fine," Jason heads out of the room. "I don't know where shit goes, but I can start your laundry. I assume the suits and the shirts are dry clean only?"
"Yeah."
"Got hangers for them?"
"In the laundry room. It's just off the kitchen."
"Come find me when you're done." Jason waves as he walks out of the room and down the stairs.

He feels better now that he has something to do. The out of place feeling he had when he entered Tim's house is slowly dissipating. This place is not what I expected at all. I like it. As he picks up the clothing from Tim's suitcases, he makes a pile for the dress shirts and a pile for the pants. The jackets he leaves where they are for the moment. Everything else is sorted into two piles of clothes that can be washed here and Jason heads into the kitchen to look for a laundry basket.

I'm feeling stupidly domestic right now. I wonder what his pantry looks like? That is one nice stovetop he has there and that's a new fridge. He's been here what, a year or so? Makes sense most of this stuff is new then.

Jason's got a load of laundry going and is trying to match jackets to pants to hang up for the dry cleaners when Tim comes back downstairs. There was a pile of ties hiding under the jackets Jason isn't sure what to do with. "Wow, you're faster than I thought," he says with a grin as he looks around. "The suitcases are stored in the closet over here." Tim gestures to a door underneath the staircase.
"Take'em, they're empty," Jason replies.
After putting away his large suitcases, Tim joins Jason in the living room and matches up his pants and jackets much more quickly than Jason did. He lets out a sigh. "Not much longer and I won't have to wear these anymore. Not often at least."
"Shouldn't you be happier about not having to tie a noose around your neck every day?"
"I will be." Tim gives Jason a meaningful look. "I'm not going to be by myself after all."
"Damn straight you aren't."
Tim steps into Jason's personal space and wraps his arms around his neck, gently brushing his lips against Jason's. "My bed is all cleared off," he says quietly. "And the only action it's seen has been my hand and a dildo. Care to help me change that?" He nibbles lightly on Jason's bottom lip.

Jason wraps his arms around Tim and pulls him close, one hand dropping down to the other man's ass to give it a squeeze, the other dragging through Tim's hair to pull his head back so Jason's teeth could graze along Tim's neck. "You helped me christen my bed, so it's only fair I help you christen yours."
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Tim's eyes are closed and he's still gasping a bit when Jason comes out of the bathroom with a warm rag to clean him up. He can't help but feel a bit proud at the sight. Fucking shame I didn't meet him a few years ago when I still had the rod in my tongue. He'd have loved that. As it is, Tim certainly has a thing for the remaining piercings.

Jason sits on the bed and reaches over, laying the mostly wrung out rag over Tim's belly to start wiping up the mess he'd left on his boyfriend's abs. He gently pokes at them. "Skipping the workouts while you were gone?" he teases. It's not that Tim's lost much of his hard earned definition, but he's definitely lost weight. Yeah, we're going out to eat.

Tim bats weakly at Jason's hand. "Amongst other things," he admits.
"I'd say you skipped some meals too. Gotta work on that, rich boy."
"I ate whatever was put in front of me," Tim tries to defend himself as he sits up.
Jason raises an eyebrow. "And very likely that was all you ate. Let me guess, if you weren't being wined and dined, food didn't pass those lips, did it?"

This time, Tim has the grace to look a bit shamefaced. "I was busy."
"Uh-huh." Jason runs a hand through Tim's messy hair. "I'd cook for you if I thought there was anything in your kitchen."

Tim leans into the touch and gives him a small smile. "I was kinda hoping we could go out for a late lunch. Perhaps have an actual first date?" He looks hopeful.
"You read my mind." Jason steals a quick kiss before he gets up and heads back to the bathroom to rinse out the rag. He hasn't put any clothes back on yet and he puts a little extra swagger in his stride, knowing Tim's watching closely.
"You are such a showoff," he hears Tim say from almost right behind him. Fucking little ninja. Where'd he learn to do that?
"If you got it, flaunt it."
"Not anymore." Jason feels a hand trail lightly over his ass before Tim slips past him into the bathroom. "I think I'm going to institute a look but don't touch policy." He smirks at Jason.
"With you being the one who gets to touch?" Jason grins as he rinses out the rag in the sink.

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"Of course."
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Their first date is at a microbrewery of all places. Jason laughs as they walk in. "I hope the food is as good as you say it is, because going to other people's bars is just not my thing."

Tim loops his arm through Jason's and gives it a squeeze. "It is. I promise."
They're quickly seated and Jason reads over the menu, purposefully skipping the beer list. He likes going out to eat and loves trying new foods, always getting new ideas for his own kitchen and for things to try at the bar. This place has quite the chicken wing selection with all kinds of different sauces. He'd tried wings once and found he spent way too much time back in the small kitchen trying to keep up with the orders. Gee, sound familiar Jaybird? You're back there all the time now, so how's that any different from before?

Something catches his eye. "They smoke their own meat here?" he asks Tim, who's seated across from him at the table looking over his own menu.
"Yeah," Tim replies. "They only do so much each day, so they can run out sometimes. I like the brisket." He grins. "You saw the brisket pub fries, didn't you?"
"Yeah," Jason says with a hint of longing. "I've wanted a smoker for a long fucking time, but the only place I've got room for it is on the damn roof. Not exactly the most secure place for it, you know?"

Tim looks thoughtful. "I've got a small backyard at the brownstone with a covered patio..." Jason smirks. "Jumpin' the gun a bit, don'tcha think there, rich boy? This is our first date after all." He nudges Tim's foot a bit with his own.
"Our first date and we've been having sex for a month now?" Tim shakes his head teasingly. "My mom would be so proud of me."

Jason can't help but laugh at the mock disgusted look on Tim's face. He leans back in his chair, sprawling a bit as he shrugs. He always takes up a lot of room at a table. "What can I say? I'm just that amazing in the sack."
"Full of yourself much?" Tim toys with the straw in his water glass, smiling as he relaxes into his chair as well.
"I'm not that flexible, Timmy, but that's quite the trick if you are."
The waitress chooses that moment to come and take their orders. She shakes her head at the sight of the two men laughing like hyenas in front of her.

## Chapter End Notes

The brewery is based on a local one the hubby and I like to go to. Best nachos in the history of EVER, though the hubby likes the brewhouse fries.

Next week...hmmm...I think I'll just give the title of the chapter, that should say it all. Chapter Two: The Butler and the Bartender.

# Milestone Two: The Butler Meets the Bartender 

## Chapter Notes

Domestic fluff. 'Nuff said.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A week passes rather uneventfully for Jason as he falls back into his usual routine. The same could not be said for Tim. Word had gotten out about his pending resignation and the media blew it totally out of proportion. And then there's something about shareholders panicking and WE share prices plummeting. I know just enough about the stock market to know the smallest news can send share prices all over the place if investors even suspect something's up, but this is ridiculous.

Tim thinks so as well, but he's still a VP and has a job to do through the end of the year. Part of that job is kissing ass too. I just wish I could see him this weekend. He didn't come at all last weekend and he missed the first Tuesday night in forever. I'm gettin' spoiled.

The other thing that rankles is, due to the media exposure, Tim doesn't dare come anywhere near the bar right now. The bar is his place to go, relax, and not get his face plastered all over the news. Jason gets it, he really does. That doesn't mean I have to like it. He swears all this will blow over soon, that this first week or two is going to suck balls. Fuck, Ijust want it over now.

Jason is man enough to admit he and Tim are in the honeymoon phase of their new relationship. Where everything is so new and shiny and all he wants to do is wrap himself around Tim and lose himself in the other man. The getting laid part is nice too; he'd gone through quite the dry spell there for a while before Tim. He doesn't count the occasional threesome with Roy and Kori.

I seriously doubt I'm going to even see Tim this week either, let alone fuck him. That's all right, my hand and my cock aren't strangers.

He finishes slicing the bell pepper for his chili and tosses it in the crockpot along with everything else. He's a bit early in getting things started today, but it's not like he has anything better to do. Washing up, he puts everything away and slides his chef's knife into its special sleeve. He's threatened death and destruction on Roy if he ever so much as touches it. The only one besides him to use it is Steph.

I wonder if Tam's dropped her a line yet? Probably not, I'd have heard about it if she did. Gotta admit, I'm a bit curious to see where that goes. Steph's last few boyfriends have been total douchebags. She never struck me as liking women before though. Meh, first time for everything.

Grabbing his book, a well-worn copy of Pride and Prejudice, he heads out to the front room and gives everything a critical eye. He keeps everything clean, but today he felt the itch to do a deep clean. Gotta get the front door repainted too. And check the weather-stripping. Shit weather's gonna be here sooner than later. He sets the book on the counter and gets started on his little chores. By the time he's done checking the seals on the door and the windows, it's just after 3, so he turns on the lights in the windows, making a note to wash them.

Jason's outside sitting in front of his door with a paint scraper and a gallon of dark green paint for touch ups when he hears a light cough behind him. Twisting around, he sees an old and very well dressed man standing there. Is that a three-piece suit? In this neighborhood? And what is with that mustache? "Can I help you with somethin'?" he asks, looking up at the man. He has a distinct feeling he's being judged.

The man arches a fine eyebrow as he looks down at Jason. "Yes, I am looking for one Jason Todd," he says in a very British accent. "It is my understanding he owns this establishment." The man gestures at the bar.
"You're lookin' at him." Jason stands up and wipes his hands on his pants. "And you are?"
"Alfred Pennyworth. Master Timothy has spoken quite highly of you."
"Alfred? Oh..." It suddenly clicks and Jason's mouth drops open. "Nice to meet you," he tries to recover and holds out a hand, noticing a bit too late that he's got green paint on it still. "Umm...sorry about that." He tries to pull his hand back, but Alfred grasps it firmly.
"A little paint never hurt anyone," Alfred said with a small smile.
"Nope, but I don't want to get your suit dirty. Here, let me get this shit outta the way and you can come inside." The words roll off Jason's tongue before he even realizes it. Fuck, there's something about him that makes me feel like I'm 8 again and getting yelled at for swearing in front of the teacher.

The old butler doesn't say anything as Jason cleans up his mess and opens the door for him. Inside, Jason's glad he's got high standards for keeping the bar clean, unlike some of the other dumps he's been in over the years. It may not be perfect, but the health inspector hasn't given him less than an A on the few times they've been out. "I'll be back in a sec," Jason says as he takes his paint supplies to the backroom and makes a quick stop to the bathroom to wash his hands.

When he comes back out front, Pennyworth is seated at the bar, his outer coat carefully draped on the stool next to him. In his hands, he's idly flipping through Jason's beat up book. He looks up and gives Jason a small smile. "Master Timothy informed me you were a great admirer of the Bard's works, as well as other classical works of literature."
"I've always loved to read. I'm mostly self-taught," Jason says as he ducks behind the bar. "Didn't even make it to middle school. Got my GED when I was 19 and an associate's in business when I was 22 ." He leans back against the wall and crosses his arms loosely in front of him. Why did I tell him all that? "So what brings you in today? You're the last of the Waynes to descend on this place."

Pennyworth sniffs in a way that only the English can and looks down his nose at Jason, though not condescendingly if the small smirk is any indication. "I am not a Wayne. I simply have too many of them in my charge."

Jason laughs at that. Okay, Tim warned me this guy has the best sense of humor. Drier than a martini. "I thought just two of them live at home right now?"
"Yes, but keeping them in check, as well as managing Master Richard and Master Timothy from a distance, is quite the full time job."
"I bet. So can I get you anything?" Jason gestures to the wall behind him. I sincerely doubt this guy's a beer drinker.
"At this time of day, I actually prefer a cup of tea. But I doubt that is on your menu down here, so I shall have a Bailey's on the rocks."

Feeling torn for a moment, he turns and grabs the bottle. Fuck me, but I'd love to make this guy a cup of tea. But I don't really want him coming up to the loft. "I don't have hot drinks on the menu. I keep debating about adding tea or coffee, but the upkeep to make them isn't really worth it, not with my usual clientele." He sets down a glass filled with ice and deftly pours the creamy liquor. Bailey's has long been a favorite of his.
"I understand you do have the occasional afternoon free. Perhaps you would come up to the Manor sometime and join me for afternoon tea." Pennyworth takes a sip of his drink, never breaking eye contact with Jason. "I'm told I make wonderful cuppa."
"I'm sure you do!" Jason laughs easily. "Probably could show me a thing or six about how to make it right. I just go with what I think tastes good."
"Then you are certainly on the right track. Everyone's taste runs differently."
They chat easily, which amazes Jason as he truly thought he'd have nothing in common with the English butler besides a love of Shakespeare. Alfred (because Jason quickly starts thinking of the man as Alfred rather than Pennyworth) tells him a few stories about Tim, and Jason opens up a bit and tells him about how he'd spend all day in the library when he could get away with it. He also finds himself telling him about Mike, the guy who took a chance on a much younger Jason. "I honestly don't know what I'd be right now if it weren't for him," Jason says thoughtfully. He gestures to the bar. "All this, it's because of him."
"It sounds like Mr. Callahan was someone who was able to truly see to the heart of the matter, or the person as your case may be." Alfred nods sagely. "I, for one, am glad he did as you have brought back a spark to Master Timothy that I have not seen for a long time."

Jason ducks his head, trying not to blush at the compliment. "I'm just a bartender," he says, trying to deflect.

But Alfred would have none of it. "If you are a bartender, then I am simply a butler. But we both know we're much more than just our job titles."

He opens his mouth to retort, but is interrupted by the door opening. One of his evening regulars walks in. Turning to the clock, Jason realizes he's been talking with Alfred for well over an hour, almost two. Jesus Christ, where the hell did the time go?
"Excuse me," Jason says instead and goes to get his customer settled in with his usual beer and order of pub-mix.

When he returns to Alfred, the old man has put his coat on and taken his wallet out. "Nah, this first one is on me." Jason picks up the glass that Alfred had long since finished. "It's been great meeting you. Tim was right, you are awesome."

Alfred gives him a small smile and a polite bob of his head. "Thank you, Mister Todd. The pleasure was all mine." He stands up and straightens his coat. "Before I forget, Master Bruce asked me to remind you about Thanksgiving next week. I do hope you'll make it."

What he needs to do is stop calling me that. I convinced Bruce Wayne, I'll convince this guy eventually. "We'll see about that. Need to talk to Tim first. I haven't seen him since last week and I'm lucky if I get to talk to him for more than five minutes at a time right now. He's so busy since the shit hit the fan."
"And he and Master Bruce have yet to speak to each other either. I heard from Master Timothy what transpired here."
"We should just lock them in a room together and let them duke it out." It's said carelessly, but Alfred gets a serious look on his face.
"That's not an entirely bad idea," he says.
No, it's really not. They need to talk. God knows I'm not much of one for forcing emotional conversations on a person, but with what I've seen, these Waynes are the worst at actually speaking to each other.

Jason grins. "Thursday nights here are pretty slow too. I can booze them up, stuff some curry fries down their throats, and lock the doors so that they're not going anywhere. We can hide in the kitchen."

Alfred's small smile morphs briefly into what Jason suspects is a large grin for the stoic man. "I shall endeavor to get them both here by 8 . I'm certain Miss Fox would be glad to help rearrange Master Timothy's schedule."
"I'm sure she would."
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The next night, Jason does his best to get the bar empty by 7:30, telling people he's closing early for a private event. As predicted, it's a slow night so it's not that hard.

He's slightly apprehensive about the whole thing though, feeling like he should have talked to Tim about it first rather than sending a text he never got a reply to. At least I gave him a heads up so it won't be a complete surprise.

At 7:30, he shoos the last person out, places a sign in his window, and locks the door. Anyone wants in, they have to knock. Jason quickly cleans up from the last few people and is just coming back up front from the kitchen when he hears a knock. Glancing at the clock, it's 7:40.

He goes to the door and takes a peek through the peephole. It's Tim. Unlocking the door, he opens it and Tim slips inside. He's dressed casually but not as dressed down as he has been in the past and looks distracted.
"Hey," Jason says quietly, giving Tim a small, slightly uncertain smile as he closes and locks the door again.

Tim replies by giving Jason a hard, almost desperate, hug. "Hey. I got your text. Sorry I didn't reply."

Jason breathes in the scent of Tim's hair as he hangs onto the shorter man tightly. "It's all right. You've been busy." He tries hard to squash down the irritated feeling over all the other people who've been taking up his boyfriend's time.

Tim shakes his head. "Yeah, but that's no excuse. You're my boyfriend, I should make time for you no matter how busy I am."
"That's a nice thought, but I know how busy you are at the best of times," Jason laughs. "I'm a big boy and I know you haven't forgotten about me. I just wish this shit would settle down soon."
"Very soon," Tim says. He hasn't made any move to pull out of Jason's arms yet. "Thanks for arranging this with Alfred."
"You bet. Hungry?"
Tim grins. "For your fried pickles? Always."
"I'll get some started then."
Neither man lets go of the other yet, enjoying the embrace. Tim's stomach suddenly makes a loud grumble and they both laugh. "Okay, the stomach has spoken." Jason lets go and Tim slips his grip to grab his hand.
"Alfred is always punctual. We have 15 minutes."
"If I didn't know how red in the face you get after an orgasm I'd say that's plenty of time," Jason teases as he leads Tim back to the kitchen.
"Ha-fucking-ha."
"It's true though!"
Tim lets go as Jason gets started with his food. "Perhaps some fries too. You have any curry left?" He wanders over to the crockpots to take a look.
"Plenty. Alfred wants to try it. Said he loves a good curry."
"Yeah, he does." Tim takes a seat on the counter out of Jason's way. "You guys have a good talk?"
"Surprisingly, yes," Jason says as he tosses the pickles in the fryer and takes out the bag of steak fries. "That guy's incredible."
"There's a reason we all love him. I don't know what we're going to do when he's gone. Swear that man needs to live forever."

He has nothing to say to that, so chooses to get the spicy aioli out of the fridge instead. It's a couple minutes of comfortable silence while Jason gets the food ready.
"Can I stay over this weekend?" Tim asks quietly. "I need an escape."
Jason looks up from the plates he's working on. "Of course. Friday night too?"
"Yeah. Think I'll come early. I can hide in the loft for a bit and come down and help close after Kori leaves." Tim looks tired and isn't trying to hide it.
"Whatever's clever," Jason replies. "I didn't think I'd see you at all this weekend, so I'm sure as hell not gonna say no."

Taking the plates, he and Tim return to the front of the bar. "You want a drink or do you need to stay sharp?"

Tim makes a face. "There's no way in hell I'm doing this completely sober."
"Need a shot?"
"Yes."
Jason ducks behind the bar to pour Tim a shot of whiskey and sets it down in front of Tim on the bar. While Tim slams it back, he mixes his normal jack and coke.

## "Nervous?"

"Kinda?" Tim rubs his hands over his face, not even caring that he dislodges his glasses in the process. "I know what to expect thanks to what you said, but whether Bruce is actually going to say it is a whole other thing." Fixing his glasses, he starts eating his pickles.

Jason putters around for a few minutes while Tim eats and promptly at 8, there's a knock on the front door to the bar. "You sure called it."

Tim gives him a wry grin and shoves another pickle in his mouth.
Crossing the room, Jason opens the door. Alfred is standing there, with Bruce looking uncomfortable behind him. Jason grins. "Hey there, Alfred! Bruce. Come on in." He steps aside and the two men enter. He closes and locks the door behind them.
"Good evening, Mister Todd," Alfred says. "Thank you again for hosting this little get together."
"No problem. I'm not really losing any money by doing this."
Bruce's eyes have been on Tim since he entered, who in turn is studiously avoiding his adoptive father's gaze and focusing on his fried pickles like they held the answers to the universe. At Jason's statement though, his attention turns back to the bartender. "I'll make sure you're compensated for any lost revenue."

Jason raises an eyebrow. Like hell am I taking money for this. "I already said I'm not really losing any money, so don't worry about it. If this was a Friday night or the weekend, that'd be a whole other story. Now what're you drinking? I've still got that scotch you had last time."

He holds Bruce's gaze until the other man backs down. Jason gets the impression that's a rare feat. "Double, neat," he finally says.
"You got it. Alfred, you want anything from the bar before we go hide in back?"
"A gin and tonic would be lovely, thank you."
Nodding, Jason brushes past Bruce and heads to the bar. As he ducks under the bar, he catches Tim's eyes. He's smiling slightly. "Something funny?" Jason asks quietly.
"Just Bruce. He's going to try and give you a check at some point."
"If he tries, I'm just gonna stick it in the shredder."
$* * * * *$
Jason drags the chair from his office into the kitchen for Alfred but the old butler looks around the small space with obvious interest when they retreat to give Tim and Bruce their privacy. "So this is where your culinary magic occurs. While I am not a fan of fried foods, Master Timothy has waxed poetic over your sauces and dips. Might I try a sample?"
"Sure, why not?" Jason goes to the fridge and takes out the squeeze bottles with his various condiments. Alfred goes to the sink to wash his hands while he sets up a small sample plate. "Let me know when you want the curry. I made some fresh steak fries about 15 minutes ago and stuck them in the oven to keep warm."
"Now is fine. It has been quite sometime since I enjoyed pub chips and curry." Alfred almost delicately dabs his finger into each of the sauces Jason's poured for him. His face lights up at the taste of the aioli. "This is excellent. The ketchup and the mustard are good too, but this aioli is quite delicious. Do you ever cater?" He looks inquiringly at Jason.
"Nah, not really. I'll make an occasional party tray here and there if a customer asks and gives me enough time to get everything together, but that's about it."
"The next time Master Bruce has a small get together at the penthouse, I may just ask for a bowl or two of this." Alfred gestures to the aioli.
"Sure, it's not that hard to make though." Jason can't help but feel a flush of pride run through him. Tim's gone on and on about Alfred's cooking before, so for the butler to compliment his food is quite the accomplishment.

Alfred takes a seat and Jason sets the plate of fries in front of him and grabs a bowl for the curry. He carefully ladles a hearty serving and sets in front of the butler. The older man takes a sip of his drink and picks up the thick cut fry to dip into the bowl. His face lights up at the taste. "This is most excellent as well. Most Americans are heathens when it comes to curry, so this is a very pleasant surprise."
"Thanks, that means a lot coming from you." Holy fucking shit, he likes it. I totally get now why Tim says he hates disappointing this man and the fact that he likes my cooking is awesome.
"Going back to Master Timothy, he let slip earlier today that he hasn't been sleeping well this week."
"I'd believe it. His bags have bags. And I'm willing to bet he's been skipping meals." Jason thought back to the last time he'd seen Tim and noticing his slimmer shoulders.
"He has a disturbing habit of doing that when he's distracted," Alfred comments between bites of the curry fries. "How does he sleep when he's here with you?"

The comment was asked blandly, but Jason smirks as he replies. "Like a rock once I can get him down."
"Might I convince you to use your powers of persuasion on Master Timothy and have him stay here tonight? He's got a rather important meeting in the morning and he needs to be well rested."

Jason raises an eyebrow. "I won't say no, but doesn't he need to go home and get dressed? What time is this meeting?"
"10. And not to worry about his clothing; I've already packed a bag for him."
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Tim sends Jason a text about an hour later that simply says "Done".
In the main room, Jason and Alfred find Tim and Bruce seated next to each other at the bar. In front of them is a mostly empty bottle of scotch and a large pitcher. "That better have been for something besides booze," Jason comments as he takes in the sight.
"Water," Tim says. He's ditched his glasses at some point and his eyes are red.
Next to him, Bruce doesn't look too much better, but rather than the red eyes, he looks much more haggard than he did when Jason first met him. "May I at least pay for the bottle?" he gestures to the scotch.

Jason smirks as he ducks around behind the bar. "Yeah, you can pay for that."

The pitcher has to be Tim's work. I wonder what Bruce thought of him going behind the bar to get it? He's very comfortable back there.
"Did this little meeting serve its purpose?" Alfred asks.
Tim nods slowly. "Yeah, it did." He looks up at Jason. "I'm in no shape to drive," he says carefully, trying hard to clearly enunciate rather than slur his words. "Can I crash here?"
"Sure thing." Jason grabs a tray and starts picking up the plates and glasses. "Alfred even packed a bag for you."

The look Tim gives Alfred says it all. "You know us all too well."
"Someone has to." Alfred heads to the front door.
Jason quickly intercepts him. "Dunno what you're thinkin', this is still the Bowery at night."
Alfred simply raises an eyebrow, but lets Jason open the door and step outside first to look around. Jason isn't sure what he was expecting but the simple black SUV parked out front wasn't it. The old butler turns off the alarm and unlocks the trunk, removing a hanging bag with what Jason assumes is a suit and a small duffle bag. Locking up, the two men head back inside.

Bruce is saying something quietly to Tim and Tim starts laughing. "I'll do my best," he says, glancing at Jason.

It's not long before it's just Jason and Tim in the bar. Jason finishes cleaning up and heads to his office to start running his totals for the day. Tim drags his office chair back from the kitchen and sits in it while Jason locks up the till in the safe. "Let me do a quick walkthrough and we'll head up."

The kitchen has long since been cleaned up and shut down for the day and the front doesn't take very long to put in order. I wonder what exactly they talked about. Whatever it was, they seem to be good. Doubt I'll hear about it tonight, Tim looks dead on his feet. Bet he's going to be passed out within five minutes of getting upstairs.

He picks up Tim's overnight bags from Alfred and goes back to his office. Tim looks like he's asleep in the chair. "Wakey, wakey, Timmers. Fall asleep there, you're going to have the worst neck ache in the morning."

Tim blearily opens a blue eye and sighs as he hauls himself out of the chair to follow Jason. "I can sleep anywhere."
"So you've said, but my bed is much more comfortable."
"And three flights of stairs away."
"Semantics."

As predicted, Tim all but collapses in Jason's bed upon their arrival to the loft, leaving a trail of clothes behind him after making a quick detour to the bathroom.

Chuckling, Jason hangs up Tim's suit in his closet and leaves the small duffle bag in an obvious place for Tim to see in the morning. Alfred said the meeting was at 10, so Tim should leave here about 9. I should get him up about 8, I think. Christ, what a horrible hour to be awake at. Jason doesn't often see 8 in the morning anymore, closing the bar late and often staying up for an hour or two after that to unwind before being able to fall asleep. He sets the alarm on his new phone, rather proud that he figured out how to use the alarm feature so quickly after getting it.

It's still early for him to be going to bed, so he takes a quick shower to get the smell of the bar off his skin. He towels off and walks naked over to his dresser to pull out a pair of sleeping pants. The weather has gotten colder and while Jason runs warm, even he doesn't like to be cold. Glancing down at Tim, he smirks when he sees the shorter man star-fished across the bed, already drooling into a pillow. He pulls up the blankets and tucks him in. Looks like I'm sleeping on the sofa tonight.

He grabs a blanket and an unused pillow and heads over to the plush sofa to make a little nest for himself, then heads to the kitchen to make a cup of tea. A few minutes later, the only light on in the loft is the table lamp by the sofa and Jason curls up with a copy of Murakami's Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki. He's long had a soft spot for the Japanese author.

A couple hours later, it's just after midnight and Jason's starting to feel tired when he hears a rustle from his bed. Looking over at the bed, he sees Tim getting up and heading to the bathroom. Jason takes that as his cue to get a water bottle and some Tylenol for his boyfriend. He's sitting on the edge of the bed when Tim returns. Wordlessly, he hands both items to him. Tim swallows the medicine and gulps down about half of the water before setting it on Jason's nightstand.

Instead of crawling back into bed, Tim settles onto Jason's lap instead, straddling his thighs as he leans into Jason's chest and wraps his arms around the big man. Jason returns the embrace. "Feeling okay there?" he asks quietly.
"Yeah, just had to go to the bathroom again." Tim sighs into Jason's chest and shifts a bit so that his chin rests on the man's shoulder. His breath starts to tickle Jason's ear.
"You should get back to sleep."
"I will if you lay down with me."
"You just want me because I'm warm." Jason falls backward onto the bed and pulls Tim down next to him.
"Amongst other things."

GoAwayOlivia pointed out that Alfred would normally eat the curry and chips with flatware, being from Great Britain, but Jason wouldn't know this. Fries are American finger food. And now I want curry fries...

Next week: Jason gets to cause chaos and be an asshole. Tim enjoys the fireworks and makes his own digs. Dick just wants to know what's going on and Bruce sits back and enjoys the show. In other words, a typical family holiday dinner. It's Thanksgiving! :P

# Milestone Three: Here Comes Chaos (Thanksgiving at Wayne Manor) 

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jason gets Tim out the door with minimal effort the next morning. The 10 plus hours of sleep did the young, soon-to-be-former executive good as he only needed one cup of coffee to make it out the door, though he did have another in a travel mug he borrowed from Jason to make it into WE.

The day passes uneventfully. Jason gets the bar kitchen up and running, then takes a nap before heading downstairs for the night. 8 am is way too fucking early to be awake. Tim arrives a little after 10 , much to Kori's delight. She hogs most of his attention until she leaves at midnight.

It's not until Jason's closed the bar and he and Tim are wrapped around each other on the sofa watching a movie neither one is paying attention to that he finally gets a chance to ask a question he's been thinking about for the last couple days. "So...Thanksgiving. I've had both Bruce and Alfred ask me to come."

Tim huffs one of his small laughs as he leans into Jason. He's already stripped down to his boxers and undershirt and wrapped a blanket around the two of them. "They've asked me about it too. Keep telling them I need to talk to you first. I'm okay with it but totally understand if you think it's too soon."
"I just don't want to feel like a freak show. Dickieboy I can deal with, but the demon brat I might just punch if he says the wrong thing."
"Bruce and Alfred both promise to keep him in line. Not sure what Bruce can do but Damian does listen to Alfred sometimes. And Dick. He always listens to Babs though. She scares him." Tim grins at that.
"Babs? Who's she?"
"Dick's wife." Tim gives Jason a quizzical look. "I haven't talked about Babs at all?"
"Nope."
"Okay. Wow, um..." Tim looks embarrassed for a moment before he starts explaining. "Barbara Gordon-Grayson. She's the daughter of Gotham's police commissioner, James Gordon. He's one of Bruce's best friends, has been for years, so Dick and Babs kind of grew up together. They dated a bit as teenagers, but it wasn't until sometime when I was in California that they reconnected. They've only been married for a couple years and I keep wondering when Babs is going to kill Dick and hide the body."

Jason barks out a laugh at that. "Okay, she sounds pretty cool. Anyone else going to be there I don't know?"

Tim looks thoughtful for a moment. "Maybe Cass? She's Babs's ward. Or former ward, really. She's my age."
"How did that happen? This Barbara gal is Dickie's age, right?"
"A year older actually. She's the daughter of the police commissioner, so she made it work. And, at least at the time, Cass certainly counted as special needs."

Tim went on to explain how Cassandra Cain came to be in Barbara's care. That she was a mute with almost no understanding of spoken language and no knowledge of reading or writing to communicate. Not even sign language. Her parents had raised her as a social experiment and Barbara had somehow found out about it, raising holy hell when she did. Both of Cass's parents were in prison for child neglect and a host of other charges and Barbara fought to get Cass. It took years of careful training and an infinite amount of patience, but Cassandra could now speak, though not well. Her conversations were short, but she understood what was being said. Body language apparently helped, although Jason's not entirely sure how. She could read and write, but is most comfortable with sign language.
"Wow, what a story." That's fucking impressive. Her I'd like to meet.
"I know, right?" Tim snuggles into Jason, unashamed to admit he loves full body contact with the larger man. "I don't see Babs and Cass as often as I'd like, but I think they'll really like you. If Dick hasn't messed things up at least."
"Gee, that's reassuring." Jason lets out a frustrated sigh. "I dunno, to be honest. I kinda want to since I've already met most of these guys, so it's not like it'll be the first time with all the awkward shit that goes with it."
"It's just the awkward shit with all of us together in the same room and coming out to everyone besides Bruce and Alfred," Tim finishes for him.
"Actually, that part would be fun," Jason disagrees. "You haven't told them yet?"
"Nope." Tim gives him a sly look. "And I'm not nervous in the slightest about telling them. I don't care in the least what Damian thinks and Dick's pretty open-minded. So is Babs. Not sure about Cass. It's never come up before."
"Two in our corner, one undecided, and one who gives a fuck. Sounds great."
"So is that a yes?"
Jason plants a kiss on the top of Tim's head. "Yeah, that's a yes. I like causing chaos."
"Of course you do."

Thanksgiving day is one of the only days of the year Jason closes in observance of an actual holiday, even with all the football games on. He closed early the night before and wakes up at what feels like the crack of dawn, considering his normal hours. A simple breakfast and a cup of the English breakfast tea Tim got for him later, he stares down the contents of his pantry and his refrigerator. When he called Alfred on Monday to let him know he was coming with Tim for Thanksgiving, he'd insisted on making something to share since Alfred wasn't going to let him in the kitchen to help.
"I've no doubt of your culinary talents, Mister Todd, but you will be a guest and guests do not cook," the old butler gently but firmly admonished.

It had been hard enough to get the man to relent to let Jason bring the appetizers. He'd wanted to do something as the old man is going to be doing everything else.

So what the fuck passes as rich snob appetizers? Tim's pretty down to earth and from what I remember of Dickie, he is too. I don't give a fuck about Damian and Bruce seems like the type to try whatever's in front of him at least once. No fucking clue about the girls. And Alfred did say to make whatever I wanted...

He'd had a chance to go shopping a couple days before to get a few things he didn't normally keep in his kitchen as there was one thing he knew for certain he was going to make. Roy is going to be pissed he missed this. Shame the recipe takes so damn long to set up properly. It always tastes best after sitting in the fridge for a day.

The rest of contents of his kitchen slowly coalesce into a game plan. He gets started and only has to run down to the bar once to grab a bottle of the semi-decent rum.

The morning passes quickly and before Jason even realizes it, there's a knock on his door. Looking at the clock, his eyes widen in surprise. "Shit," he mutters as he goes to the door to let Tim in. "Sorry, I'm running late. Just finished taking the stuffed mushrooms out of the oven. I need to shower and get things packed and..."

Tim lays a finger over Jason's lips, stopping his rambling and grins. "It's alright. Show me the Tupperware or trays or whatever and you can go shower. I can start packing for you."

Jason licks Tim's finger as he lets the man in. "Thanks. I think I may have overdone it a bit." He gestures to the kitchen.
"Holy crap." Tim's eyes widen behind his glasses. "You do know you were just making appetizers and not dinner, right?"

On the counters in various states of packing are a few different trays of cookies, some Brie and figs wrapped in puff pastry, a small crockpot mostly full of cocktail wieners in Jason's homemade BBQ sauce (which Roy had sworn was the best shit on earth and that Jason needed to leave him the recipe in his will since he refused to give it to him), and the recently finished mushrooms. Jason rubs the back of his head sheepishly. "I wasn't sure what to make and wanted to stay away from what I serve downstairs."
"Damn shame as Bruce loves your curry too." Tim makes a shooing motion. "Go shower. I'll take care of things here."

Showering quickly, Jason runs a hand over his face debating if he has enough time to shave. Fuck it, we're already gonna be late. He grabs his electric razor. A few minutes later, he exits the bathroom and opens his closet to stare at his small collection of dress shirts.
"Wear the dark blue or black one," Tim shouts from the kitchen. "Jeans are fine if there's no holes in them."
"Since when did you know what's in my closet?" Jason takes out his black long sleeved button shirt and lays it on the bed while he goes to the dresser to pull out a pair of faded but comfortable jeans, some clean boxer briefs, and a white undershirt.
"Since I got cold up here the other night waiting for you and went searching for more blankets. Ever hear of a space heater?" Tim snarks in reply.
"Got two actually. This place gets cold in the winter, even with all the renovations and shit I've done. I'll get them outta storage." Jason gets dressed and sits on his bed pulling on socks and a pair of loafers he only ever wears when going to the bank to beg for a loan. Which has been a while, so I'm sure something's gonna happen here soon where I'll need another one. Joys of owning a fucking building.
"You have a storage unit?"
"Yeah, it's called the other half of the top floor. I subdivided it into little storage rooms for each apartment tenant." Jason crosses the loft to join Tim in the kitchen.

Everything's been packed away with the sole exception of the stuffed mushrooms. "Not sure how you wanted to pack these since they're still hot." Tim gestures to the warm baking sheet.
"I got this." Jason finishes up while Tim takes the crockpot down to his car. Sealing the last tray, he grabs his good leather jacket and puts it on, then grabs the trays and heads out the door, doing an awkward juggle of everything while he locks the door.

When he steps outside into the cool November afternoon, Jason gapes at the sight of Tim's silver Audi. Before he even opens his mouth, Tim gives him a look. "Not today."
"But I sucked your cock," Jason almost whines as he carefully places the trays in the trunk and braces a few things against them to keep them from shifting much.
"Yes and it was wonderful, but I think you're too jittery to drive right now," Tim replies dryly. He gets in the car.

Jason tries pouting after settling in the passenger seat but it gets him nowhere as Tim just laughs at him as he speeds away.
"If you're not too boozed up when we leave, you can drive home."
"Promise?"
"Yes. I'll probably be too drunk to drive, so you'll need to anyways. Unless you want to drink?" Tim glances over at Jason questioningly.
"I own a fucking bar. I can drink any day of the week."
"You okay being DD then?"
"Yeah, but only if you tell me why you're planning on getting shit-faced. You didn't sound that concerned about dinner when you talked me into it, so what changed?" Jason asks as he shifts in the seat.

Tim sighs. "I don't normally but now that we're on our way, I'm a bit nervous."
"Not too late to turn around. We've got a feast stinking up your trunk." Jason jabs a thumb over his shoulder.
"No, I'm good. If it gets too bad, we can leave."
"I'll let you be the judge of that. Anything I need to watch my mouth about?"
Tim smirks as he turns on to the Aparo Expressway. "Just be yourself."
"Asshole, then. Got it. I'm good at that."
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Jason lets out a low whistle as Tim drives up the small road that pretends to be a driveway and sees Wayne Manor for the first time. "Jesus fucking Christ, you sure I shouldn't be wearing a suit or something?" The sight intimidates him slightly. Not many things out there that do.
"You're fine," Tim is quick to reassure him. "The only person who won't be in jeans is Alfred. I don't think he even owns any."

Rather than parking in front of the main entrance, Tim drives around to the side and pulls into a slightly hidden garage. "Family entrance," he explains. "Thought it'd be easier than going in the front."
"Thanks," Jason replies a bit weakly. He's still feeling a bit overwhelmed.
"I think you'll like the cars here too."
At that, Jason rouses and looks around. Shit, I'm in the garage at Wayne Manor. Bruce's car collection is rumored to be one of the best in the world. He scrambles out of the car and gapes for the second time this afternoon. "I think I'm in heaven," he says as he takes in the large room around them.

Tim gets out and comes to stand next to Jason. "This isn't even all of them," he comments. "Just the ones that get driven the most. The motorcycles are over there and there's another level below us with the antiques and other classics."

Jason is not embarrassed by the small whine that escapes his mouth.
"I'll make sure you get a tour before we go," Tim says with a smile. "Your food is getting cold."
"Fuck that, it can freeze for all I care," Jason replies but he goes to the trunk and waits for Tim to unlock it.

They unload the car and Tim leads the way across the garage to a door hidden in a small alcove that Jason completely misses as he keeps trying to look at the cars as he walks. The door opens into a short hallway, which in turn leads into a kitchen that he would kill for. The most delicious scents are coming from all over the place.

Alfred looks up from where he's chopping what looks like pecans at the large kitchen island. "Master Timothy! Mister Todd! Welcome. Happy Thanksgiving." He gives them both a warm smile and sets down his knife. Wiping his hands on his apron, he walks to the two men and takes one of the trays from Jason. "It's much colder today than the forecast called for. Do any of these need to be reheated before they're served?"

Jason breaks out of his daze when Tim jabs him in the side with his elbow. "Uh, sorry about that. I want your kitchen."
"That is certainly the first time I've had that reaction from anyone walking into this room." Alfred looks quietly proud of the fact.

They go over the trays together and carefully reheat the pastry bites and the mushrooms. The crockpot Alfred simply plugs in and sets on low. He samples everything, taking particular delight in Jason's BBQ sauce. "If I know you at all, you've doctored some store brand and made it your own." He gives Jason a sly look.

He makes a zipping motion across his lips. "I'll never tell."
Tim laughs. "His friend Roy told me last weekend that fights have broken out at the bar when Jason was serving these on his menu and ran out of the sauce. Apparently, it takes a day or two to set up properly."
"True story," Jason agrees as he glares at Tim for giving Alfred a hint. "Which is why I only make these on Super Bowl Sunday now and charge double what I normally do for my food."
"I can see why." Alfred looks back at the crockpot.
The old butler helps rearrange everything on the trays after warming a few things in the oven. He directs Tim to grab a hot pad for the ceramic crockpot and together the three men leave the kitchen, laden with food.

Alfred takes what Jason hopes is a direct route to the living room where Tim's family is supposedly waiting. This place is a fucking maze. I'm already lost.

Another hallway and a large door later, Alfred finally enters a rather cozy looking room. If by cozy, I mean bigger than my entire loft but at least not everything in here looks like it can

Seated on a large sofa are Dick and Damian with Bruce sitting across from them in a fancy looking recliner. An Asian girl next to Damian. There's another couch on the other side of Bruce and a red haired woman is seated there. Jason spots a wheelchair peeking out from the other side of the sofa.

Dick looks shocked to see Jason trailing after Alfred and stands rather abruptly. "What're you doing here?"
"Nice to see you too," Jason drawls, but gives Bruce a dirty look. "Didn't say anything, did ya?"
"I just sat down," Bruce replies as he stands up to take a tray from Jason and put it on the coffee table. "Welcome to Wayne Manor, Jason."

Tim steps around him and carefully drops one of the hot pads he was using to carry the ceramic pot and sets it down. "Can we get the unpleasantries out of the way first? I really want to eat these."
"Unpleasantries?" Dick looks confused. "Tim, what's going on? Why is Jason here?"
"Pennyworth must be getting into his dotage if he thinks bar snacks are suitable for a table here." Damian leans back against the sofa and crosses his arms, a small smirk playing at the corners of his mouth.

Jason ignores the interplay around him for a moment to get a better lay of the land. The Asian chick must be Cassandra. Tim told me Dickie has a thing for redheads, so that has to be Barbara.
"Damian, you're not helping." Dick gives his youngest brother a cross look before returning his attention to Jason. "Tim?"

Heaving a big sigh, Tim reaches out and grabs Jason's hand, giving it a squeeze. "Jason's my boyfriend. I figured since almost everyone here has already met him, we wouldn't have to deal with awkward introductions." He glares at Dick challengingly.
"What!?" Dick shouts and points an actual finger at Jason. "Your boyfriend? Tim, what the hell? Since when are you gay?"
"Dick, settle down before you make more of an ass out of yourself than you already are." The redhead turns a bit on the sofa to look up at Jason. Bright blue eyes gaze steadily at him through a pair of wire-framed glasses. She holds out a hand. "It's nice to meet you finally, Jason. I'm Barbara."

Jason sets his final tray on the table, freeing up his other hand to return her handshake. Luckily, Tim's got his death-grip on his left hand. "Likewise, though I gotta admit, I just heard about you for the first time last weekend."

Barbara gives Tim a reproachful look. "Tim...Really? You and I go back a long ways, sweetie."
"What?" Tim asks, mock defensively. "I don't tell him everything."
I wonder...Tim said she runs a small cyber security, data recovery, computer something or other company. He's hinted at a misspent youth with computers. "She part of the reason why you're so scary good with computers that you impress the crap outta Roy?"

Tim's mouth gapes open for a moment, then closes, firmly, while Barbara starts laughing.
"Umm, aren't we forgetting something here?" Dick tries to interrupt, but is interrupted in turn by Damian of all people.
"Richard, leave it be. It matters not who warms Drake's bed. I am pleased to see that my opinions on his level of taste have proven to be true yet again. Our brother has always enjoyed the coarser things in life."
"Damian," Bruce, Barbara, and Alfred all say warningly.
But Jason holds up a hand, quieting them all. This is the reason why Tim brought me along after all. Chaos, here we come. "And what would you know about the coarser side of life, huh? Here you are in your castle up on the hill, waited on hand and foot, never having wanted for anything." He gives Tim's hand a squeeze. "What I'd really like to know, is have you ever worked a real day in your entire life? Not at Daddy's company, that doesn't count since everyone knows you're Damian Wayne, but out in the real world? What good would your name be if no one knows who you are? Or cares? Work your way up from the bottom, then you can talk to me about the coarser side of life."

Okay, that came out a bit differently than I thought. Around the room, jaws dropped, Damian's first and foremost, but a couple of people were trying to hide smiles and failing epically. Cassandra for one, Barbara another. Even Bruce. Jason peeks at Tim and sees a wide grin on his face. Nope, no hiding there.
"You should not speak so to your betters," Damian all but snaps as he rises to his feet, hands clenched into fists.
"I don't see anyone in this room who I'd say is better than me. I see a bunch of people who I know work hard to make a living. If they get better paychecks than me, so be it. But at least they're working. Earn an actual paycheck from something not handed to you on a silver platter. You might be amazed at how big of an accomplishment that is." With that, Jason lets go of Tim's hand and takes a seat on the sofa next to Barbara. Show him just how not intimidated I am by him; that'll piss him off even more.
"You!" Damian splutters and tries to lunge at Jason from across the coffee table, but is stopped by a silent Cassandra, though Dick makes a move to grab him too. He stills almost instantly at her touch, but his young face is twisted in rage.
"Damian, calm down," Bruce orders. He's sitting calmly in his armchair, watching the events unfold in front of him like a king from on high. Bet the fucker is enjoying the hell out of this.
"Come on, Dami, relax. Jason likes to push buttons." Dick tries to sooth Damian and shoot a glare at Jason in the process. "It's Thanksgiving everyone, can't we try to at least get along?"
"Get rid of him and I'll be much happier." Damian glares at Jason. "Drake too. He's the one who brought the trash in the first place."

Oh, that's going too far, you fucking demon. Jason opens his mouth to speak, but Tim beats him to it. "Watch it, Damian," he says harshly, but then a sly smirk appears on his face. "If anything, you should be thanking Jason. He's the one who gave me the idea to leave WE in the first place."

Well played, rich boy. Jason enjoys the looks of amazement on Damian and Dick's faces.
"What?" Dick asks, head whipping between Tim and Jason. "What the hell is going on here? Why am I just now hearing about this?" He points at Tim again. "You promised you would tell me what's going on. That something big was in the works and then I hear you quit WE. What is he doing to you?" The finger swings to Jason.
"What are you, six?" Jason asks sarcastically, but Tim's still standing and rests a hand on Jason's shoulder, calming him. The motion doesn't go unnoticed by Dick.
"I'm doing this because I want to," Tim says calmly. "I even have Bruce's blessing." His gaze lands on his adoptive father for a moment before returning to Dick. "For the first time in a long while, I'm happy, Dick. Jason makes me happy. Are you really going to pick a fight with me over that?"

Dick looks like the rug was just pulled out from under him as his shoulders drop and his aggressive stance turns inwards. "Timmy, you know I would never do that. Just...talk to me. Please."

Tim glances down at Jason, asking a question that Jason instantly knows the answer to. He nods. Fuck, we're already turning into an old married couple.
"Come to the bar this weekend," Tim says. "We'll talk then."
Damian looks like he wants to say something else, but Bruce steps in before he does. "Now that the fireworks are over with, let's eat. It looks like Jason was busy this morning."

The rest of the afternoon went pretty well or so Jason thought. No more arguments, at least that he heard. He quickly decided Barbara was the most amazing person in the history of ever and could not understand how she ended up married to an idiot like Dick. He sensed a story there.

Alfred's cooking is divine and Jason doesn't hesitate to tell the man. He's promised copies of the recipes for his stuffing, cranberry sauce, and sweet potatoes.

Bruce also gave him a personal tour of both levels of his garage. Tim tagged along for that. If Alfred's cooking was divine, then Jason decided he'd died and gone to heaven as he got a chance to at least sit in the drivers seat of cars he'd only ever read about or saw on TV. He'd even invited Jason to come back some other time to take a drive in some of the nicer sports cars.

As they get ready to leave, Tim tosses the keys to his Audi to Jason. "I did promise," he says with a grin.
"Fuck yes!" Jason runs out the kitchen in a rush, before coming back to grab the empty trays Alfred had washed and darting out the door again. Tim laughs as he follows along behind, once again carrying the crockpot. It had long since been wiped clean of any signs of BBQ sauce.

Jason eagerly rearranges the driver's seat and mirrors and waits impatiently as Tim closes the trunk with a slam.

He settles into the passenger seat and gives Jason an arch look as he buckles his seatbelt.
"Treat her nicely. She's a lady, but she does like to go fast."
"Sounds like someone else I know."
As Jason drives them home, it's hard to tell what exactly he's feeling higher from, driving Tim's car finally or the chance to drive some of the other awesome cars in Bruce's garage. "Fuck, Tim. Do you think Bruce really meant it?" he asks.

Tim smiles. "Of course he did. He wouldn't have offered if he didn't."
"Fuck..." Jason drags the word out as he easily changes gears and the car flies over the Kane Bridge back into Gotham. His head is full of images of the different cars he'd seen. Next to him, he hears Tim chuckling. "What?" he asks a bit defensively.
"I've never seen you lose your cool over something before." Tim gives him a bright grin. "It's nice to see you so into something besides books and food."

Jason gives him a grin of his own. "Well, if we detour to your brownstone, I'll show you something else I can be into as well."

Tim flushes a bit at the innuendo. That never fails stroke his ego. "Do you...do you want to stay the night?"
"Yeah. I think I do."

## Chapter End Notes

Oh the plans I have for Barbara and Cass...and Tim. :D
Next week: Dick and Tim have the TALK and Jason gets to be a knight in a faded red hoodie.

# Milestone Four: Tim and Dick Have a TALK 

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Saturday is busy as hell and Jason finds himself quickly sucked into the maw, though Roy and Stephanie both send him right to the kitchen to keep the food coming. Tim comes down with him, dressed in his holely jeans and a band t-shirt that Roy instantly gives him a high five over. He's been running plates to Steph and collecting dirty ones like a regular busboy.

Steph laughs when she sees Tim elbow deep at the sink rinsing off plates. "Do I need to be splitting my tips with you?" she asks with a grin. "You've been working as hard as me."
"Thanks for the thought, but I think I can manage." Tim grins right back at her and winks.
Jason rolls his eyes as he works the fryer. "Stop flirting with my staff, rich boy. You've got all of them eating out of your hand."

Steph smacks Jason in the arm as she passes him to drop some more plates off for Tim. "You're just mad we like him better than you."
"Fuck you."
"Sorry, honey, but that's Tim's job." Steph turns her bright blue gaze on Tim. "Have you had a chance to give Tam my number?"
"I did and she was very happy to get it. She hasn't called or texted yet?" Tim returns the questioning blue gaze with one of his own.
"Nope."
"I'll talk to her." Tim grins. "Maybe she's just nervous."
"Not sure why! She's got a wicked sense of humor and has a killer shoe collection from what she told me. Of course I want to talk to her again."

Jason narrows his eyes a bit at that remark and bites his tongue. Perhaps Steph really isn't into Tam the way he and Tim thought she was when she first asked for her number.

That thought is quickly moved to the wayside at the next thing that comes out of Steph's mouth. "She's got the sexiest voice I've ever heard, man or woman. I could probably come just listening to her read the news."

Tim and Jason both burst into laughter. "Christ, Steph, get back to work. Tim, you've got a mission now, I hope you know that."
"I'll call her later, promise."
*****

Things finally quiet down a bit in the evening and Jason's allowed to leave the kitchen for the first time all day. He lets out a low whistle when he runs the numbers. "That's pretty impressive."

Kori's looking over his shoulder. "I'll say. I'm glad I came in early. This will be a nice addition to my Christmas fund."

Jason gives her a querying look. "Don't you shop for Christmas months in advance or some shit like that?"
"Yes, but I still have to payback the fund."
She's the accountant, not me. Don't question it. "Whatever makes you happy."
She gives him a little peck on the cheek and walks away. From behind him, Jason hears Tim laugh. "You get what she was sayin'?" he asks.
"I did."
"Does it make sense to you?"
"Yes."
"Then I won't worry about it."
A little while later, Jason's in back closing down the kitchen for the night. He secretly loves this time of night as he doesn't have to keep running back and forth or deal with grease splatters from the fryer anymore. He's made a plate of fried pickles for Tim (his first of the night, the younger man has been working his ass off all afternoon when he didn't even have to) and is just reaching into the fridge for the spicy aioli when Tim steps through the door, carefully closing it behind him. He's got a bit of a pinched look on his face.

Jason narrows his eyes in concern. "Something wrong?"
Tim shakes his head and shrugs. "Dick's here," is all he says.
It's enough. "Oh. Didn't expect him so soon."
"I was thinking he'd show up tomorrow, personally." Tim sighs. "May I borrow your office? It might get loud and I don't need an audience for this."
"Yeah, let me unlock it for you. Or do you want to pick the lock again?" Jason smirks at the memory.

Tim grins, obviously remembering the last time he did that too. "Keys. Dick doesn't know I can do that."

Jason digs his keys out of his pocket and holds them up, waving them a bit so they jingle. "I want that story, Tim. Just how drunk do I need to get you before you spill the beans?"

The look on Tim's face is pure devilry and Jason can't help but feel his cock twitch in his jeans at the sight. "You'll have to find out now, won't you?"

Laughing, he tosses the keys to Tim who catches them one handed. "If it stays this slow, I'm closing at midnight. No destroying my office."
"You got it." Tim glances at the counter at the pickles. "Those for me?" he asks hopefully.
"Yeah. Completely up to you if you want to share them with Dickieboy."
"Not a chance in hell. They're mine."
*****

Midnight comes and Tim and Dick still haven't left Jason's office. It's been slow the last hour so he and Kori have almost everything cleaned up and ready to close for the night. Jason is just waiting for a couple of guys to finish up their beers and call it a night. Kori can't quite leave yet as her purse is locked in the safe in the office so she's been killing time rearranging the top shelf bottles on display behind the bar. It annoys Jason to no end when she does but he knows better than to change it back while she's here.

Kori pulls her phone out from where she keeps it under the bar and checks the time. She never keeps it on her while working, saying it ruins the lines of her clothes. Jason privately agrees as her ass looks amazing in whatever she wears. "Its already quarter after. Think they'll be done soon?" she asks.

Jason shrugs. "Hard to say. I'll go interrupt and get your purse."
"My knight in a faded red hoodie," Kori says with a grin.
"I'll slay any dragon for you, gorgeous." He ducks under the bar and heads to the back. The guys up front are regulars so he's not concerned about leaving her alone for a few minutes.

It does feel odd to knock on the door of his own office though. He waits a moment before he opens it slightly to stick his head in. Tim and Dick are sitting across the desk from each other, Tim in his chair and Dick in the more uncomfortable chair opposite. He recognizes the unspoken power play for what it is. "Hey, sorry to interrupt but it's after midnight. I just need to get Kori's purse outta the safe for her so she can head home."

Tim pulls his phone from his pocket and looks at it. "Crap, I'm sorry. I didn't realize it was this late already." Even in his ratty jeans and band shirt, he still carries the aura of the executive he is the way he's situated at the desk.

Dick on the other hand doesn't look quite as calm. If anything, the man looks exhausted and more haggard than Jason thought he could look. He's also giving him a level and assessing look, which is a definite improvement over the stink-eyes he was giving Jason the other afternoon.
"No worries, you've been busy." Jason steps in and walks over to the safe, kneeling in front of it to open it and get Kori's massive purse. She's got a new one every fucking week, I swear to God. Standing up, he notices the mostly empty pitcher and glasses on his desk. Knowing Tim, it was water. "You guys take all the time you need. Want me to top that off really quick?" He gestures to the pitcher.

Tim shakes his head. "We're good. Almost done."
"Don't rush on my account. I still got customers out there to keep me entertained." With that, Jason exits the office and heads back up front.

Kori accepts her purse with a small smile. "How's it going back there?"
Jason shrugs. "They haven't killed each other. Tim looks like he's been steamrolling Dickie. Dude hasn't stood a chance."
"No one does against our Tim," Kori says proudly. "Walk me out?"
Despite Tim saying he and Dick were almost done, it's about an hour later before they emerge from the back, Tim carrying the empty pitcher and glasses. Jason closed half an hour before, so he's got everything cleaned up and ready to go. He's already fixed the bottles on his back wall and is leaning against the bar playing a word game on his phone that Tim installed for him earlier. The damn thing is addicting.

Tim's still looking calm and collected but Dick's eyes are red now. Jason didn't peg him as a crier but stranger things have happened. Like dating a millionaire son of Bruce fucking Wayne.
"Thanks, Jay," Tim says as he set the pitcher and glasses on the counter. "Sorry it took so long."
"I told you, it's not a big deal." Jason taps his phone to darken the screen and tucks it into his back pocket. "You guys get it worked out?" He casts a wary glance at Dick.

Dick catches it and a small smile appears on his face. "We did. There was a lot I didn't know and a lot I assumed. And you know what happens to people who do that."
"That's all right, Dickie. I still think you're an asshole. Just less of one than you were before. You're still a cop after all." Jason can't help the smirk.
"Thanks I think." He looks over at Tim. "You stay here on the weekends?"
"For the most part." Tim shrugs. "Jason can't close on the weekend and this is the only time I can get to see him for more than a few hours."

Dick shakes his head slowly but he's still smiling. "Just seeing you behind the bar earlier was a trip. You look comfortable back there."
"I'm working on it. I'm even reading a bartending book right now."
"Yeah," Tim gives him a shy smile. "Thought it might come in handy."
"Well, you will be unemployed soon. Gotta start looking at your options." Jason can't help the grin as he teases Tim and Dick starts laughing.

The relaxed atmosphere keeps up after Dick leaves and Jason finishes shutting down, Tim going up ahead of time to start Jason's evening tea. He's gotten good at it, which shouldn't come as a surprise as Jason privately thinks Tim is good at anything he puts his mind to. Genius, remember? God, what the fuck did I do to end up with a guy like him?

By the time he gets upstairs, the only lights on in the loft are the kitchen lights and those are turned down low. The water's running in the bathroom but Jason sees the steam still rising from his tea on the counter top. The loft is cold and he suddenly remembers he needs to get the space heaters out of storage. Crossing the loft, he knocks softly and opens the door. "Hey, I'm going to go grab those heaters out of storage, okay?"
"Thank god," Tim says from the shower. "Now I don't have to glue myself to your side all night."
"You still can, just with less clothing. I'll be right back."
He doesn't keep a lot in his storage unit so the space heaters are quickly found and brought back to the loft. One is plugged in by the sofa and the other in the bedroom area. Tim is still in the shower, probably because it's warmer than the rest of the loft. It's an old building and renovations only do so much. Need to remember and check to see if anyone else is having issues with drafts.

Jason strips down and grabs his sleeping pants, then heads to the bathroom. "Save any hot water for me?"
"I tried." Tim sounds a bit breathless and Jason's eyes narrow a bit. Is he doing what I think he's doing? He hardens a bit at the thought. It was still so easy to completely lose himself in Tim's embrace, his body, his everything.
"Lukewarm I hope?" He opens the shower door and can't help the pleased grin that appears as he takes in the sight.
"You took too long," Tim tries to say defensively but it still comes out in that breathy tone. As well it should with where his fingers are. He's leaning against the wall with his hand angled behind him and his cock jutting out proudly in front of him.
"Got a condom hiding somewhere or do I need to grab one?" Jason feels himself hardening even more.

Tim gasps. "On the counter."
Jason turns and swipes it up, giving himself a few good strokes to get fully hard. Tim's been at it for a while from the looks of it, so I don't think he'll last long. That's all right, he looks so
pretty when he comes... He rips the foil open and slips the condom on, carefully pinching the tip around his barbell.

Entering the shower, he locks gazes with Tim. Jason reaches down between them and gives the base of Tim's cock a firm squeeze. "Don't want this ending too quickly," he whispers as he leans in and laps at the lukewarm water running down the side of Tim's neck. "Did the office inspire you tonight?" he asks as he runs his hands down Tim's sides to settle on his slim hips.
"Yes," Tim gasps out. "Please." One of the things Jason enjoys most about Tim is that he's not shy about what he wants. "Want you."

Jason captures Tim's lips with his own, catching Tim's gasp. He's warm and solid and just this side of too slippery as he scrambles up on his toes to press firmly against his taller boyfriend. The kiss is wild and messy and almost desperate. A thought crosses Jason's mind as he lifts Tim up to get a better angle that interactions with his family always seem to do this to him. He'd been the same way on Thanksgiving too.

He brushes the thought aside to be examined later. Right now, he needs to fuck Tim so hard that he can finally stop thinking so much.
*****

Later, they curl up on the sofa dressed in their sleep clothes. Tim drags a blanket over them even though the air is much more mild thanks to the heaters. Jason has a new cup of tea as the old one was cold and over-steeped. A movie plays quietly on the large TV but as usual, they're not paying attention to it.

Tim sighs as he curls up against Jason, tucking his head against Jason's shoulder so that he's almost in the bigger man's lap. Jason wraps his arm around him and holds him close. "You okay?" he asks.

He feels Tim nod. "Yeah," he breathes into Jason's neck. "Sometimes I just get lost in my head."
"I hadn't noticed," Jason replies dryly.
Tim chuckles weakly. "It was a lot, with Dick. He always railroaded me when I was younger, trying to get me to do things I didn't want, always thinking he knew best. I let him because I didn't know any better and by the time I did, it was such a habit to just roll with it. When I came back from California I put a stop to it, which made him concerned as this was a side of me he'd never seen."

Jason nods. "I think I see where this is going. He didn't know how to deal with the adult you."
"Exactly. No one did, really. I'm starting to think that was one of the problems. I was away for so long that I grew into my own person. One that no one here knows quite how to deal with even though I've been back for well over a year now."
"There is nothing wrong with you." Jason kisses the top of Tim's still damp hair.
"I know that." Tim elbows him lightly. "But I'm just reminded about how much my family lives in the past. It's like they never look to the future."
"Care to explain?"
Tim shrugs. "Bruce's parents were murdered when he was very young, right in front of him. Dick's parents were killed when he was 10, also right in front of him. Mine were murdered when I was 13 , though thankfully I didn't see it. Starting to see a trend here?" He leans his head back at an uncomfortable looking angle to peer at Jason with those beautiful blue eyes of his.

Shit, that's a lot of death to deal with. I know I'm not the poster child for emotional health but even I can see just how fucked up the Wayne household must be, especially at certain times of the year. "Yeah, which makes me wonder exactly how Dickieboy managed to land someone as cool as Barbara. Bruce, I get. You can see his commitment issues a mile away. And you've got me," he gives Tim a cocky grin. "So what happened there?"
"I'm not sure exactly. They were close when they were teenagers. A lot of firsts happened between them but after Babs' accident they drifted apart. She said Dick lived too much in the past and that she wasn't the same person anymore. She practically reinvented herself." There's a strong note of admiration in Tim's voice.
"She's the reason you're so good at computers, right? Took you under her wing or something?"
"Or something," Tim evades like he usually does on this particular topic. Christ, I really want to know what happened there.

They sit in companionable silence for a time and Jason is starting to doze off when he feels Tim shift against him, his hand reaching up to play with one of the hoops piercing his nipples. It's an idle motion, one that Tim tends to do when he wants to say something and is searching for the words. "Just spit it out," Jason says.

Tim huffs a small laugh. "You know me too well." He pauses, collecting his thoughts again before continuing. "Damian's birthday is Tuesday."
"I hope to God you're not asking me to come to whatever party he's going to have. Does he even have any friends?"
"Sycophants, each and every one. He knows it too. But that's not what I was going to ask." Tim continues playing with the hoop and glances up at Jason. "He'll be 18 and I'll be... free..."

Jason remembers something Tim had said awhile back about that. "You won't have to hide anymore."
"No," Tim says and grins up at him, bright and blinding and so fucking happy. "I still want to do my best to keep our privacy, but..." his face relaxes back into more thoughtful lines. "Every Christmas, Bruce holds a massive charity gala for the Wayne Foundation and a number of other local charities that work with families and kids that cover things from basic needs to hospital bills. The funding for the event itself comes right from Bruce's pockets, so all the funds raised go directly to the charities. Kids from all over town come, there's a Santa, it's just great. It's the one event of the year I don't mind at all."

Oh Christ, I think I know what he's leading up to. "You want to come out of the closet then?"
"I'd like to, yes." Tim locks his steady blue gaze on Jason. He never put his glasses back on from earlier, so he has an uninterrupted view of the icy blue of Tim's eyes. "Jason, I know it's a big step for us, it's going to be packed and the press will be there and..."

Jason raises a finger and places it against Tim's lips. "Stop right there. I'll go. I knew what I was getting into when we started seeing each other. I'm not ashamed of who I am and I know you aren't either, though fuck knows what you see in me that keeps you coming back. But I do have one very important question."

Tim gives him a soft smile, though he looks like he wants to argue about what Jason just said. "What?"
"What the hell am I gonna wear?"

## Chapter End Notes

I am uncertain what my posting schedule is going to be like for the next week or so as someone very dear to me has finally gone on to his well-deserved rest. I'm sure to be traveling again soon once final arrangements are made.

Next time: (Again, I think the chapter title will suffice) Afternoon Tea at Wayne Manor

# Milestone Five: Afternoon Tea at Wayne Manor 

## Chapter Notes

I just realized I'm posting this on Valentine's day. There's a sad lack of romance in this chapter...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's a Monday afternoon in early December when Jason wakes up to the sound of his phone ringing. Groaning, he reaches for his nightstand and tries to keep the blankets pulled all the way up. Fucking hell, it's not even technically winter yet, but tell that to my balls when I get up. I thought heat is supposed to rise?

He swipes the phone to answer it without even looking at who's calling. "Hello?" he croaks, then clears his throat.
"Good afternoon, Mister Todd." The clear and clipped tone instantly told Jason who is on the side, even if the distinct accent didn't. "I do hope I didn't call too early."

Jason squints and looks at the digital clock on the nightstand. 'Nah, you're good, Alfred. My alarm is supposed to go off in about 10 minutes." He sits up and turns off the alarm, feeling goose bumps prickle across his exposed skin. "Somethin' up?"
"Not particularly, but I am curious as to your afternoon schedule this week."
Jason looks towards the floor for his slippers and slides those on. Standing up, he stretches as best he can while cradling a phone to his ear. If Tim were here (and awake), he'd give an appreciative whistle. "I'm busy today, Wednesday, and Thursday's delivery day unless the weather goes to shit." He clamps his mouth shut and shakes his head. He tries really hard not to swear around Alfred. There's just something about the man that makes me want to at least try. "Sorry about that, the brain to mouth filter isn't workin' just yet."
"That is quite all right. I understand from Master Timothy that yesterday was very busy."
"This whole weekend was busy. The first big chill of the year always drives people indoors. You think I'd be use to it by now." Jason looks around for his hoodie. He's starting to sleep in pajamas due to the weather change, but if there's one thing he hates, it's being cold. Too many years of not having enough and thinking I could make it on my own. Letter to my 11 year old self from a 28 year old asshole...
"Would Wednesday be your tuxedo fitting for the Christmas gala?" Alfred interrupts Jason's thoughts.
"Yeah. Tim's taking the afternoon off for it. Some place down by Grant Park." He finds the hoodie over the back of the sofa and shrugs it on.
"Very good." Alfred sounds satisfied. "You will be in excellent hands there. However, I didn't call though to discuss your fitting. I would like you to come to the Manor for afternoon tea sometime this week if it can be arranged."

Jason gapes, suddenly glad he's on the phone rather than in person with the old man. Fuck me, really? I mean, I know he said he'd like me to come for tea sometime when we first met, but I thought he was just being polite. "Um...ah...yeah. That would be great."
"Excellent. Would tomorrow afternoon be too soon? I understand Fridays can be a bit dicey. I believe another winter storm is blowing in this weekend as well."

Shit, tomorrow? That's what? Tuesday. It's Tuesday, nimrod. "No, Fridays are out right now, but tomorrow's fine. I always open sooner than I should because I'm bored."
"Then let's say 2 o'clock tomorrow afternoon? It's a bit early for tea, but you'll need to get back into the city to open for the evening."
"That's fine." Jason knows he sounds a bit faint and shakes his head, trying to snap out of it. "Do I need to bring anything?"
"Just yourself."
"I can do that. I'll see you tomorrow, Alfred. Thanks."
Hanging up the phone, Jason stares at it for a moment. He's still a bit numb. The feeling persists as he makes his way across the loft to his kitchen and starts a pot of tea and makes some breakfast for himself. As he heads downstairs to the bar to get things started for the day, he finally shakes himself out of his bemused state. I am going to afternoon tea at Wayne Manor tomorrow afternoon. Fucking hell!
*****

Tim is decidedly amused when Jason calls him that evening to tell him. "Alfred likes you, Jason."
"I thought you said he has good taste?" Jason retorts as he wipes down the bar. The Monday night football game is over and people are heading home. There're a few stragglers over in the corner booth, but they already said they're on their last pitcher.
"He's got excellent taste and how dare you imply I've got bad taste," Tim dishes right back. "You're sounding like the demon."
"Now who's being evil?" He grabs a tray and starts loading up dirty glasses.
Tim makes a frustrated noise and returns back to their original topic. "Anyway, I'm glad to hear he invited you over. Do you need directions? How're you getting up there?"
"I remember how to get there. That and Alfred already sent directions to me. I didn't think old people texted?" Jason ducks under the bar and grabs the tray to take to the kitchen and dump into the sink, already full of hot, soapy water.

That earns him a laugh. "This one does. We're a pretty tech savvy household."
"Gee, I wonder why?" Because WayneTech is one of the biggest technology companies in the fucking world. It's probably easier to list what they don't have their fingers in. He heads back out front.
"We do like our toys," Tim agrees. "Do you need to borrow a car to get up there?"
Jason smirks as he leans against the bar. "Only if it's your Audi."
Tim laughs again. "Sorry, but I'm using that tomorrow. I can bring the Honda over if you need it."
"Yeah, I figured as much." Jason nods as he sees the guys in the booth wave him over. "Hang on a minute." He sets the phone down on the bar, grabs his tablet, and heads over to close out their tab. The guys troop out of the bar and Jason picks up his phone again. "Sorry about that, but duty calls."
"I get it," Tim says. He sounds a bit distracted. At this time of night, Jason's learned it means one of two things. Either Tim's working on something for the office or he's playing a video game. The other side of the line sounds pretty quiet, so he's guessing it's the former.
"Don't worry about me, rich boy. I'll get up there in one piece."
"You're being evasive." Tim sounds a bit suspicious as he focuses on Jason again. "How are you getting up there?"

Jason grins. "It's a surprise."

## $* * * * *$

For some reason, the topic of Jason's motorcycle has never come up between him and Tim. When Jason goes grocery shopping for himself, he walks the few blocks to the store. Almost everything he needs is within easy walking distance and when he does go out further than that, he'll take his baby out for a spin. Jason loves his motorcycle. Roy loves his motorcycle. They worked on it together, rebuilding it practically from the ground up so it's more of a custom build than anything traditional. Jason doesn't care. It's his and that's all that matters.

Still, as he's roaring through the empty afternoon streets of Bristol on his way to Wayne Manor, he does wish the bike could be a bit more winter friendly. Jesus fucking Christ, it's cold. It's more open up here than down in the city. I think my legs would be frozen off if it weren't for the heat coming off the engine, even with the thermals I'm wearing.

Jason approaches the gate to Wayne Manor and comes to a stop right beside the security pad Alfred gave him instructions on how to use. Opening it with a flip of a heavily gloved hand,
he presses the zero and the pound sign. A minute later, a familiar voice comes over the speaker. "Wayne Manor, please state your business here."

Under his red helmet, Jason grins. He knows Alfred's watching him on the security camera, so he gives a jaunty wave and takes the helmet off so the old man can see him clearly. "Hey Alfred!"
"My word, Mister Todd!" The old butler sounds appalled even through the speaker. The gates start opening. "It is well below freezing out there, get up this drive this instant. Come around to the side entrance Master Timothy brought you in before."

Chuckling, Jason slides his helmet back on and makes sure his scarf is secure before he heads up the drive. That was a better reaction than I thought I'd get.

Jason flies up the long driveway just because he can. Alfred's gonna chew me out, might as well get some fun outta this. He pulls up along the side of the house Tim parked at before and sees one of the garage doors open. Assuming he's supposed to drive in, he slows down and comes to a stop just outside the open door. He kills the engine and gets off, walking the bike inside out of the cold.

Alfred is waiting for him just inside the door and hits a button to close the overhead garage door behind Jason. He's shaking his head. "Mister Todd, I simply cannot believe you drove all the way here on a motorcycle in this kind of cold. It's well below freezing today."

Jason grins unrepentantly. He can't help it. "Really? I hadn't noticed."
Realizing he's not going to win, Alfred gestures further up the garage. "You may park over there." He still sounds peeved.

Jason decides to try and placate the old butler. "Alfred, there's one thing you're gonna have to learn about me and learn it fast. I tend to do what I want, when I want, and to hell with the consequences. I'm better about it than I used to be but I'm still notorious for doing dumbass shit." He parks his bike in an open spot and looks over at the butler.

Alfred lets out a disapproving sigh. "As long as you're aware of it," he concedes. "Does Master Timothy know?"
"He's spent plenty of time with Kori and Roy at the bar. If he hasn't figured it out by now, then he's not as smart as everyone says he is."

That earns him a chuckle. "Very well then. Let us go inside where it's warmer."
The kitchen is just as warm and comfortable as Jason remembers. He quickly sheds his layers and Alfred takes them somewhere to dry off. Washing his hands at the sink, Jason eyes the kitchen again, this time able to take in more than before. I was a little distracted last time. But fuck me if this isn't the most gorgeous kitchen I've ever seen. I love mine and it's got everything I want or could need, but this is just paradise for cooks.

Alfred quickly returns and gestures to a tray on the kitchen island. "I thought we might have tea in the library. There's a wonderful view of the winter garden from there as well."
"Whatever's clever. Need me to carry anything?"
"If you would be so kind as to take that tray," Alfred gestures to the one on the island that Jason spotted earlier, "I will collect the teapot."

The tray Jason carries across the house is laden with tea sandwiches and some delicate looking cookies, as well as cream, sugar, and some lemon wedges. Alfred leads the way carrying only a teapot, so he assumes the cups are already in the library.

When they enter the library, Jason tightens his grip on the tray at the sight. "Holy shit," he almost gasps.
"You are a great lover of books, Mister Todd, so I presumed you would enjoy this room more than one of the guest parlors." If Jason didn't know better, he'd say the butler sounds smug.
"Yeah," he replies absently, eyes still locked on the row upon row and walls filled with books. "I thought I'd died and gone to heaven when I saw Bruce's car collection, but I totally take that back. I could die a happy man right here."
"Let us save that for later, shall we?" Alfred says dryly. "This way."
Jason follows the old man further into the room. A small table and chairs is set up in front of a wide set of bay windows. The curtains are open wide, letting in the weak winter sun. He'd be impressed with the view of the garden if he weren't still in shock over the books.

He sets the tray down and takes a seat in the chair Alfred gestures to. "So just how many of these are first editions?" Jason asks as he settles in. He feels a bit large for the table and shifts the chair around a bit to accommodate his legs.
"More than I easily count," Alfred acknowledges. "Master Bruce and I share a hobby of collecting first editions, particularly of classic literature."
"Man, I'd love to get my hands on a first edition of Pride and Prejudice. I know it's kinda lame, but that's my favorite book. Though the Hobbit is a close second." Jason admires the books for a moment longer and turns his attention back to Alfred just in time to see him try and hide a small smile.
"Quite the difference in genres," he comments as he turns Jason's teacup upright and picks up the teapot to pour. "How do you prefer your Earl Grey?"

Jason smiles. "Surprise me. Tim says you're the tea snob."
Alfred chuckles lightly. "I prefer a squeeze of fresh sliced lemon with half a spoonful of sugar."
"Helps the medicine go down?"
"Not always, especially in this household." As Alfred prepares their tea, he launches into a story about taking care of Bruce, Tim, and a much younger Damian while they were all laid up with the flu. "All three were the most recalcitrant of patients, especially Master Bruce. At the suggestion of the family doctor, I finally ended up sedating the lot of them to keep them in their beds."

Jason can't help the sharp laugh that escapes. "Christ, that's hilarious. Is Tim still that difficult?"

Alfred smiles. "No, thank goodness, though he is ill more often than I'd like. He has a tendency to work until he drops, then start all over again when he awakens. Once he's truly sick though, he'll take all the time off he needs to recover. Miss Fox makes sure of it."
"That woman is amazing. She doesn't put up with his shit either." Jason grins and tells Alfred about the first time he met Tam Fox. He only edits the ending a bit. The butler doesn't need to know just how hot and heavy he and Tim were getting in the kitchen while the girls were out front.
"They interrupted your first kiss?" Alfred chuckles delightedly. "How droll."
The next hour passes easily and Jason's amazed at how much he's enjoying himself. The tea is better than anything he's ever made for himself (and Earl Grey is a favorite of his) and the light snacks are delicious.

Alfred steps away for a few minutes to refresh their teapot and Jason takes the time to wander the rows of bookcases in the library. He keeps his hands firmly in his pockets. I've got no fucking idea what these are all worth and they don't need my grubby hands all over them. But damn, it is fucking hard to resist.

Deciding it's easier to avoid temptation if he's not wandering around, Jason heads back to the table. To his surprise, he sees Bruce standing there eating a cookie.

The older man catches sight of Jason and smiles. "Hello, Jason. Alfred said you were going to be here for tea this afternoon. Glad I was able to catch you."
"Hey, Bruce." Jason steps forward and holds out his hand. He can be polite when needed. Sometimes. "What's shakin'?"

Bruce's looks surprised for a moment, then goes along with it. He shakes Jason's hand firmly. "Not much. Just the usual end of the year trials and tribulations."
"I don't even want to think about what tax time must look like for you. Kori has to nail my ass to my desk to start going over things." Jason shakes his head ruefully. "Joys of being a small business owner."

Bruce laughs loudly, sounding for real rather than the fake laugh he uses when on TV. "The concept's much the same, whether it's a small or large company. Kori is the waitress/accountant, right? Tim was telling me about her. Says she keeps you in line the same way Tam does for him."
"She keeps all of us in line and looks fabulous while kicking ass and taking names. " Jason takes his seat at the table and Bruce takes Alfred's chair. Neither of the big men fit quite well in the chairs, which amuses Jason immensely when he sees Bruce shift around too. "But I doubt you want to talk to me about my staff," he says leadingly.
"As much as I'd like to learn more about you first hand rather than through Tim and Alfred, I do have something to discuss." Bruce sounds serious.

Jason feels his stomach sink. And today was going so well too. I should of known better. "Oh?"
"I understand Tim is bringing you as his date for the Christmas gala." Bruce quickly holds up his hands to forestall the protest forming on Jason's lips. "Of which, I have absolutely no problems with whatsoever, so get that look off your face. What I do want to know is if the two of you have decided what to say to the press when they inevitably ask who you are. I haven't had a chance to catch Tim in private yet to ask him, so I was wondering if he's said anything to you?"

Jason feels his face tighten as he clenches his jaw and forces himself to relax. "Sort of. He said he wants to keep me out of the media spotlight as much as possible but that he doesn't want to hide the fact that he's seeing another man. I kinda got the impression this first time around I'm going to float under the radar as a friend. The next time I show up somewhere, that's when the questions will start flying."

Bruce nods along thoughtfully as Jason finishes speaking. "That's a pretty fair assessment. But there's always someone who will dig further."
"Would this be Vicki Vale?" Jason asks as he leans back in his chair. "Tim's bitched about her before." He knows he's right judging by the scowl that appears on Bruce's face.
"Yes," he replies tightly. "She's driven and tenacious so if Tim wants to keep you out of the media, you'd better come up with a good story. And please tell me beforehand in case she asks me any questions. I'll make sure the rest of the family knows."
"I'll talk to Tim about it tomorrow. Supposed to get fit for my straight jacket after lunch." A thought occurs to him. "What about Damian? There's no love lost between those two and he certainly doesn't like me. Will he listen to you?"

Bruce's scowl tightens into a firm line and his eyes grow flinty. The look is intimidating as hell. He'd have no problems walking the streets of Crime Alley or the Bowery with that look on his face. He's a big guy too so only the exceptionally dumb would be stupid enough to cross his path. I bet he'd be great in a bar brawl... "Do not worry about Damian," he all but growls. "I'll make sure of it, even if I have to threaten to send him back to his mother."
"He has mommy issues?"
Bruce rubs a hand across his eyes. "In spades."

Chapter End Notes

Next week: The Christmas gala that in hindsight is probably not a good idea to bring Jason to...

# Milestone Six: The Christmas Gala 

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jason scowls at his reflection in the mirror in front of him. There're three panels to it, so it really emphasizes the full force of his displeasure to the people standing behind him.
Unfortunately, one of those people is Tim, who just grins like the sadistic bastard Jason has always suspected him of being. Jesus Christ, I hope this is fucking worth it. "Am I almost done yet?" he growls.
"Not quite," said the middle-aged man pinning a pair of pants together over Jason's long legs. Tim had introduced him as Jacob. He casts a gimlet eye at Jason in the mirror. "If you'd stop fidgeting, this would go faster. Not many men come in here with thighs like these."

Tim snickers. "Must be all the lifting you do."
Jason sighs and tries to stand still. "You sure it's not too late to rent a tux?"
The appalled look on Jacob's face makes Jason crack up and Tim laugh even harder. "Jay, I doubt you could even find one that would fit properly," Tim replies as he catches his breath. "Besides, Jacob's the best in the city. Get it done right the first time, this tux will last you practically forever."
"Additionally, after this initial fitting, I'll have your measurements on file as well," Jacob chimes in. "So any future orders will go much faster if there's no changes."

It's Jason's turn to make a face. "Tim, please tell me there won't be future orders. Please," he implores his boyfriend. Ah, shit. Even with him quitting WE, he's still a fucking Wayne. At least I won't have to go to everywhere with him.
"We'll see," Tim replies smugly. "I can think of a few places we'll go where you'll need a suit or two to rotate between, but this should be the only tux, at least for awhile. We'll just need to get some different shirts and vests to mix it up. Besides, you don't want to disappoint Alfred, now do you?"
"You fucking suck."
$* * * * *$
"It's the night before Christmas and all through the bar, not a creature was stirring not even a...hmmm...the only word I can think of is car and that doesn't make any sense." Roy says as he tries to get Jason to relax. It's a few days before Christmas and the night of the charity gala. Tim will be here any minute to pick him up.
"Just shut your fucking face." Jason toys with the idea of pouring himself a shot of just about anything at this point to try and calm down.
"Settle down, Jay," Kori says from behind him, carefully running her hands over his shoulders in an attempt to sooth him as well. "He's only trying to help."

Jason lets out a frustrated groan. "I know, I know. Sorry, I'm just... wound fucking tighter than a virgin on prom night."

Roy lets out a laugh as he grabs a shot glass and sets it in front of Jason. "Pretty sure all three of us missed our prom nights. Think of this as yours." He turns and takes down a bottle of the almost top shelf tequila. Roy knows him too well.
"Pretty sure none of us have been virgins for a long time either."
"I was $15, "$ Kori says as she takes a seat next to Jason at the bar. It's a Wednesday night and they're both covering for him for the night, though Jason could probably have just closed the bar instead. They're the best fucking friends. "A photographer thought I was older; even back then, I was very tall for my age."

Jason snorts. "Fuckin' perv. Please tell me he got what he deserved."
Kori grins brightly. "Of course he did. It took a few years, but he went one step too far with a 14 year old girl."
"Ugh, what piece of garbage," Roy says as he pours a generous shot of tequila for Jason. "I was 15 too, but at least the girl I was with was the same age. What about you, Jaybird?"

Jason stares at the shot glass. "Define virginity for me. Because I was sucking cock for a living there before I even turned 14." Not exactly something I ever want Tim to know. I've come a long way from that scrawny little punk. Of course, now I'm a tall, muscled asshole, so I guess not too much has changed. He picks up the shot and tips it back.

None of this is exactly news to the two of them, although Roy makes an effort to come up with a definition for him. "How about the first time you wanted to do it rather than just doing it for the cash?"
"Fair enough," Jason fiddles with the shot glass. As much as he wants another, it's the only one he'll get and they all know it. Before he can say anything though, the door to the bar opens and a gust of cold air and snow blow in, along with Tim. Jason grins. "Saved by the bell," he says, getting up and grabbing his winter jacket.
"Am I missing something?" Tim asks cautiously as he closes the door behind him, pushing a bit harder than usual because of the wind. The sky's clear tonight, but the wind is whipping around the snow that had just finished falling yesterday.
"Nope." Jason buttons up his new coat, giving Roy and Kori a warning glare as he does. Somethings I do NOT want Tim knowing, even if I'm pretty sure it's not going to faze him in the slightest.
"We were just talking about first times," Kori says with a small smile and ignoring Jason like she usually does. "What was yours like, Tim?"

Tim's mouth gapes open like a fish for a moment and Jason chuckles. "Weren't expecting that, were you?"
"No, I wasn't." Tim blinks quickly and Jason notices that he's not wearing his glasses. He must be wearing contacts. Fuck, he needs to wear those more often. "Umm, I was 17 the first time... with a girl. It was good, I guess. Unless she was totally faking it." He sounds so awkward, Jason can't help but jump in to rescue him.
"And your first time with a guy was with me, so that more than makes up for things." Jason grins, bright and just this side of cocky, which he knows drives Tim wild.
"Oh, crap!" Roy shouts and fumbles for his phone. "I was supposed to get a picture of the two of you for Steph. Coats off!"

Jason shakes his head, but complies. Next to him, Tim does the same and he sees Tim's tuxedo for the first time. Holy fucking hell. He looks like something off one of those magazines the girls like to read. He completely misses the appraising look Tim is giving him in return.
"Smile pretty!" Roy holds up his phone and Tim leans into Jason a bit, one of his real smiles on his face. Jason grins.
"Now this really does look like prom," Kori teases. "Which one of you gets the corsage?"
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Jason grazes at one of the myriad of food tables that have been set up around the massive ballroom at Wayne Manor. Cassandra follows along after him. She doesn't say much, but she points out which items she likes best. "Alfred made these," she says quietly, gesturing to a little lemon tartlet. "He always does."

He's of the opinion that everything is good and mentally deconstructs the ingredients to see if he can figure out how to make things in his own kitchen. It's proving a good distraction to the mass of humanity swirling around them. Once the kids started arriving, he felt himself becoming more and more on edge. "That man is God in the kitchen."

Cassandra grins brightly in agreement.
For the moment, she's his chaperone, guiding him around the ballroom and helping him get the lay of the land. While he and Tim did arrive together, it was just like they'd predicted, that Jason would glide underneath the radar unless they did something more blatant as a couple. I highly doubt anyone would approve of the two of us disappearing into a coat closet somewhere. Not with all the kids around.

Tim had been right about the kids. They'd arrived by the busload, all dressed in their winter best, eyes wide and shining as they took in the winter wonderland that was Wayne Manor at

Christmas time. Bruce really did pull out all the stops as the Manor looked absolutely incredible, with a large Christmas tree in the main foyer for people to admire as they entered, lights and wreaths guiding people back to the ballroom that had been transformed into a small Christmas village, complete with a Santa who is handing out little gifts of something each kid actually needed. Each one would be leaving with a backpack full of school supplies too.

But the event is also hosting adults, and it's easy to pick out which ones come from the top tier of Gotham's population. They're dazzling in their gowns and tuxes, their jewelry catching the light and twinkling as brightly as the colored Christmas lights. They're here to be seen and while Jason's pretty sure some of them actually are decent people who really want to help the kids this event is for, the rest couldn't care less. A few of the conversations he's overheard have proven that succinctly enough.

The whole thing is making him sick to his stomach.
Yes, every cent earned tonight is going to the charities and shelters these kids came from, each one carefully vetted by the Wayne Foundation to make sure the funds they receive are being used for their intended purpose rather than lining someone's pocket. But the glitz and the dazzle are just too much. It's just rubbing their faces in what the other side looks like. All the things they have that they'll never get their little hands on. I understand that this night is supposed to be something special for all of them, that it's supposed to be a bright and shining point in an otherwise gray existence and is supposed to give them hope and a chance to be a kid. But goddammit, I want to be anywhere else but here right now. I'm too jaded to enjoy this, too far removed from a childhood that sucked to appreciate what's going on around me.

He fights the urge to punch something.
Cassandra takes Jason's arm and guides him away from the table. It's like she knows what's going on in his head and knows he needs to take a breather. She leads Jason through the festively decorated ballroom, looking amazing in a strapless red gown with her black hair done up in some kind of twist with her bangs framing her face. A smile dances at the edge of her lips as they walk, but Jason notices it doesn't reach her eyes. She's just as uncomfortable as me. Much better at hiding it though. Wonder how long she's been doing this?

He's lead to a set of double doors that open out onto a balcony that overlooks the back lawn of the Manor. It's cold but Jason welcomes it as the heat inside is almost stifling. "Get some air," Cass tells him. She stands in the doorway but doesn't come out. He can't blame her; it's cold. "I'll be back."

With that, Jason's left alone for the first time in what feels like hours. Good God, it hasn't even been two hours and I already feel like I've been through the ringer. I can't imagine what Tim's feeling. Probably nothing, he's been doing this shit for years. What the fuck am I doing here? I'm glad he passed me off to Cass and all so he could handle the press, but I've barely caught a glimpse of him since. I want a cigarette so fucking bad right now...

He knew his nerves were shot when he started craving cigarettes again. It had been so hard quitting as he'd been smoking since he was 11 . Roy, Kori, and Steph all helped him through it. He'd tried the patch, cutting back on his almost a pack a day habit, but only quitting cold
turkey really did it in the end. He'd had the worst oral fixation for the longest time. It was the main reason he'd taken out his tongue piercing. The enamel on his front teeth was starting to wear thin with how often he was running the bar between them.

Hands shoved in his coat pockets, Jason makes a fist and takes a deep breath. The cold burns in a way he almost welcomes and he lets his breath out slowly before doing it again. From behind him, he hears the door open. I am not ready to go back in there. It's just too much. Figuring its Cassandra coming back for him, he turns.

It's Tim.
"Hey," he says quietly as he crosses the balcony to Jason. "Cass found me. Said you looked like you're about to punch something."

Jason lets out a bitter laugh. "Thought I was hiding it pretty well."
"Probably," Tim agrees as he steps in close and wraps his arms around Jason's waist. "I told you about how she reads people though. Pretty obvious to her."

Jason leans into the embrace and holds Tim close, breathing in the scent of his shampoo and the hint of the cologne he wore. He preferred clean, fresh scents and Jason felt his nerves start to calm at the familiar scent of Tim. He doesn't say anything and just holds on.
"Want to talk about it?"
It's tempting, so tempting to brush it under the rug and ignore it. Tim wouldn't push if he didn't want to. Jason knew that. But...it's something very important to him. Something Tim needs to understand if they're going to make this work.

But fuck if he's going to say this out here where he's freezing his balls off.
"Yeah but not here. Fucking colder than hell."
Tim nods and steps away. "I know where we can go and hide away from all this. Let me just tell Alfred so he doesn't send out a search party."

It's not long before Jason is following Tim through the back halls and stairs of the Manor. Tim opens a nondescript door and pokes his head out to look around first before gesturing to Jason to follow him. They cross a dark hall and enter another door. Tim turns on a light and locks the door behind him.

Jason blinks in the dim light. They're in a bedroom. Looking around, he spots a few personal touches and a very familiar messenger bag. "This is your room."
"Yes," Tim says as he steps around Jason. "Best spot I could think of for privacy on a night like this." He takes a seat at the desk. "Sit wherever you like."

It's like Tim knows Jason needs his space right now. He needs to breathe too and takes off his tuxedo jacket and loosens the tie, undoing the button at his throat in the process. Pacing for a
moment, Jason then sits at the end of the bed closest to Tim. He takes a deep breath and lets it out before he begins.
"I don't know if you've looked into my background the way Bruce, Dickie, and the brat have. I don't care if you have. I'm not ashamed of who I am or where I come from. But seeing those kids tonight? It just made me remember what was going on in my life when I was their ages. These guys all came from local shelters and foster homes, right?"

Tim nods but wisely doesn't say anything yet.
Jason continues. "I could have been one of those kids if I went into the system and stayed there. I could have had this one bright and shining moment where everything is perfect, where I was wanted, warm, and given what I needed to just make it through the next few weeks or months. But I didn't."

He tells Tim about his childhood, things he's alluded to before but never in sharp detail. He tells Tim about his father who was never around and when he was, used his mother as a punching bag and later on him as well when he was old enough to try and stand up to him. One day he was gone and never came back. He tells Tim about his mom and her long illness, then subsequent addiction to heroin. To this day, he still doesn't know which killed her. "But what hurt the most was when I was going through her things after she died and discovered my birth certificate. It wasn't her name on it. It was someone else's."

At this, Tim gets up and sits next to Jason, laying a hand on his knee in support. He takes it and holds on tightly.
"No one wanted me. Not my dad, not the woman who actually gave birth to me, and now the person I thought was my mom was gone. I tried foster care. I really did. All it took to get me to runaway though was one night where my drunken foster dad got a hold of me and started ripping at my pants. I don't think I ever cried so hard before that night. Not even when my mom died. The next morning, I was gone." He's been trying to keep his voice level the whole time, trying to displace himself and his feelings over what happened to him, but it finally cracks here at the end.

Jason's not sure who's holding onto the other harder.
Tim is silent for a moment before he says anything. "I didn't check. I never did. I knew parts of it from what Bruce and Dick found out and from things you've let drop here and there, but...my god, Jason." His voice breaks and Jason twists to pull Tim into a tight hug.
"No, don't you dare cry for me, Timothy Drake," he says fiercely into Tim's hair. "All that shit is in the past and that's where it's fucking staying."
"Then why did you tell me?" Tim pulls back a bit to stare Jason in the eyes, his own blue eyes gleaming with unshed tears. "What happened tonight that brought all this to the surface?"
"Happiness is fleeting. Especially when you're young." Jason lets go of Tim and stands, starting to pace again like he did before. "All this, all this glitz and glamour gives these kids
an escape for one night. Tomorrow, they'll wake up and the ball's over. No more fairy godmother for another year."

Tim stands up at that, hands clenching into fists. "That's exactly what we're trying to prevent from happening. We're trying to give these kids a chance to have a better life."
"Yeah?" Jason stops pacing to face Tim again. "And what about the ones who aren't at the right shelters or are enrolled in the right welfare program, huh? What about all the ones that slip through the cracks?" What about the ones like me? goes unsaid but Jason can see when Tim gets it. "What you're doing here tonight is great. It's fucking awesome for the kids who are here. It gives them hope, it gives them the chance to dream again and to be fucking kids for one night."
"But there's still so many we're not even helping at all," Tim finishes for him. His shoulders slump and a defeated sigh escapes his lips. "I'm sorry, Jason. I...I don't know what to say."

Jason closes the gap between them and wraps his arms around the shorter man. "You don't have to say anything. I'm the one who's fucked up, who can't even keep his shit together in a room full of kids who haven't done a goddamn thing wrong."
"There is nothing wrong with you," Tim says fiercely, tilting his head back to glare at Jason. "Look at yourself, Jay. You have done so much with your life, risen up from the worst things life could ever throw at a child. You've made your own family with Roy, Kori, and Steph. You run your own business. You provide homes to a dozen families in that building of yours and don't charge anywhere near what you should for rent just so that there's a roof over their heads and the parents are able to put food on the table. Don't think that I haven't noticed how much each of those people look up to you when I see them in the stairway. You are an amazing person."

Jason starts to shake his head in disagreement, but Tim reaches up to stop him. He stares imploringly at the taller man. "What do I need to do or show you to convince you?" he asks, voice shaking a little bit at the end. "Because I'll do it. God, I want you to see what I see."

Not having the words, Jason leans in and closes the gap between them, pressing his lips firmly against Tim's in desperation. I don't want to talk anymore. I don't want to remember, I don't want to think. "Please," he whispers into Tim's mouth. He's not sure what he's asking at this point, but Tim takes the hint.

Hands are everywhere, unbuttoning shirts, taking off vests, and undoing belts. Tim's jacket is thrown somewhere and as they struggle out of their dress shirts, Jason hears the plink of cufflinks being dropped somewhere on the hardwood floor. Soon, but not soon enough, they're stretched out on the large bed with Jason holding on to Tim for all he's worth. But now that he has a naked Tim in his arms, Jason's at a bit of a loss as to what to do next.

Tim picks up on it as he brushes a gentle kiss against the corner of Jason's mouth. "Whatever you want," he says quietly. "We can stay just like this or I can show you just how much you mean to me."

The words send a rush of warmth through Jason's veins and he can't help the shuddering gasp as he nods.
"You gotta tell me what you want, Jason." He feels Tim brushing his hair back from across his forehead, fingers running carefully through the white streak he's had since he got clocked in the head with a crowbar by a crazy man dressed in a garish purple suit with clown paint on his face when he was 15 . "I don't want to do anything you don't want."
"Sh...show me..." he gasps. Jason feels like he's about to crawl out of his skin, the desire to be touched and wanted by this man next to him is almost overwhelming.

Tim wriggles a bit and Jason opens his arms, lying back in the almost too soft bed while younger man shifts so that he's straddling Jason's trim waist. He leans in and captures Jason's lips, cradling his face as he skillfully plunders Jason's mouth. He's warm and wet and Jason lets out a soft cry when Tim's tongue leaves the depths of his mouth to work its way down the side of his neck.

Hands roam everywhere as Tim slowly makes his way down Jason's broad torso. He lingers a bit on the nipple rings, but tears himself away sooner than he usually does and continues down further. He bypasses Jason's cock completely, moving instead to one muscled thigh and working his way down to his ankle before switching legs and going back up. Tim's lips dance across his skin and his hands knead and touch him in ways he never thought someone would ever do with him.

Jason puts up a good front, but he knows how broken he is. How fucked up he is. He does what he can to help those around him, to take care of them the best he knows how. But rarely has that gesture been returned to him. Never has someone wanted just him.

Tim makes him feel. Makes him feel wanted in a way he hasn't ever really felt in his entire life. And as his slim fingers carefully work him open with lube he must have grabbed from somewhere, he tells him. "You're perfect, Jason," Tim whispers. "Just the way you are. You inspire me more than you'll ever know." Fingers leave his body and the broad head of Tim's sheathed cock presses in. "I want you," he says in a choked voice. "Just you. No one else."

He keeping repeating these words as he takes Jason and sends them soaring. And as Jason comes, harder than he ever thought possible without a hand ever having touched him, he finally understands and wonders. Is this what love is? Dear God, Tim... Tim...if it is, don't ever leave me.
*****

Tim returns from his bathroom with a damp washcloth to clean up the mess on Jason's welldefined abdomen. The larger man is sleeping, still sprawled on his back, but looks more relaxed than Tim thinks he's ever seen him.

He carefully sits next to him and wipes him down, but Jason doesn't stir. Tim can't help but take some quiet satisfaction at how thoroughly he loved his boyfriend. Loved...now there's something I didn't think I'd admit to even myself so soon. But how can I not? Jason is everything I wish I could be. So confident and sure of himself. And to think he believes
himself to be so broken, so unworthy of anyone's love...Tim sighs and pulls up the carefully folded afghan from the foot of the bed over the taller man. He gets up and pads quietly across the room to the bathroom and rinses out the rag in the sink.

Looking into the mirror, Tim braces his arms on either side of the sink and stares at himself, seeing but not seeing as he remembers what Jason revealed to him earlier. I could find that man. His first foster father. It'd be easy to hack into CPS and find Jason's juvie records. I could make that man's life miserable if he isn't already in prison. How many other kids did he take advantage of and ruin? No...not ruin. Jason's not ruined. He's come so far...

He sighs again and walks over to the shower and turns it on, waiting a minute for the water to warm up a bit, before stepping in. I'm not going back downstairs tonight. Jason needs me. I will not leave him alone after all this. Bruce can make up whatever story he wants to cover for me. Washing quickly, Tim steps out and dries off before turning off the light.

Back in his bedroom, he puts on a pair of soft flannel pajama pants and grabs his laptop. Crawling into bed is a bit of an adventure with Jason sprawled out next to him, but Tim pulls back some of the covers and maneuvers his way in. Leaning back against his mountain of pillows, he opens up his laptop and pauses, looking down at the man sleeping next to him. Jason's finally shifted a bit and is curled against Tim's thigh.

He runs a hand idly through Jason's thick black hair. He'd somehow managed to tame the locks that curled over his forehead earlier, but now they were loose again. I promised Babs I wouldn't start hacking again, that we were done with trying to fix the system from within. We all went straight after Babs sent everything she had to Diana. All the years of work we'd put into making Gotham better and it worked. We did it. But I think...I think she'll forgive me this one time.

With that in mind, Tim's fingers fly over the keyboard, searching for records long since buried and forgotten.

## Chapter End Notes

Is that a point of view change there at the end? Why, yes, I believe it is. Just what is our favorite little Timmy up to?

Next week: Hmmm...I'm torn here because I haven't decided if the almost 10k chapter I wrote is going to be divided in half yet. But, I will say this...Christmas Eve and Jason's having almost as big a pity party for himself as the people he's serving at the bar who have no where else to go. Gee, that sounds reminiscent of something else I wrote over the holidays.

## Milestone Seven: Christmas Eve

## Chapter Notes

This is by far the longest chapter I've ever written of anything. 22 pages in my doc and clocking in at just over 9600 words, EDITED. On the bright side, I didn't divide it half like I was going to.

Angst, fluff, and shitstorms ahead.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The bar is quiet, even with almost a dozen people nursing their beers and staring idly at the televisions mounted on the walls. But, as Jason observes each time they ask for a refill, each one is subdued. Morose. Sad. Depressed. Pick a fucking adjective. Only those with nowhere else to go come to a bar on Christmas Eve. And only a pathetic loser like me would be open for them to come to.

Jason lets out a sigh of his own as he eyes the clientele around him. Most are at the bar itself, but a couple are in back at the high tops. He's got all the sports channels playing on the TVs. He has never been a fan of Christmas movies, even the ones that are supposed to be comedies, so Jason tries to keep the reminders about it being a holiday to a minimum. But even that's hard as Roy, Kori, and Steph had done their usual decorating a few weekends ago before Jason had come downstairs for the night. They knew not to go overboard. A few strands of white lights hung from the ceiling above the back of the bar, the menu board was done up in red and green chalk, and a wreath hung from the door leading into the kitchen.

They knew better than to hang up snowflakes. Jason despises winter and the one time the others attempted a winter wonderland theme, they'd come in the next week to find it all completely gone. Roy had a quiet word with Jason over that and relayed back the edited version to the girls. Warm, subtle Christmas décor became the standard.

Pouring another beer for a sad looking middle-aged man, Jason crosses his arms in his old red hoodie and leans back against the back of the bar again, waiting for the next time someone called his name. He avoids looking at the clock. This night of all nights, he never pushes or prods people out the door until he absolutely has to. Some years, he's been open until 2 in the morning, witnessing Christmas Eve turn into Christmas Day. It doesn't matter to me. Not like I ever have anything better to do. Even this year. I completely fucked up the other night. Christ, I still can't believe I lost my shit like that in front of Tim. And yet, he still looks at me like I'm something special. I'm damaged goods, Timmy. Ain't no sugarcoating that.

Jason hasn't seen Tim since he dropped him off at the bar the morning after the gala, but that hasn't stopped the young, soon-to-be-former-executive from lighting up Jason's phone with texts at all hours of the day for the last three days. They're mostly random observations about
the people around him, snuck in here and there during meetings, all keen and sharply humorous. He can't help but chuckle when he gets one, but this evening has been very quiet. Probably dinner with his family. I can't see even a rich bastard like Bruce Wayne not wanting to spend the evening with his kids. Not now that I know him. He's more family oriented than Tim gives him credit for, though I think he knows that now too.

The night goes on slowly and a few people trickle out as it gets closer to 11, bundling up warmly against the cold wind that blows fine snow up and down the street. The storm that brought the snow had blown out earlier that day, leaving wind and an absolutely frigid night behind. The few times I actually braved the shelters as a kid were on nights like these. I'm glad I found the time to make that blanket donation to the shelter a few streets over the other day. They're going to need them tonight.

Jason does what he can and often wishes he could do more, but his real focus is always more so on the kids that roam the Bowery streets than the adults. The kids know Jason's bar is a place they could find food and the occasional blanket or bit of clothing. Two nights ago, he'd left a couple boxes full of thick socks on his loading dock along with his nightly leftovers. All were gone when he checked in the morning. He'd left a trash bag bull of different thermal blankets on the dock tonight. The only thing he'd served tonight was pub-mix as he didn't feel like opening the kitchen.

It's like this place has always been a haven for the lost and lonely. Mike used to do the same thing.

It turns midnight and a few more people leave, though they look like it's the last thing they want to do. But he still makes no move to shoo people out and as it slows down even more, Jason pulls out his book. When he made his selection from his bookcase earlier, he'd done so with the intention of selecting something as far away from Christmas as possible.

Much to Jason's surprise, the bar is empty just before 1 and he follows the last lonely soul out the door to lock up behind him and turn off the lights in the windows. He turns everything off, including the Christmas lights above the bar and retreats to his office to run his final totals for the day. He can't help but feel a little disappointed by how the night turned out. Let's face it, dumbass, you were waiting for Tim to show up. Sneak his way in when your back was turned and then there he'd be in his usual spot waiting for you to notice him. He's got a family to be with tonight. Not me.

As much as Jason never really had a Christmas growing up and absolutely despises the rampant consumerism and greed that he sees every time he so much as steps outside the bar during the holidays, he'll admit to himself at least that he wouldn't mind Christmas so much if he had someone to share it with. Kori and Roy always have him over for Christmas dinner, but it wasn't the same. Perhaps if I don't fuck things up, I just might have that someone next Christmas.

With that thought in mind, he exits the bar through the kitchen door and locks it behind him. He trudges up the stairs and fishes his keys out when he gets to the top and hangs the left to his door.

The first thing that strikes Jason when he shuts the door behind him is that he didn't hang up Christmas lights in his loft at all, but the soft glow of white lights comes from his kitchen where the small twinkling lights have been carefully draped over the top of his cabinets, around the island, and rather cleverly placed under his countertops. Looking around, he sees them framing each window as well.

Secondly, the loft smells of something freshly baked. It's a warm, homey scent and Jason can feel his mouth watering.

Third, and final, he sees Tim putting the finishing touches on a small Christmas tree that's taking up most of the space on the small dining table Jason has off to the side of the kitchen by one of the windows that he rarely uses for anything other than collecting mail. Said mail has been neatly bundled off and is sitting on his counter.

Considering that's exactly what Jason was thinking earlier, all he can do is continue to gape. "When did you get here? And how the hell did you get in?"
"I've been here for a couple hours now. I wanted to surprise you." Tim finishes hanging up an ornament and walks into the kitchen.

It didn't escape Jason's notice that he didn't answer the second question. He shakes his head as he follows after Tim. "You picked the lock on the door, didn't you?"
"Maybe." Tim gives him a crooked grin. He looks pleased with himself. "You should invest in some better locks."
"Christ, Tim, if you wanted to come in, you could have just come down to the bar. I'd have given you my key."
"But that would have spoiled the surprise." He turns on the oven light and takes a peek at whatever is in there.
"Is this your roundabout way of saying you should have a key?"
"If you don't change your locks, I won't need one." Tim turns off the oven light and walks over to Jason, wrapping his arms around his waist and tipping his head back a bit. "If it really bothers you, I can stop."

Jason returns the embrace automatically and lets out a rueful chuckle of his own. He leans down to plant a light kiss on Tim's upturned lips. "No, it doesn't. I just want to know how you of all people are so good at it."

Tim looks down for a moment, then glances back up, catching Jason's eyes. He seems a bit nervous. "Well, about that...I know we didn't talk about Christmas or presents or anything like that. So I thought perhaps I'd tell you a story tonight."
"You mean I don't have to get you smashed now?" Jason's eyes widen in surprise. Fuck, I did not expect this tonight.
"I'd prefer to be sober when telling this story actually. It's...quite the doozey." Tim drops his gaze again, looking uncertain.
"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to." Jason tightens his arms around Tim. "Just because I dumped on you the other night doesn't mean you have to do the same."
"I'm glad you did," Tim replies firmly and his gaze locks back on Jason again, knowing he's on firmer ground now. "And I'm not. I've been wanting to tell you for a while, but things keep happening."
"Ain't that the truth?" Jason looks over Tim's shoulder to the oven and spies something covered with a tea towel on his island. "What are you making?" he asks, changing the subject.
"Dinner." Tim grins as he twists around and steps out of Jason's grip to return to the kitchen. "Courtesy of Alfred. I can follow his reheating instructions to perfection. Go shower and get cleaned up. It'll be ready by the time you're done."

Jason does as he's told, feeling entirely bemused by the entire situation. As he showers and gets the stink of the bar off him, he wonders, and not for the first time, what Tim's story is. I know he's good with computers. Really good. And he can pick locks like most people can pick their nose. He's worked with Barbara before and she's really good with computers too. I bet he's a hacker of some kind. I know precisely dick about that shit, but it's the only thing that makes sense. Where the hell does the lock-picking come in though?

By the time he's cleaned up and dressed in what passes for his pajamas, Tim's got dinner ready. Jason's mouth waters at the rich, savory scent. "Crap, that's shepherd's pie, isn't it?"

Tim nods. "With Alfred's homemade sourdough biscuits too."
"You baked those?"
"Don't sound so surprised. I said I followed his instructions. Dick's the incompetent one in the kitchen. He burns water." Tim hands Jason a big bowl full of deliciousness and a plate with buttered biscuits.

Jason accepts the food and goes to sit down at the counter but Tim shoos him over to the rarely used kitchen table. "I left enough space for us to eat there and admire my tree."

They eat in companionable silence. Jason's almost done with the amazing meal before he notices the two gifts under the small tree. "Who are those from?" he asks around a biscuit. He's been up all day and half the night, he can be excused for bad table manners.

Tim glances at the small beautifully wrapped package and the envelope he tucked under the tree earlier. "Alfred and Bruce," he replies.
"The hell? We've only been dating about two months. Don't ya think it's a bit early for your family to be giving me gifts? I didn't even get you anything since I've got no idea what rich boy presents entail."

The look Tim gives him is full of amusement. "This rich boy is perfectly happy to spend Christmas Day wrapped around his bartender boyfriend in bed, on the sofa, in the shower; pretty much wherever you are, I'll be there too. As for the gifts, I didn't question them as Alfred and Bruce do what they want. They like you a lot."
"They need their heads checked," Jason mutters but not quietly enough as Tim huffs a bit in exasperation. "I know, I know. There's more to me than I give myself credit for. Spare me the lecture," Jason tries to forestall Tim's argument.

Tim lets him this time but rolls his eyes before going back to his dinner.
They finish eating and Jason insists on doing the dishes while Tim wraps up the leftovers and places them in the fridge. It's not until they're settled on the sofa with a movie playing in the background that Tim says anything more. He's changed into his own pajamas, some warm looking plaid flannel that Jason teased him about the first time he saw them. Tim's curled up next to Jason, head resting on the bigger man's shoulder. But he's tense and not at all relaxed like he usually is when he's sitting like this.
"Spit it out already," Jason teases gently. "I'm not going to judge you for your misspent youth. Pretty sure I still take the cake for that."

Tim snorts almost derisively. "I'm not so sure about that." He sighs and then gets up, wrapping Jason's afghan over his skinny shoulders and starts pacing around in front of the TV. He's gained a bit of weight back since he submitted his resignation but he's still underweight from when they first started messing around.

Jason's eyes widen at that statement. "What the hell were you up to?"
"I was a hacker. A damn good one too until the shit hit the fan and I almost got someone killed."
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Tim knew since the night of the gala that he was going to tell Jason his story. The question was how much as it also involved Babs and Cass and their secrets were not his to tell. He's been stewing on it for the last couple of days but it's not until he starts pacing in front of Jason in the dim light of the Christmas lights he'd put up in the loft that the words finally come to him.
"My parents were killed when I was 13," he starts. "I got lucky when CPS sent me to Bruce rather than a group home. It's like they didn't know what to do with a rich kid and Bruce was already registered as a foster parent since he took in Dick. Anyway, it was at my parents funeral that I overhead something I wasn't supposed to hear..."

Tim sat in the shadowed corner of a large and ornate mausoleum. It's quiet and out of the way, which was exactly what he wanted right now after watching his parents coffins be lowered into the ground. Bruce was taking care of everything and seemed to understand (and with good reason) exactly what he's feeling right now. He's the one who pointed him in this direction when Tim told him he needed a bit of space.

The reality that he's truly alone now was sinking in. Tim's been alone often over the years while his parents traveled for work and for his dad's archeology digs. But even when he was at home or away at school, he always knew where they were. That they were there even if they weren't in the same city or even the same time zone. But now...

They're gone and they're not coming back. Ever.
Tim leaned back against the solid stone behind him and stared blankly across the green grass at nothing in particular. The wind blew softly, just enough for him to feel the air moving against his face. The day was bright and clear, a rarity for Gotham. His mom would have liked that, Tim decided absently. She always liked the sun.

The sound of voices approaching Tim's hiding spot don't even register until they're almost right on top of him. He's curled up in a small space, easy to overlook unless he spoke up. But he doesn't and he's suddenly glad for it when he heard what's being said.
"...now that they're dead, it's a straight shot to the top for you. The kid's too young to even know what's going on."
"Yeah, but he's still in the way. Won't know for sure exactly how much until the wills are read and we see if the company is supposed to go to him. Even if it doesn't, he'll still get mommy and daddy's shares and he'll be a majority shareholder, trust or no trust."
"So what're you going to do?"
"Share prices are way down since the Drakes were kidnapped and plummeted even further after they were killed. Investor sentiment will be very shaky until new leadership with a clear vision can take over. I'm only interim CEO but if we can get prices to drop even further, perhaps layoff some people in an attempt to cut costs and make it look like we're scrambling, then we may be able to force a restructure..."

The voices trail off as they walk past Tim but he's already scrambling and sneaking out of his hiding spot to try and get a look at who he'd just heard. He spotted the backs of two men walking away, taking a roundabout way back to a line of cars in the distance. Neither man is familiar but he knew the name of the interim CEO of Drake Industries. He'd shaken the man's hand earlier when he expressed his condolences to Tim.

## James Kauffiman.

He can hear the alarm bells ringing in his head. Whatever Kauffman was planning, Tim's determined it won't work. He already knew Drake Industries was his and the people who work there are his to protect. Money-grubbing assholes like Kauffman aren't welcome.

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Later that night, Tim made sure his bedroom door was locked and went to his desk to open his laptop. The room was his new room at Wayne Manor and Alfred's told him he can redecorate it however he wants when he's ready. It's just across the hallway from Dick's room
(when he's even there) and Bruce's master suite was a bit further down the hall. It's as quiet and secure as he knew how to make it considering his still new surroundings.

He's no stranger to getting past the firewalls of DI. At this point, it's almost child's play. But what was difficult was sifting through all the information. But he had a name, so looking up Kauffman's emails was his starting point.

What he found made him wonder what's going on in the man's personal email. While there's no concrete evidence of wrongdoing, there are a number of allusions to other messages that aren't on the DI servers. Tim started going through other emails of people Kauffman contacted regularly and after almost two hours of reading, he finally found Kauffman's personal email address.

Getting into Google was a bit trickier, but he finally broke the password on the interim CEO's account. Tim's stomach sunk at what he discovered and he brushed away angry tears that burn his eyes.

His parents kidnapping was carefully planned and masterfully executed. The money from their ransom was supposed to go to Kauffman and a couple others through a series of wire transfers via offshore accounts. But something went wrong and Tim's parents paid for the mistake with their lives.

Tim knew everything. But how could he get it to the police without implicating himself in obtaining this information illegally? As he thought it over, he saved everything he could and carefully backtracked out of the program, erasing each step along the way like he'd never been there at all.

Before he shut down everything, Tim glanced at the clock. It's almost 3 in the morning and he has to be up by 8 as his parents' wills were going to be read a short while after that. But before he closed his laptop, he remembered something he'd seen online. An online presence, someone who went out of their way to right wrongs and bring justice to those who need it. This person was relatively new on the Web, but was starting to make waves.

Tim settled in and tried to figure out how to contact the Oracle.

In the end, the Oracle reached out to Tim. A few days after his discoveries, Tim's going through the files when his screen went black and a neon green image appeared. It's kind of disturbing looking, but he's more focused on trying to get back control of his computer than on the image in front of him.
"Crap, crap, crap," he muttered as he tried entering commands. "Son of a bitch," he swore when nothing seemed to work. He picked up his laptop to open the bottom and take the battery out to shut it down when a synthesized voice appeared over the speakers.
"Hello Drake. I understand you've been looking for me?"

Tim stopped and gaped back at the screen. Drake is his online handle. Not very original, but Red Dragon seemed too ostentatious. "Oracle?" he asked tremulously.
"The one and only. This is quite the treasure trove I just found on your computer. You're very good, Timothy..."

His blood chilled at the thought of how easily he'd just been counter-hacked. "Apparently not good enough," Tim snapped.
"No, but you're still very good. I've been trying to get in for the last hour. I'm sorry to hear about your parents."

It shouldn't surprise him that Oracle knew who he was at this point, but it did. "Um ...thanks. Ah...it's actually for them that I've been trying to find you."
"Go on. I assume you've been hacking your own company's files and what looks like your CEO's emails for a reason."

Tim took a deep breath and explained everything. Oracle didn't say a word and it's only by the continued presence of the green image on his desktop that he knew he's (she's?) still there. He's not sure why, but Oracle felt like a woman, so he decided to stick with that pronoun.

When he's done, Oracle finally replied. "That's quite the story and you've got all the evidence right here. What do you need me for?"
"I don't know what to do with all this! I don't understand even half of what these financial sheets mean but I know from the emails there's messy accounting going on and that there's a fucking murderer sitting in my dad's office!'" Tim all but shouted at the computer screen. He's frustrated and can't hide it anymore.

There's a long pause. "I know someone at the FBI who can help you, Timothy. I'll reach out to her, give her what I collected from you. I'll say it came from me so that no one comes looking at you. You and your parents will be in good hands. But when this is all done, you and I are going to have a long talk. You will owe me a favor. Agreed?"

At this point, Tim didn't care that he owed the Oracle anything and everything she could want. All he knew was that his parents would have justice.

## "Deal."

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It's almost a year before Tim heard from Oracle again. During that time, a lot happened. He was formally adopted by Bruce as his son and with Tim came Drake Industries, absorbed into the massive conglomerate that was Wayne Enterprises. It was hard letting that happen, but Tim knew it was the only way he could protect his parents legacy. He turned 14 and started high school a year early. But most importantly, James Kauffman and a number of his cronies were arrested as part of the conspiracy to kidnap Jack and Janet Drake. There were a number of other charges as well, but in Tim's mind, the one he wanted most simply wasn't
possible. His parents death was an accident, so accidental man-slaughter was the best Agent Prince could get. It irks him to no end, but with all the other charges against Kauffman, he would be in federal prison for a very long time.

Tim sat at his desk, working on his math homework. He always saved it for last as it's the easiest topic for him and he found it almost relaxing. Freshman he may be, but the calculus in front of him was from the senior level math class he's in. His laptop was open, some music blasting from the speakers when it abruptly cut off. Tim raised his head in surprise and looked over curiously.

A familiar green image was looking back at him. "Timothy," an electronically modified voice said in greeting. "It's been a while."

He grinned, even as a feeling of dread settled into his stomach. "Oracle," Tim replied. "It has been. How are you?" he asked, remembering his manners.

An odd sound came from the laptop and Tim realized that's how a laugh sounded through the filter. "I'm well, thanks. It looks like things have finally settled down for you."
"Yeah," Tim nodded. "Thank you so much for Agent Prince. She's absolutely amazing and I swear Bruce is like half in love with her as she doesn't put up with his crap."

The sound came again. "She is one of the best. She was also very impressed with you, Timothy. We see a bright future for you."

It dawned on Tim suddenly and he gaped. "You work for the FBI too."
"Good guess, but not quite. I'm a bit more...specialized."
"Wow. I got really lucky then, I guess." Tim thought quickly, realizing exactly just how much trouble he could have gotten into for the hacking he did into Kauffman's personal emails last year.
"Very," Oracle agreed. "I've been keeping an eye on you too. Those are some rather impressive skills you have and even with everything going on, you've been keeping them sharp. That was rather amusing how you transferred all that money out of Carmine Falcone's personal bank accounts to those offshore charities and relief funds."

Tim scowled and crossed his arms defensively. "The man's an absolute pig and is running this town like he owns everything. I saw his emails. He's rotten to the core. I thought the FBI has a task force just for the mob? '"
"They do, but it's not as large as it used to be." Oracle paused before continuing. "You have a very strong sense of justice, don't you, Timothy? There's right and wrong, but you navigate that gray area in between. I could use someone like you. "
"What do you mean?" Tim asked in confusion. "I'm only 14."
"And you move in circles that most 14 year olds can't even imagine. I want you to work for me. With me. I think together we can clean up Gotham."

The words echoed in Tim's ears for a moment. "You're from Gotham too." It's the only thing that made sense.
"I am. And like you, I'm in a rather unique position to upset the status quo. Bruce Wayne does a lot of good for this city, but he's constantly fighting against the likes of Carmine Falcone, Oswald Cobblepot, as well as Armand Krol. The police commissioner, though he tries, isn't enough as he has his own corrupt police force to deal with."

Tim's silent for a moment, absorbing what Oracle was saying. He knew his hometown was one of the most corrupt places in the country, possibly the world; he's experienced it first hand. The thought of finally being able to do something about it appealed to him and he grinned, though he can't help but wonder exactly what he's getting into. "What do you want me to do?"
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In the beginning, it started simple. Tim would go with Bruce to every public event and function he did. It was easy enough to blend in to the background. No one ever paid attention to a kid. He was short for his age and people often thought he was younger than he really was. Tim would make note of who was speaking with whom and for how long. He learned to pay just as much attention to the arm candy as to the people themselves.

One thing he learned fast was how misogynistic the men of this city were. When he commented on it to Oracle one night, the grating sound he knew was a laugh was his response. "You have no idea, Timothy. No idea."
"I think I'm starting to," he snarked in reply.
"Perhaps, but you're only seeing the public face. What goes on behind closed doors is a whole different story."

Tim couldn't help but blush as his imagination provided some helpful hints of what Oracle was implying. "Wouldn't that coming to light help with what we're trying to do? All we're doing is making an elaborate flow chart of who's who and how they're all connected. It's like a fricking spider web."
"We're getting there. I've got a life away from my computer too you know." It was the first hint Tim got that Oracle was a real person. Sometimes he thought she was a figment of his imagination (he still persistently thought of Oracle as a woman for some reason, especially after he looked up everything he could on the Oracle of Delphi).
"I bet you don't have to go to high school and deal with all the infighting and bullying." Tim said it defiantly, but inwardly he cringed. He was starting to get bullied at school; no one was physically hurting him as he was a son of Bruce Wayne now, but what was being said behind his back was starting to get to him.
"No, those years are thankfully behind me," Oracle replied. "Have you ever taken a martial art before?" she asked abruptly, changing the subject.
"I think you should start. I'll send you a list of good instructors. Use that generous allowance I'm pretty sure you're not even using most of to pay for it."

So that's how Tim found himself learning aikido.
And a year after that, when Oracle learned that Tim was actually quite talented with a camera, he started accumulating blackmail material on the subjects he'd been carefully stalking through the ballrooms and society events of Gotham's elite. Tim had a knack for knowing how to blend in with his surroundings and with his newfound marital arts skills, he was much lighter and more agile on his feet. Dick, his new older brother, was even teaching him some gymnastics and freerunning when he was home from college.

It was easy enough to escape Wayne Manor at night to make his way into the city. The rooftops became his highway thanks to Dick's inadvertent teachings. The pictures Tim could take were impressive and he knew it.
"Check it out," he said one night after he returned from the city. "This one's a keeper. Falcone himself inspecting a weapons shipment."
"How on Earth did you get that, Tim?" Oracle sounded amazed even with the synthesized voice.
"Very carefully," he replied. "I'm not sure how much longer I'll be able to crawl through windows that small though." Tim had hit a bit of a growth spurt recently (finally in his mind).
"I feel like I should lecture you on taking chances, but everything we're doing involves taking risks. But you need to be careful, Tim. You're a public face in this city whether you want to be or not. Stuff like this, you'll need someone watching your back."
"Stuff like this is going to take down Falcone," Tim retorted. "I got a bead on the mayor's plans for tomorrow night while I was out. He's seeing his mistress again, but he's got something going on before she's supposed to arrive."
"Were you in his calendar again?" Oracle asked.
"Aren't you?"
Oracle sighed. "Tim, I'm going to send someone out to meet you tomorrow night. They're not going to say anything to you, but they'll be watching while you do your work and make sure you stay safe."
"Why? What's the point of making me take aikido if someone else is going to do any potential fighting for me?" Tim asked defensively.
"There's a myriad of reasons, but the most important one was for your self-esteem last year. You needed it."

Tim's mouth snapped shut.

Oracle continued. "Besides, you've only been learning for a year now. This person has been practicing all their life. If anything, they'll be teaching you a few things, assuming they like you. So don't be a dick."
"That's my brother's job, not mine." Tim replied cheekily, but accepted the rebuke for what it was.

The next night, Tim gained a partner. This person was short and slender, always dressed completely in black from head to toe. He never saw their face and they almost never spoke, but he was pretty certain it was another woman. And apparently she did like him because after a few weeks, she started teaching him things after Tim was done taking his pictures.

For a short time, he thought it was Oracle herself, but that notion was quickly disabused when he received a call from her one night while on the job with his silent partner at his side.

It was slow and tedious work, building a solid case against the power brokers of Gotham. One lead would turn into another, and another, and another. Tim had been right to liken it to a spider's web.

Tim was almost 18 by the time Oracle thought they had enough. Years of hard work were finally paying off.

Which was good, because Tim's home life was starting to become a living hell thanks to the introduction of Bruce's actual son coming to live with them several months earlier. Damian despised Tim at first sight and the feeling was almost mutual after the vicious rebuff Tim got when he tried to make friends with the young boy. Cohabitation was the best way Tim could describe his living situation as Bruce was forced to spend more and more time with the boy. More often than not, anytime Bruce tried to spend with Tim was interrupted by the little demon. It didn't take long to realize Damian was doing it on purpose.

In hindsight, Tim's not surprised that he messes up.
Oswald Cobblepot, more commonly known as the Penguin, was a legitimate business owner on the surface but also was a crime boss in his own right. His reach and influence expanded beyond just Gotham, which made him more dangerous in some ways than the entrenched mob bosses in the city. His base was the Iceberg Lounge and Tim was no stranger to its doors and windows. Penguin was a paranoid son of a bitch though and regularly had the club swept for bugs and other recording devices, so Tim constantly was going in and out replacing his.

As he'd gotten older and his skills improved, his tech got better. His silent partner, whom he'd dubbed Black Bat long ago, much to her delight, was his shadow on nights like these. It was incredibly dangerous breaking into the club at night. The day was less risky, but even in Gotham, two people wandering around in black ski masks attracted the wrong kind of attention.

Tim knew he'd gotten lucky that night. The Iceberg was relatively quiet as Cobblepot was across town at the Mayor's mansion for a dinner with other local business leaders. There were just enough legitimate people there that Tim knew the more sordid type of business the
mayor and Cobblepot partook in wouldn't be on the menu and he'd learned from Oracle a few days before that his last set of bugs had been found and destroyed.

Breaking in was easy at this point. But with Penguin gone, his office was unattended. It was tempting, so tempting to take a peek, to see what was in the man's ledgers that he didn't keep electronic copies of. The pictures Tim could take if there was anything good...his fingers itched.

He signaled to Black Bat to follow him, breaking away their planned exit and headed down another hallway. She grabbed his arm and shook her head warningly.
"Just this one time," Tim said quietly so that his voice doesn't carry. Black Bat may not speak, but he's learned she understands him very well. "Penguin's not even here. If we find where that drug shipment the Odessa mob is moving, it'll be worth it. That'll be the nail in their coffin."

Black Bat hesitated before reluctantly nodding. She went around him and took the lead instead, gesturing for Tim to follow. He knew better than to try and get past her when she was like this; she took her role as his protector very seriously.

Tim slid out his tablet and pulled up the security feed he was hacked into as they got closer to Cobblepot's office. He froze the frames as they passed under the cameras, two ghosts in the night. When they got to the office, Tim knelt in front of the door and started picking the lock while Black Bat kept watch. He'd gotten very good at it over the years, so it didn't take too long.

Stepping into the office for the first time, Tim's breath almost caught at the sight of all the birds the man kept there. The room had a musty scent that he figured had to be related to the birds somehow. Eye on his tablet still, Tim and Black Bat made their way across the large room to Cobblepot's desk.

In it was the treasure trove Tim suspected it would contain. The Penguin kept electronic files that he and Oracle could easily get into, but he didn't fully trust keeping everything on his computer, so his desk contained files upon files that could be quickly and easily disposed of at the drop of a match. Tim's camera came out and he snapped pictures with lightning speed.

So focused was he that Tim missed seeing the approaching guards on his tablet, still dutifully showing the security feeds he'd hacked into earlier before he and Black Bat even entered the building...
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"...Black Bat was shot several times as she tried to get me out of there. Neither of us were armed for a gunfight and though we were both wearing Kevlar on the off chance something did happen, it still hurt like hell and the only exit we had was out the window behind Penguin's desk." Tim's throat hurts a bit, he's been speaking for so long, but he's almost done. Jason's been an enraptured audience, his teal gaze following Tim's every step as he paced his way around the living room telling the story.

He takes a deep breath and continues. "We jumped out that window like something out of a bad action movie. I don't know how she did it, but Black Bat grabbed me by the arm and somehow shot a grapple line to the next building over, saving us from becoming street pizza and even more bullet ridden than we already were. I'd somehow managed to keep hold of my camera and grabbed my tablet on the way out, so there was no evidence we'd even been there. We hauled ourselves up to the roof of the building we were dangling from and ran as fast as we could. We were a few blocks over by the time I realized Black Bat wasn't with me anymore. I found her one building behind me, bleeding out."

The memory is still painful, even with eight years between then and now. The sight of Cass lying there in a pool of blood still gave him nightmares sometimes. "I called Oracle at that point, in a complete panic. She was a cool as ice though and gave me instructions on what to do, what to look for, and a little bit later, where to go so Black Bat could get the help she needed." He chuckles darkly. "I ended up being a bit more banged up than I thought too. I was running around with a bullet in my shoulder and didn't even realize it until I tried to pick my partner up."

Tim chances a glance over at Jason and sees that his mouth has dropped open a bit at that. "Yeah, that's what that scar is on my shoulder," he says wryly. "Anyway, Black Bat survived. Oracle was both furious and relieved that we were okay and she made very good use of the information I managed to get before the shit hit the fan that night. At that point in time, Commissioner Gordon had a much better hold on the GCPD and they went after the Odessa mob so hard and so fast, they didn't even know what was coming. The DA, Harvey Dent, had a field day with that one."

Deciding he's finally said everything he wanted for the moment, Tim stops and heads to the kitchen, grabbing a water bottle from the fridge. He chugs half the bottle in one go and grabs another one to take back to his boyfriend. Jason's still on the sofa, sprawled out now with a thoughtful look on his face. He silently accepts the water Tim gives him and twists the plastic cap off as he takes a swallow.

Tim's not entirely sure what to make of the look he's being given by the other man. Say something. Please. Anything. He wants to fidget under Jason's assessing gaze but keeps his head held high and resists the urge.

Jason finally lets out a sigh and smirks, patting his lap. Tim gratefully sinks down onto muscled thighs, sitting sideways so that he can look at Jason while still relaxing in his warm embrace. I'll never get tired of looking at him. He makes my fingers itch for my camera. I wonder what he'd do if he knew just how many pictures I've taken of him with my phone and tablet...
"So...what do you think?" he asks as he leans his head against Jason's shoulder and breaths in his clean scent.
"If I didn't know better, I'd say you were pullin' my chain. That is fucking insane. But you and Barbara...yeah, you two could totally have pulled this off. I remember when the Feds swooped in and arrested all those guys and then some."

Yeah, I knew he'd figure that out eventually. "I never said it was Barbara," Tim comments wryly.
"Do I look like an idiot?" He misses the look Jason gives him, buried as he is against his neck and shoulder, but he can just imagine the mock indignation.
"No, but I purposefully omitted names for a reason," Tim tries.
"Fine, be that way," Jason huffs. "One thing I am curious about though... does Bruce or Dick know any of this?"

Tim shakes his head. "No, they don't. They know the Feds went after Kauffman and then all the others years later, but they don't know how they got tipped off about it. And we'd like to keep it that way, if you don't mind."

Jason shrugs easily, even with Tim leaning against him. "No worries there. Not like either of them are in my social circle." He pecks Tim on the top of his head, warm lips pressing into his hair. "And that doesn't mean Roy or the girls are going to find out either."
"Thank you." Tim breaths in Jason's clean scent and gives him a kiss of his own along his stubbled jaw. This late at night, Jason very obviously needs a shave, but Tim loves it when he's like this. All clean and relaxed after a hard day of work, and spending his downtime with him.
"Another question," Jason starts and tightens his grip on Tim for a moment. "So this all explains your talent with locks. But...you could have just said lock-picking was a hobby or something and left all this other stuff out. I just...why did you tell me all the rest?"

He sighs. This is what he'd been hoping and dreading Jason asking. Tim sits up and shifts so that he's straddling Jason's thighs; the larger man's hands slide down to grip lightly at Tim's hips. Normally the position would get him worked up, but not now, not with what he's about to say. "Because I needed you to understand more about me and where I came from. What my history really is instead of what you find online or in the papers. When you told me what happened to you, I...I went digging."

Jason's fingers suddenly dig hard into his hips and he goes very still, his face shutting down and becoming a mask that Tim's never seen on him before. His throat works a couple times before he finally chokes out, "You went into my juvie files."

Tim swallows and nods. "I had to know what happened to him. I had to know if there were others like you, others he hurt..." It's only his quick reflexes, still sharp after all these years, that keep him from falling completely on his ass as Jason abruptly stands and sends Tim to the floor.
$* * * * *$
"You...you..." Jason can't even get the words out. He's pissed off to the point where he's almost seeing red, but what hurts the most is that he feels almost as violated as he did all those years ago. He wants to hit something, anything, and hard. It's tempting to throw a
punch at Tim now that he knows he can handle it but the little fucker would probably dodge or do some karate shit on him in return. Jason's a brawler and he knows it.

Or even worse, Tim would stand there and take it, thinking it was his due for what he'd done.
I gotta get out of here. Jason stalks away from Tim and grabs his jacket and keys. "I need some air," he manages to get out before he opens the door and slams it hard behind him.

Rather than going downstairs, he turns the other way and goes up the final flight of stairs and unlocks the door to the roof. Jason remembers the jacket he's carrying when the freezing night air slams into him and shrugs it on. The night wind is cold and he's reminded of the fact that he's wearing nothing but a pair of flannel pajama pants, a thin t-shirt, socks, and his slippers.

But at the moment, he doesn't care. The feelings of hurt and betrayal are almost overwhelming. Jason paces the width of the building twice before his thoughts gain even a semblance of coherency again. He told me all of that just so I would understand what he's capable of. What he could do. God, I knew Tim was a sneaky little shit sometimes, but Jesus Christ, that takes the fucking cake.

What the hell is he even? Some kind of vigilante hackers, him and Barbara? And fuck me if that silent partner of his wasn't Cassandra. Shit, he's not even bragging about it either. The only times he even showed any emotion during his story was at the beginning when his parents were killed and at the end when he and Cassandra were hurt. Everything else was matter-of-fact. Goddamn, but I remember hearing about all that shit hitting the fan. I had just gotten my GED and Mike was making me read the newspaper every day so I could be 'informed' in my opinions rather than just spouting off shit I knew nothing about. Half of Gotham City's elected officials and a few select citizens were arrested in one of the biggest corruption cases ever seen in the history of this country. And it was all because of Tim, Barbara, and Cassandra.

Fuck me, I'm not even thinking about what I should be thinking about. He did his little magic trick with that fucking laptop or tablet of his and got his hands on MY records. Like he had a right to them because he wanted to KNOW...if that man hurt any others besides me. Jason heaves a great sigh and watches his breath fade in the cold night air.

Just that fast, his white-hot rage iss gone, replaced with a bone-deep weariness and sense of exhaustion he hasn't felt in years. He feels the cold and the wind sharply through his pajamas and shivered. Tim did it because he wanted to know if that bastard is still out there hurting kids. Because if he is, all he has to do is send an anonymous tip to CPS and that'll be the end of it. Or not, because I can't see Tim doing a half-assed job of it without providing plenty of proof...

Jason stops pacing and clenches his fists hard in the pockets of his jacket. I...I gotta know. I gotta know what Tim found. As he turns to go back inside, he shudders hard, though he's uncertain if it's because of the memories he'd tried so hard to forget or at Tim. I'm still mad at him, but I get why he did it. Fuck...

He's not sure how long he's been on the roof, but by the time Jason opens the door to the loft, Tim's fully dressed and is sitting at the kitchen counter writing something on a notepad. The overhead lights are on in the kitchen and all the Christmas lights have been turned off, including the ones on the small tree.

Tim stops writing when Jason walks in and locks the door behind him. "I...I was just leaving you a note about what I found out, and then I was going to go home. I know you're mad at me and you have every right to be..." he trails off as Jason raises a hand to stop him.
"You're right. I am mad. I'm fucking pissed that you did that to me. I trusted you." Jason takes off his jacket and hangs it up, leaving the keys in the pocket. He stalks into the kitchen, long legs covering the distance quickly and bypassing Tim completely as he goes to the stove and grabs his teakettle to fill at the sink. He's freezing. "But...after everything you told me, I get why you did it. You're such a little shit sometimes."
"I'm sorry, Jason. I really am." Tim's voice shakes a little. "Do you want me to tell you what I found or should I finish..." he gestures to the paper in front of him. "Or I can just leave and..."

Jason turns from where he's set the kettle on the stove to heat up and glares at his boyfriend. "Your ass is staying right there and telling me everything. Whether you stay or not when you're done is completely up to you." The words slip out before he even realizes it.

Tim looks a bit shocked at that as well, but doesn't press. He takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly, squaring his shoulders as he does like he's preparing for battle. "About a year after you ran away, CPS opened an investigation after another kid who ran away spoke up when social services found him. The case was quickly turned over to the GCPD. In the end, they booked him with 11 counts of child molestation and five of outright sexual assault. There was a note in their file that said more victims were possible but the kids couldn't be found in order to confirm. Your name was on that list."

Closing his eyes, Jason takes a deep breath of his own. He clenches his fists tightly and lets it out slowly. He does it twice more before he can speak. "Where is he now?"
"Dead. He was sent to Blackgate and was killed in a riot 12 years ago. From the records I found, he was in and out of the infirmary pretty often. Even hardened criminals apparently don't like child predators."

12 years...Oh Jesus, I...I... Jason feels the tears burning in his eyes. Not for the worthless piece of garbage who ruined his childhood but for himself. If I'd been the one to speak up instead of running away... what would my life have been like? Would I have ever had to sell myself just to eat? Run drugs so I could get shoes? Would I have had a home where someone actually gave a shit about me?

## Would I still be so broken on the inside?

The sound of the kettle whistling shocks him out of his thoughts. Opening his eyes, Jason turns and tries to pick up the kettle by the insulated handle. His nerves are shot and he's still cold, in more ways than one, and he fumbles, dropping the kettle back on the stove.

Tim is there beside him a moment later (sneaky little ninja really is a ninja fuck fuck fuck) and takes Jason's hand, checking for burns. "I got this," he says quietly. "Go sit down."

Words rise in Jason's throat but he chokes them down. He doesn't remember walking to the sofa and pulling the folded afghan around him, wrapping himself tightly in it with his feet tucked in under the folds. The next thing he remembers is Tim standing there in front of him carefully holding out his favorite mug. Jason smells mint and realizes Tim's made his favorite evening tea, chamomile and mint, to help calm him down.

He reaches out and accepts it, wrapping his hand around the warm cup. Tim makes sure he has a good grip on it before letting go.

The liquid is hot and Jason burns his tongue a little as he takes his first sip, but warmth finally returns to his body and he's able to relax his tense muscles. He stares at the light colored tea for a few moments before looking up at Tim, who hasn't moved since handing over the cup. "You staying or going?" he asks bluntly.

Tim looks like a deer-in-the-headlights before he shrugs uncertainly. "I don't know. If you need your space after all this, I can leave. It's my fault all this happened in the first place. I just want to make sure you're going to be all right."

It is, but however you went about it, you gave me something I didn't even know I wanted. Closure. No fucking use wondering about the past and what might have been. What's done is done and there's no going back. Only forward. And for some fucking reason I can't even begin to fathom, Tim fucking Drake-Wayne cares about me. And I...Christ, even after this shitstorm, I still want him. Maybe even love him. God, what a mess. His emotions are running high and he feels wound up tighter than a coiled spring, but he makes his decision. "Stay," Jason replies quietly and turns his attention back to his tea. "And turn on the Christmas lights again. They're pretty."

He won't admit the dim lighting is soothing.
Out of the corner of his eye, Jason watches Tim walk away. Christmas lights are turned back on and the kitchen light is turned off. He hears Tim shuffle around in the bedroom, putting his pajamas on again, before coming back to the sofa and gingerly taking a seat on the other end. He curls up into his own little ball as he leans into the corner, angled so he can watch Jason. He's ditched his glasses along the way as well.

Jason finishes his tea and sets the mug on the coffee table before he says anything to the younger man. "Was that why you left Gotham for so long?"

Whatever Tim had been expecting, that question apparently isn't it as his eyes widen in surprise. "Yeah," he replies after a moment. "I'm kind of ashamed to admit it, but yeah. I ran away to California to escape. We had everything we needed so I accepted an offer from the best college I could get into and still be in the same country."
"And when you came back to Gotham?"
"I was welcomed home with open arms by both of them. Everything I thought they may have blamed me for was all in my head."

Jason shakes his head ruefully. "You do get stuck up there more often than not."
"It's a character flaw," Tim replies with a crooked smirk.
"No shit." Jason lifts the edge of the afghan. "Get your scrawny ass over here. You're always cold when you stay here."
"What can I say?" Tim says as he uncurls and crawls across the open cushion between them to takes his spot at Jason's side. "I was in California for too long. Lost my thick skin for Gotham winters."
"You can go ahead and say it. This building is old and drafty even with all the money I've sunk into it."
"That implies it used to be worse."
"You have no idea." Jason shifts so that he can stretch out on the sofa and Tim moves along with him, laying so that he's partially against the back of the sofa and partially on top of Jason. He readjusts the afghan over the top of them.

Jason relaxes into the cushions and the plush throw pillow behind his head. He's warm, inside and out, and Tim is in his arms. It's a good way to fall asleep, with the white Christmas lights twinkling around them.

## Chapter End Notes

Now that I've put you through the emotional rollercoaster, go take a break and enjoy your own cuppa.

Next week! Tim's last day at WE.

# Milestone Eight: Tim's Last Day at Wayne Enterprises 

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The late afternoon sun streams weakly through the wall of windows and into a sharply appointed office near the top of the Wayne Enterprises tower in the heart of Old Gotham. While the furniture and art adorning the walls are eye-catching, the room has as almost abandoned look about it as all the personal touches that had once graced this space were all packed away in a box sitting on the corner of the desk.

Tim sits behind said desk playing a game of Minesweeper on his computer. The game may be old school, but he managed to sneak it, Solitaire, and Tetris into the network, though he knows IT knows they're there and everyone pretends they're not because hello...games! It's harmless, mindless and trivial, just like everything else he's done today.

He's waiting for Bruce and Lucius to come and walk him out of the building. Company policy says anyone in a position above a manager needs to be escorted out of the building by two other employees of equal or higher position to ensure nothing leaves WE that isn't supposed to. They're also supposed to collect the person's security badge and make sure it's deactivated right away.

Considering his position in the company, there's not really anyone higher who could walk him out.

At the knock on his office door, Tim looks up. It's almost time and in spite of everything, he can't quite get rid of the nervous feeling in his stomach, the question of if he's doing the right thing.

Only one person can knock on his door and enter without waiting for his reply. Tam walks in, with Victor Stone hot on her heels. The big black man grins broadly at the sight of his boss. "What up, Drake? Still cooling your heels waiting for the big boss to let you go?"

It's meant to make him laugh and it does. Vic has a way about him that puts everyone at ease. Heaven help the people who get on his bad side though. Damian learned very quickly to stay out of the scientist's way, especially after what he pulled in September. Tim stands and walks around his desk to greet his friends and colleagues. They may be my employees, but they're my friends too. I can't do this without them. "Yeah, I'm still waiting for Bruce and Lucius. They get to walk me out."

Tam snorts in a very unladylike manner. "I still can't believe you're leaving us here to rot for the next six months," she complains. "Working for your dad is not something I'm looking forward to."
"Come on, Tam, don't be that way," Tim pleads. "It's going to take me at least that long to get things to the point where I can bring you on board. You were the one complaining about losing out on health and 401 k benefits during that time."

She makes a face while Vic laughs loudly. "He's got you there, little lady. I remember that discussion." He turns his dark eyes on Tim. "Seriously though, six months, man? What're you gonna be doin'?"
"His boyfriend," Tam snarks.
Tim glares at his very-soon-to-be-former assistant. "You have Steph's number. I suggest you use it." Looking back at Vic, he replies. "I am going to take a couple weeks off and just relax. Catch up on things at home and spend time with Jason. I've already got my eye on some property for our new facility; I just need to see if the neighborhood grid can support our power needs."
"Where you lookin'?"
"The south end of the Bowery actually. Right up by the Sprang Bridge. There's a warehouse district there that's not in use much so I think I can get them for cheap, then turn around and renovate the hell out of the buildings. It's already zoned properly so that won't be an issue."

Vic's eyes widen in surprise. "The Bowery? Seriously?"
Tim rolls his eyes. "Find me another place in Gotham where I can buy that much property to fit everything we're going to need. That equipment list you gave me is rather extensive and even if I don't buy it all at once, we'll need to later."

Tam laughs and slaps Vic lightly on his broad shoulder. "Don't worry, Tim's got a security firm lined up too to keep all your toys safe. And he's designing the security system himself." She grins sharply at her boss. "And we both know just what he's capable of doing."

Tim's still not sure how Tam and Vic know about his hacker background. He suspects Vic has a more sordid background with computers than he'll admit to but there's also the night he made the mistake of getting drunk with the two of them and he can't quite remember everything they talked about. "Very funny," Tim says dryly. "I'm contracting out for parts of that. Someone I trust."

Tam looks like she's about to say more when the door to Tim's office opens again, revealing Bruce and Lucius. Tim's stomach lurches at the sight of them. It's time. He takes a deep breath to try and calm his nerves. I don't think I was this nervous even after Jason walked out on me on Christmas. Good God, it's time.

Bruce seems to pick up on Tim's sudden anxiety. "It's all right, son," he says and places a reassuring hand on Tim's shoulder.

It's warm and solid and Tim wishes he could let himself lean into it. To let Bruce guide the way and tell him what needs to be done. But he knows he can't. This road he's about to walk down is one he needs to do himself. He won't be alone though. Tam and Vic will be joining him soon enough. And Bruce will always be there for him to talk to.

He looks over at Lucius, at the man who helped him so much when Tim first came back to Gotham and supported him in all he did. He gives the man a tremulous smile. "Ready to kick
me out finally?"
Lucius chuckles quietly. "My boy, if I thought I could get away with it, I'd kidnap you and lock you in my office to keep you from leaving. But it's time for you to fly."

Tim closes the distance between them and wraps the older man in a big hug, not caring that he's crushing either of their suits or that they have an audience. "Thank you, Lucius. For everything."
"No need for thanks, Tim. I'd do it all again in a heartbeat, even though you are taking my daughter away from me," Lucius says, but he's returning the embrace just as tightly.
"Daddy," Tam chides gently. "I'm still going to be here for a bit longer."
"And I'm going to take advantage of that," Bruce chimes in. "Having an executive assistant who can actually keep up with me will be a novelty for a change."

Lucius and Tim step away from each other and Tim gives Bruce a dark look. "Just do me a favor and don't try to steal her from me. DI will need its COO soon enough."

Tam grins. "Hmm, I like the sound of that. Timmy, get your ass in gear and get things off the ground so I can update my Facebook page with that job title."

They all laugh at that, including Victor who's been slightly uncomfortable with his boss's bosses in the room.

Mood lightened, Tim goes back to his desk and shuts down his computer for the last time. He puts his suit jacket on, then his winter coat. Tam hands him his leather messenger bag, which he slips over his shoulder. Picking up the box that's been sitting on the corner of his desk, Tim lets out a breath he didn't realize he's been holding.
"I think that's everything," he says.
Vic wraps an arm over Tim's shoulders and gives him a quick hug. "This isn't goodbye, Tim. For any of us. It's just a see ya later."

His chest tightens again and Tim nods. "Right. I'll be seeing you soon, Vic. Happy New Year."
"Happy New Year, almost-boss man."
Tam steps in and gives Tim a close hug as well. "I'm not going to cry," she whispers. Her smoky voice is breaking as she tries to keep herself calm and collected. "I'm going to see you soon enough. Maybe even tomorrow night at Jason's."

Tim juggles the box so he can wrap an arm around the slightly shorter woman. "Change sucks sometimes," he says quietly into Tam's black hair, pulled back tight in her usual knot. "I can't do this without you."

Tam sniffs and pushes away from Tim. "Yes you can. It'll just take you a bit longer. Now get outta here before you make my mascara run."
"Can't have that, now can we?"
Bruce and Lucius are waiting by the door. "Ready, Tim?" Lucius asks. "I don't want you making my little girl cry any more than she has to."

Tim huffs a small laugh as he walks across the room. "I feel like I should be getting a warning or something."
"I save that for whoever she brings home to meet me and her mother."
Bruce chuckles a bit at that. "Good thing you and Tam never dated, Tim. The stories I've heard..."
"Can't be any worse than what you did to Jason," Tim interrupts with a smirk. "Let's go."
Lucius opens the door and Bruce steps out. Tim turns and takes one last look at his office. So much has happened in this room. Long nights, early mornings. Too much coffee and not nearly enough food. Tam, Vic, and I worked our asses off for this company and now it's come to this. I'm leaving now to pave the way for them to follow. Because they believe in the work we were doing. Because they believe in me.

He grins at his friends. "See you later."

## *****

Jason sits in his office, going over his inventory and comparing that to his supply orders. Football games galore for the next few days and everyone and their mother has a college team or an NFL team to cheer on. Thank fuck Super Bowl is only 5 weeks away. It's a very busy time of year for him and New Year's Eve falls on a Saturday night this year, so it promises to be even busier than usual unless his regulars crowd the bar and keep all the barhoppers out. He and Roy are usually enough to keep people from being too stupid but he sure as hell doesn't want someone who's already been kicked out of one bar for being an asshole to come into his on one of the busiest nights of the year.

Tim's volunteered to help behind the bar already. I really need to add him to the payroll if he keeps doing that. Christ, when did this place start becoming popular? He pointedly ignores the little voice that tells him it was when he started introducing good food to his menu.

Glancing at the clock on the wall, Jason sees it's almost 6 . He's not due out until 7 to take over for Roy. He and Kori can handle things just fine, especially since he didn't open the kitchen tonight to make sure there's enough on hand for the following nights madhouse. Pub mix was all his customers were getting. And if they don't like that, they can kiss my ass.

He also wonders where Tim is and what he's doing. The former Wayne executive had said he'd come to the bar tonight, but didn't specify when. Today is his big day. Last day at Wayne Enterprises and all the shit that goes along with it. Bet everyone's taking him out somewhere
fancy and doing whatever it is rich people do when one of them breaks ranks. His mind has a hard time conjuring up that image though as Jason's discovered recently that rich people don't quite fit the mold he always thought they did. Especially Tim.

Jesus Christ, I still don't know what to make of that story he told me. At least I don't have to worry about him in a fight around here. Little shit can probably kick everyone's ass and then some. But all the rest of it? It's like James Bond or something like that. With more computers and blackmail involved. Man, I bet what he told me was just the tip of the iceberg.

Jason flips through the orders on his tablet, reading them but still lost in his thoughts. He and Tim had spent most of Christmas morning asleep, at some point moving from the sofa to the bed where they could both stretch out more. He'd made breakfast when they woke up and afterwards they actually watched a movie for once rather than ignore it and do other, more entertaining, things. Jason hadn't felt like it. He still felt raw over what Tim had done and while he didn't mind his company, he was still pissed at him.

It wasn't until Tim left in the early evening that he even opened the gifts under the small tree. The envelope from Bruce contained a card scrawled with a brief note saying he thought Jason could find this useful. When he shook the envelope, a gift card to a high-end grocery store in Gotham fell out. He knew this place by reputation, having never shopped there before, but everything he'd heard about it was amazing. The gift card didn't say how much was on it but knowing Bruce, it was a fair guess to be at least a hundred dollars on there.

The gift from Alfred was simply amazing. Once Jason had the guts to open the beautifully wrapped package, he couldn't help but gape at what he held. It wasn't the Hobbit, but a first edition of the Fellowship of the Ring. He found a handwritten note on a separate slip of paper carefully tucked into the front of the book. From one lover of books to another. May you keep it well. Happy Christmas.

His hands were shaking so badly Jason had to set the book down on the table for fear of dropping it.

Recognizing his concentration is shot, Jason sets the tablet down on his old desk and stretches, raising his arms up over his head and feeling his back popping in the process. He settles back into his chair, but before he can get up, Jason hears a knock at the office door. "It's open," he calls out.

The door opens to reveal a broadly grinning Tim, still dressed in his nice suit and fancy looking overcoat. He slips in and closes the door behind him. "Hey," he says.

Jason stays put, but gives Tim a grin in return. "Hey, yourself. What the hell are you doing here so soon? Wasn't expecting you until later."
"Well," Tim hedges as he pulls his messenger bag over his shoulder and takes a seat in the chair on the other side of the desk. "Home would have been boring and I couldn't think of another place I'd rather be if I'm going to get drunk tonight."
"Have you even been home?" Jason asks incredulously. He gestures to Tim. "That looks more like straight-from-the-office to me."
"Nope. And before you ask, I drove my Civic today. It was actually easier to get out driving that as the press got wind today was my official last day at WE and they were all huddled around the main entrance and the parking garage wanting to get a shot of me." Tim rolls his eyes, his thoughts on that clear as day.
"No one was looking for Timothy Drake-Wayne driving a salary-man's car, were they? Looking for that fancy Audi of yours instead."
"Parked safely in the garage at home," Tim says smugly. "I've got a change of clothes in my bag. I'm going to ask for your key this time so I can go upstairs and change, if that's all right with you."

The allusion to the other night isn't missed by Jason and he gives Tim a thoughtful look before he says anything. "Appreciated, but not necessary. Take off that heavy coat and come here." He pushes the chair back from the desk and pats his denim-clad thigh.

Tim raises an eyebrow, but does as he's told, shrugging off his heavy black jacket and laying it across the chair before he walks around the desk and sits on one of Jason's muscled thighs. "Something on your mind?" he asks.
"Just that I haven't seen you in a suit for a while and I realized this is going to be the last opportunity for a long time." Jason casts an appraising gaze up and down Tim's lean form. His boyfriend may look skinny, but he's got more muscle than people give him credit for, at least when he remembers to eat and work out regularly. He runs a hand up the sleeve of the blue-pinstriped suit jacket. His fingers reach Tim's collared throat and start playing with the knot of the striped blue tie. "How fond are you of this tie?" he asks.
"This is my favorite suit and my favorite tie," Tim replies wryly as he shifts a bit on Jason's lap. "If you're planning something, it better be worth it if I have to get rid of either."
"Hmm...Well, if they're your favorite, then that implies there are others you wouldn't mind having ruined." Jason flashes Tim a cocky grin and tightens his grip on the tie, pulling Tim in close and capturing his mouth in a fierce kiss. He hasn't touched Tim sexually since the night of the gala and he feels the urge to completely wreck his normally cool and professional façade.

Which, if the sounds Tim's making as Jason plunders his mouth are any indication, he's going to be a perfectly willing participant. It's times like these Jason wishes he still had his tongue pierced. He moves his hand back up the tie and gets a good grip on it just below the knot and pushes Tim back a bit, forcing him to break contact. Taking in the dazed look on Tim's face, Jason smirks. "Lose the jacket and the tie now or I won't be held responsible for what happens to them."

Tim blinks a few times as the words sink in before flying into motion, shifting as he does so that he's fully straddling Jason's thigh now. The jacket is off and tossed across Jason's desk to land on his overcoat and his fingers fumble for a moment with the tie before it's loosened enough to slide over his head and land on the jacket. As soon as the tie is clear, Jason starts working on the buttons of Tim's dress shirt. He's halfway done before he decides he's had enough and his hands reach down to pull the shirt up and out of Tim's pants, leaning in as he
does to latch on to the side of Tim's neck and lathe at a spot he knows by now drives the other man wild.

Gasping a breath, Tim doesn't disappoint as he enjoys Jason's efforts. His hands are running through Jason's practically untamable black hair one moment before one drops to his shoulder and grasps tightly at the dark gray henley he's wearing. Jason reaches down and finishes the buttons, pushing Tim back yet again as he pulls the shirt wide and traps Tim's arm in the sleeves.

Jason grins as he carefully removes Tim's glasses and opens a drawer to his desk to set them in. "Up," he orders and Tim slowly stands up, his back to the desk and facing his still seated boyfriend. He's made no move to finish taking off his dress shirt and Jason enjoys just how rumpled Tim looks. His chest rises and falls from his deep breaths, his white v-neck undershirt half pulled out of his pants. But it's the heated look on his face that turns Jason on even more.

He's just as hungry for Jason as he is for him.
"Look at you," Jason murmurs as he runs a warm hand up the outside of Tim's clothed thigh and slightly inwards to run down the inside. He feels the man tense and shiver at the sensation. "Wonder what those paparazzi would think if they saw you right now."
"They'd be wondering why my boyfriend hasn't fucked me yet," Tim replies challengingly.
Jason's hand rises again, this time across the front of Tim's well-tailored slacks to feel just how hard he's made the other man. Tim's blue eyes flash as Jason palms his cock and rubs his hand up and down slowly, grinding the heel of his hand in gently at the base.

Tim closes his eyes for a moment and opens them again when Jason moves his hand higher and starts unbuckling Tim's black leather belt. Standing, Jason looms over Tim for a moment as he crowds the shorter man against the desk, forcing him to sit and scoot back as Jason takes his place between Tim's spread knees. "Let's see what we can do about that," he says in dark voice that promises so much and captures Tim's warm mouth once again.
*****

Jason is only a few minutes late leaving his office and going out front for the night. He feels good and the tension that's been hanging about him for the last few days has disappeared. $A$ good fuck will do that I suppose, but at the same time, I'm glad we didn't have sex on Christmas. It just felt wrong. I needed some space and Tim gave it to me. But Christ, did we make up for that back there.

The sight of Tim sprawled across his desk with his legs wrapped around Jason's waist as he rocked in and out of the other man's body was something he'd not soon forget. He'd done such a thorough job that Tim was still curled up in his chair trying to come back down to Earth. I never did get that dress shirt of his off either.

Jason can't help the smug look of satisfaction he knows is on his face as he ducks under the bar and approaches Roy.

His best friend gives him an appraising look as he finishes filling up a glass of beer and hands it to Kori. "I know that look," he says with a lecherous grin. "That's your I-got-laid-and-laidgood look. We're not seeing Tim anytime soon, are we?"
"Nope," Jason replies as he grabs a small glass, fills it with some ice, and pours himself a Coke. Taking a sip, he continues. "He's still recovering, so the office is off limits."

Roy laughs loudly at that and raises his hand for a high-five, which Jason gives him. "Jesus, Jaybird. Save that kind of shit for the bedroom, not the office."
"Agreed," Kori adds as she returns from delivering the beer to a man at one of the high tops in back. "Some of us actually work at that desk."
"I'll clean it up, don't get your panties in a knot." Jason takes another sip of his soda and eyes the decent crowd. "How's it been?" he asks, changing the subject.
"It's been steady. A few comments here and there about the kitchen being closed, but that's about all," Roy replies before he grins lecherously. "Obviously not as much fun as you've been having,"
"I'm going to be hearing about this for awhile, aren't I?" Jason asks, sarcasm apparent. "I can't even count the number of times I've found the two of you screwing around back there or in the supply room."
"And you've joined us for how many of those times?" Kori asks archly as she leans on the bar and showing a generous amount of cleavage in spite of the long sleeved shirt she's wearing.

Both men appreciate her assets for a moment, knowing she's putting on a show just for them. "Not as many as you're implying," Jason responds.

Roy laughs brightly and slaps a hand on Jason's broad shoulder. "But enough to make it memorable. So tell us, Jay...You and Tim do it anywhere else in here yet?"

## Chapter End Notes

In my mind, the voice of Victor Stone will always be from the 90s Teen Titans...Khary Payton. BOO-YAH!

Now it's time for sleep. Blessed sleep. Wonderful sleep. Why do I post this fic in the morning after I get off work from a long weekend of overnight shifts again??

# Milestone Nine: New Year, New Beginnings 

## Chapter Notes

Here be fluff and domestic moments.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim groans softly as Jason's alarm clock starts going off. "Your alarm is evil," he says as he tries to burrow deeper into the covers.

At the moment, Jason has to agree with him. They'd closed up the bar at 2, having a pretty decent crowd all the way up until last call, and brought a bottle of the good whiskey upstairs to officially celebrate Tim's newfound freedom. They'd had sex again in the shower, polished off about half the bottle of whiskey, then had sex again before passing out in Jason's big bed. It had all seemed like a good idea the night before, but the light pounding behind Jason's closed eyes is reminding him why he doesn't get drunk anymore.

Oh, God, it tastes like something up and died in my mouth. I can only imagine what Tim feels like; he drank more than I did.

Jason reaches over and turns off the offending device and blinks blearily at the time. He always gives himself an hour to wake up and pretend to have a life before heading down to the bar to start his kitchen prep. This morning though, he just wants to say fuck it and go back to sleep. But then I'm going to feel even worse when I have to get up. Shit. God, I hate being a responsible adult sometimes.

He slowly disentangles himself from Tim and sits up. There's a bit of vertigo, but nothing gut wrenchingly so. All Jason feels is the pounding in his head. This corner of the loft is still relatively dark, but he stares blearily across the open space to his brightly illuminated kitchen. Nice to see it's a clear day outside for once, but damn, I wish I closed the blinds last night. Fuck.

Tim moans again as Jason stands and rolls slowly into the spot he'd just vacated. "That better be a I-don't-want-to-get-up moan and not a I'm-gonna-puke moan," Jason says quietly.

A bright blue eye opens, rather impressive actually considering how smooshed Tim's face is against the pillow. "I'm not that hung over," he manages to mumble.
"Good." Jason turns and shuffles his way to the bathroom. He cleans up, taking extra time with brushing his teeth and breaking out the mouthwash because it really does feel like something died in there.

By the time he's done, Tim has somehow managed to crawl out of bed and make his way to the kitchen to get the kettle started. He looks like he's just standing there by the stove
waiting, but then Jason sees him take a sip from a water bottle he must have grabbed from the fridge.

Catching Jason's eye, Tim takes another drink and sets the bottle aside. "Save me some of that," he says, gesturing to the kettle. "I've already got coffee in my press." He walks out of the kitchen and past Jason to take his turn in the bathroom.

Jason stares after him for a moment, admiring the view. I don't think he's even aware that he didn't put any pajamas on last night. He found my slippers though. Which explains why my feet are cold. He glances down at his feet, surprised to see he at least has socks on. And a pair of boxer briefs. Okay, so clothes first.

Going back to his bedroom, Jason throws on some clean clothes, and returns to the kitchen just in time to hear the kettle start whistling. He pours hot water in Tim's French press first, then starts on his own tea. He decides on the English Breakfast tea Tim brought home for him.

Tim is much longer in the bathroom than Jason was, so he's curled up on his sofa with tea and a plate of toast watching what looks like an Adventure Time marathon by the time the other man emerges. A few minutes later, Tim settles down next to him with a cup of coffee, freshly showered and wearing clothes. Jason glances at Tim's worn jeans and his black hoodie, then looks down at himself and chuckles.
"What?" Tim asks, cocking his head to the side slightly.
"We match." He gestures at the long sleeved black shirt he's wearing over a white t-shirt and his own faded jeans.

Tim rolls his eyes. "If it's any consolation, I've got a red shirt on under this." He reaches out and snags a piece of Jason's toast. "If today is going to be as busy as you say, we're going to need more than toast to get us started."
"Says the man who lives on coffee and power bars," Jason retorts tiredly. "I'll make us something more robust when we get downstairs." He shifts on the sofa and puts his feet up on the coffee table. "Speaking of which, I don't expect you to actually work tonight. You're a free man now, live it up."
"Thanks for the thought," Tim chuckles. "But I'm fine. The only other appealing option is staying home, playing video games all night, and getting Chinese takeout. So, unless you kick me out, I'll just stay here."
"You can pick that up for lunch, rich boy. That sounds good."
"We should go for dim sum again sometime soon."
"Even better."
$* * * * *$

Upon their arrival downstairs at the bar, Jason sets Tim up at the chopping block with a bunch of vegetables to chop while he gets breakfast started. Tim's more than proven he's capable of cutting vegetables without screwing it up (Roy) so he leaves the other man be as he turns on his flattop and takes out the bacon from his fridge. He lays out four thick-cut strips and puts the rest away.
"Why do you keep the bacon down here when there's none on your menu?" Tim asks as the scent of sizzling bacon spreads through the kitchen.
"Because it's too fucking easy to make too much and eat it all myself. I'm not planning on turning into a fat slob here anytime soon."
"Fair enough. You want some of this bell pepper to scramble with the eggs?"
They chatter back and forth as they go about their respective tasks. Jason has their breakfast done in no time and they take a quick break to eat. When they're done, Jason takes over at the chopping block and Tim starts doing the dishes without being asked.

It's easy and comfortable and Jason starts wondering just when the hell did he get so domestic?

Roy arrives just as Jason finishes adding the final touches to his crockpots full of chili. He's decided against making curry tonight, even though it's easier to prepare, partly because he didn't get all the ingredients he needed for it in his last supply order. Tim had made a disappointed face at that and had offered to go shopping for Jason if he really needed him to.
"What's up, love birds? Happy New Year!" Roy says cheerfully as he walks in through the kitchen entrance.
"Hey Roy!" Tim greets the redhead excitedly. The two of them had really hit it off, computer nerds that they were, though Jason privately wonders, in light of what he now knows about his boyfriend, what Roy would think if he knew just what Tim could do. Hell, the two of them would do something stupid, like hack a satellite, just because they could. Can they even do that kinda shit if they wanted to?

Roy gives Tim a companionable slap on the back. "Congratulations on being a free man! Hope you lived it up last night, cuz if you're here tonight and tomorrow, there's little chance you will."

Tim gives him a questioning look. "I get tonight, but tomorrow?"
"College bowl games," Jason chimes in, explaining. "Monday too if I'm remembering the schedule right. That night shouldn't be too bad, all the big games are on New Year's."
"Wow," Tim looks back and forth between the two men. "I never thought of it that way before. I watch the games, yeah, but they're usually on in the background while I'm doing something else."
"Welcome to our world," Jason replies dryly. "Now you understand why I hate football."
"No, I'm pretty sure that's just you," Roy says. "You hate almost all sports."
"Fuck you. Why don't you go do your job and stock the damn bar?"
"Oh, Jaybird, you're lucky I like you." Roy reaches out and grabs Jason by the back of the neck and gives him a little shake. "Relax," he says quietly. "Next few days are gonna suck balls, but then you can close for a few days starting on Tuesday and do whatever the hell you like. There's a sweet piece washing dishes here you should probably do too."

Jason can't see Roy, but he can hear the teasing leer in the man's voice. "Oh, you mean besides the two more times I did last night after I closed?"
"That's my Jaybird." He doesn't need to see Roy to know he's grinning.
*****

Tim's out in the front with Roy helping him stock the bar when Stephanie arrives through the kitchen entrance. Her other job is closed on New Year's Eve, so she'll be here all night. Jason puts the finishing touches on a new batch of pub-mix and gives her a grin. "Hey there, slacker."
"Slacker?" Steph arches a fine blonde eyebrow. "I'm gonna be here from open to close today, so screw you."
"Just kiddin'," Jason replies as he gives the massive bowl another shake to make sure everything is coated properly. "I appreciate you being here all night. Not sure how busy the afternoon will be, but you know how that goes." She ought to, Steph's been working for him for three years now.
"Yeah, which is why I don't mind working the afternoon shift on top of the evenings. I can at least put my feet up for a bit." Stephanie looks around, taking in where Jason is in his prep. "Let me go lock up my purse. What do you need help with?"
"I need help with keeping Roy and Tim from plotting to take over the world."
Steph's eyes light up. "Tim's here? As in, here here and not upstairs?"
Jason laughs. "Yeah, he's out front with the ginger pain in my ass."
He barely finishes the sentence before the blonde graduate student bolts out through the kitchen door and into the main room of the bar. Jason shakes his head as he continues to work. Annoying as it may seem, I'm glad everyone likes Tim. This would be a hell of a lot harder if they didn't. Though I bet Steph's enthusiasm is based more on getting some information on Tam than on actually seeing Tim. I'd have heard about it if she'd actually texted Steph yet.

Prep work finally done, Jason goes out front to see what's going on. Roy has a few different cases of beer on the dark wood countertop and is putting them away in the coolers behind the bar, but it takes him a moment to spot Tim and Steph. They're tucked away in one of the booths by the pool table with Steph yammering away about something, complete with hand
gestures like she only does when she's super excited. Tim does the same thing, so from a distance it looks like some screwed up form of sign language.

Jason leaves them be and heads over to the bar, ducking under the countertop to help Roy. "What's goin' on back there?" he asks, jerking a thumb over his shoulder to point out the two sitting in back.
"Not sure," Roy replies easily. "I heard somethin' about a thesis and running a few ideas by Tim before they disappeared back there."
"Huh," Jason says intelligently and looks back over at the two. "I didn't think Steph was at that point in her graduate program yet."
"I didn't either, but what do I know? Your boyfriend's the one with a master's degree, so he'd know something about writing one of those things."
"Yeah," Jason agrees and finishes shoving bottles of beer in the full ice chests. He glances back at Tim a few times, but his thoughts are all over the place. I've technically had two offers from the Wayne's to pay for me to go back to school. Bruce's offer was because he was being a douche, but Tim's, even though he never directly asked because he knew I'd say no, was legit. If I did go back, what would I want to get a degree in? I love to read, so that seems the obvious choice, but I don't want people telling me what to read and what to think about the books. I'm sure some of the classes would be interesting, but if my English 101 and 102 courses were any indication, I'd probably stab someone, most likely myself just to get outta there.

Culinary school seems like another obvious choice, but I like being self-taught. If I want to learn how to do something a certain way, I just look it up and practice until I get it right. I don't need to do all that fancy knife work or foams or whatever. Hell, if I really wanted to learn a few things, I could just call Alfred. I bet he knows and for some fucking reason, he likes me. Fuck, Bruce Wayne likes me. The hell? I'm just a kid from Crime Alley who happened to grow up straight despite all the shit that happened to me. If I weren't dating Tim, they wouldn't even give me a second look. Fuck that, a first look even.

Tim and Steph come up to the bar, interrupting Jason from his thoughts. He glances at the clock. "Almost time to open, you two need me to stay down here for a bit?"
"Nah," Stephanie replies breezily. "Things won't pick up until about 5 or 6 and you know it."
"Yeah, get outta here," Roy agrees. "Go do something fun with your afternoon before the shitstorm starts later tonight."
"Looks like I'm free for the afternoon then." Jason gives Tim an arch look. "What do you want to do?"

Tim grins. "I can think of a few things."

As 10 o'clock rolls around, Jason really wishes he was still curled up in bed and wrapped around Tim. They'd had a wonderful nap together earlier in the afternoon and when they woke up, the slow and lazy sex was a perfect way to wake up fully. It was more grinding really, as neither one was quite awake enough to do more. But still, it was perfect and relaxing and the complete opposite of the noisy chaos surrounding him right now.

Kori's helping Roy run the bar while Jason is in the kitchen shutting things down for the night. Steph's keeping busy between tables and even though he didn't have to do a damn thing, Tim's been busing tables and helping keep glasses full. He'd just come back with a tray full of plates and dumped them in the sink to soak before running back out.

Honestly, Jason likes that Tim is taking an interest in his business. He gets the long hours and lack of free time that comes with being a small business owner. As a Wayne, he's used to it, though his family's business is certainly far from being small. But he knows that every hand can help make it that much easier on a night like this and Jason appreciates it and him all that much more. Even if he is a nosy shit that can't keep his curiosity in check. I may have forgiven him for that, but it doesn't mean I've forgotten it.

He's almost done with cleaning the kitchen when Stephanie comes flying through the door to the kitchen, closing it hard behind her and looking like someone's just punched her in the gut. She's pale and her fists are clenched so tightly she's practically shaking. Jason's guard is instantly up. "What happened?" he asks, dropping his rag and going to her. "What's going on out there?"

Stephanie takes a deep breath. "It's...fine. There's nothing wrong. It's just...Tam's here. With someone..." She forces the words out and shakes her head hard. "God, I'm being so ridiculous. I like her and from what Tim's said, she's interested too, but we've only texted a couple times and..."

That's news to me. Jason wraps Stephanie in a big hug. "Don't scare me like that, blondie. Though that sucks about Tam. I didn't get the impression that she's the type to lead someone on."
"Me neither." Stephanie sounds miserable as she wraps her arms around Jason and sniffs hard. "I feel so stupid."
"Yeah, well, it's her loss. Who's she with? Anyone you recognize?"
"No, I don't recognize him. Big black guy, built like a linebacker. He seems to know Tim too; I saw them teasing him when he was running a tray to a table for me."

A sneaking suspicion starts to creep up on Jason, but he doesn't say anything yet. "Come on, put your face back on and let's go out there together."
"Ugh, did my mascara run? Dammit!"
They sneak into Jason's office so Stephanie can fix her makeup. She'd teared up just enough to smear her mascara. Mission accomplished, they head back out into the chaos.

It's pretty easy to spot who Stephanie was talking about. The man in question is huge and easily dwarfs Tim, who's on the other side of the bar and talking animatedly with him. Jason can't see Tam, but there's a cute blonde woman tucked under one of his massive arms. His suspicion grows as he remembers more about someone Tim's told him about, someone very important to the new Drake Industries.

Tim spots Jason and Steph and waves an arm, gesturing for them to come over. It's easier than shouting over the din of the overly packed room. Jason shoves his way through the crowd and ducks under the bar, Stephanie trailing after. As he gets closer to Tim, he finally spots Tam on the other side of the man.

Grinning, Tim grabs Jason's arm to drag him closer. "Jay, I want to introduce you to Dr. Victor Stone. This is his wife, Sarah, who somehow manages to put up with all three of us. You remember me talking about Vic, right? Sarah's a physical therapist who specializes in helping people with prosthetics."

Victor grins broadly at Jason and holds out a beefy hand. "Nice ta meetcha finally, Jason! Heard a lot about you."

Jason returns the firm handshake. The man has a strong grip, but isn't trying to overpower him like so many men do when sizing each other up. "Likewise," he returns. "Picked a hell of a night to come out!" It's so loud they have to shout.
"Yeah, well, when Tam said she was heading over here on her own after dinner, we decided to tag along! Heard you make some mean fried pickles, man!"
"You're about 30 minutes too late for those. Have to come back another night!"
"Yeah, that's what the boss-man said."
While Jason and Victor are talking, he notices Stephanie slip around behind him and Tim to start talking to Tam. He's glad to see it.

Sarah holds out her hand to Jason and he shakes it as well. "Just how often do you have to put up with these guys?"
"Too often!" she shouts in reply. "All their little brainstorming sessions always seem to be done in my living room!" It's said with a fond smile though and she playfully elbows her husband in the side.
"You be nice, little lady, or you're walkin' home!"
"I'll sic Tim on you if you even think about it!" Sarah responds with a grin.
Jason can see they're teasing each other like the old married couple they're behaving like. He grins at Tim and leans down so he can speak directly into his ear without shouting. "Okay, I like them. Invite them here some night when I can actually hear myself think. Tam too."
"You got it," Tim replies and plants a quick kiss on Jason's cheek. "Make sure Steph's invited. Tam dressed up pretty just for her tonight."

At that, Jason turns his attention to Tam and his eyes widen. She really had gone all out. Gone were the business suits and skirts he was used to seeing. In their place was a beautiful red scoop necked sweater that wouldn't look out of place on Kori. It hid everything, yet left nothing to the imagination. Her black hair was down and framing her face and her lips were some shade of red that complimented the sweater rather than trying to compete with it. Knowing what he knew of Tam as well, it would not surprise him if she's wearing her usual killer heels. No wonder Vic's standing as close as he is to her too. Tam's smokin' hot tonight. Come on, Steph, reel her in!
"Damn, she looks hot," Jason mutters.
Tim gives him a dirty look. "That's my assistant...former assistant you're talking about there."
"Whatever, I can still appreciate a fine looking rack. And she's got one." He feels an elbow in his side as Tim gives him a sharp jab. "What?" Jason asks defensively. "Pan, remember?"

Tim chuckles and shakes his head. "I remember. Just do me a favor and try to be a bit more subtle with your staring when it's someone I know, okay?"
"So when it's not someone you know, I can stare all I want?"
The warring expression of disgust and amusement on Tim's face has Jason laughing hard, even as Roy shoves into him and tells him to stop slacking off and get to work.
*****

The crowd starts to settle down a bit once the official countdown to midnight starts. Everyone's watching the TVs, all turned to the broadcast from New York and Times Square, waiting for that ball to drop. Tim is behind the bar with Jason, arm wrapped around his waist as he counts down under his breath. Roy and Kori are together at the other end of the bar. Somewhere in the crowd are Tam and Stephanie, as well as Victor and Sarah.

Jason's happy. Tired, but happy. As his gaze sweeps the room, he feels almost...content. Complete. Certainly not a feeling I ever thought I'd feel. And it's all thanks to this man standing here beside me. I don't know exactly what it is we have, but goddammit, I'm going to fight for it because no one has ever made me feel this way before.

The countdown reaches the final 10 seconds and the crowd starts counting down.
" 10 !"
Tim squeezes Jason's waist tighter and turns to face him, a small smile dancing on his lips. His hair's pulled back in that messy half ponytail Jason loves and he's wearing his contacts tonight, revealing those bright blue eyes that drive Jason insane.
"9!"
Jason grins and raises a hand to cup Tim's face.

Tim's smile grows bigger.
"7!"
Jason rubs a thumb lightly over Tim's lips.
"6!"
Tim rises up on his toes just a bit to narrow the distance between them.
" 5 !"
"It's not New Year's yet, rich boy."
"4!"
"Close enough."
"3!"
Jason leans in and hovers just above Tim's lips, so close he can feel Tim's warm breath.
"2!"
"It is now."
"1! Happy New Year!!"
Jason closes the small space between them, capturing Tim's lips and closing his eyes, losing himself momentarily in his boyfriend's embrace while the crowd around them roars and cheers in celebration of the New Year.

He parts from Tim's mouth long enough to whisper in his ear. "Happy New Year, Tim."
"Happy New Year, Jason," Tim whispers back, and leans in for another scorching kiss.

## Chapter End Notes

And thus ends the first story arc! Yay! Any old old school Teen Titans readers out there who caught the cameo? ;)

On a suckier note, Milestones is going into a temporary hiatus for the next 4-6 weeks. Real life is kicking my ass right now (it's the busiest time of year at work currently and

OT is mandatory as of yesterday) so this nightowl can't keep up with a regular posting schedule to save her life. Chapter 10 is written though, and chapter 11 is mostly done, so I promise I won't keep you waiting forever. I prefer quality over crap and the next arc is well worth waiting for, promise. GoAwayOlivia was freaking out over it when I shared the outline with her (gasp, I wrote an outline for once!).

In the next arc, Damian starts making Jason's life a miserable living hell and crosses a line he never EVER should have crossed.

Until next time! :D

## Milestone Ten: The Invasion

## Chapter Notes

Milestones is back! Thank you all for your patience with me as I got this arc wrapped up. It's long, it's intricate, and has a ton of moving parts, so I hope you all enjoy as you sit back and strap in for the ride.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For the first week of the New Year, Jason's pretty sure Tim only goes home to get a change of clothes and to give him a few hours of space before returning to the bar each night. Even then, he's unobtrusive, tucking himself away in the back corner booth working on his laptop or tablet (or both as he sometimes has them both open and propped up where he can see them). He'll fill up a pitcher of water and get his own glass, sipping away all night.

He even brings Jason dinner, knowing that the man doesn't eat what he serves at the bar unless he's desperate. Jason doesn't mind. January nights are cold and the hot containers of pho and ramen that keep appearing for him are welcome.

But what's even more welcomed is what happens after the bar closes for the night and the two of them trudge up the four flights of stairs to Jason's loft. Some nights they shower together; some nights they don't and Tim will get Jason's evening tea ready while he rinses away the scent of beer and grease from the fryer. But they always end up together on the sofa, relaxing and paying only half a mind to what is playing on the TV as they talk.

Sex doesn't usually happen at night. It happens in the morning when they wake up, slow and lazy and languorous, neither of them in any rush to get off, and simply enjoying the slide of hands on sleep-warmed flesh and quiet gasps. It amuses Jason immensely that Tim's much more coherent in the morning if he has an orgasm before his morning coffee.

And so the first week passes.
The next week, Tim takes a trip to Central City for a few days to meet up with another of his closest friends. Jason misses him, but doesn't begrudge Tim the trip in the slightest. Bart Allen is someone he met online through some gaming website a long time ago and the two of them became great friends. Some of the stories Tim's told him about Bart and his best friend Conner Kent and their crazy adventures in California have had Jason rolling on the floor laughing hysterically.

Tim is trying to rope Conner (or Kon as they call him; why with a ' K ', Jason's not entirely sure) into coming to Gotham City for Super Bowl. He's pretty sure his friend is hooked. The man's a reporter and can't resist the lure of a good story.

It still amazes Jason that Tim has such normal sounding friends. Neither of them came from the same background as him, both are from solid, hard-working, middle class families. "Salt of the earth," Jason can just hear Mike saying if he were around to give his two cents worth. He supposes these guys are why Tim is able to pass himself off as one of the guys so much easier than the rest of his family (Dick doesn't count, he's his own brand of normal).

The week passes. Tim's been gone since Sunday morning. It's now Thursday afternoon and Jason is out on the loading dock freezing his balls off checking in inventory. For the last few weeks, all of his orders seem to be off in some way. What he was short on at New Year's, he now has in abundance, and the special orders he's requested for the upcoming Super Bowl weekend arrived this week rather than two weeks from now. The delivery driver is scratching his head, but Jason knows better than to yell at him. He's on the phone with his supplier bitching him out instead as he refuses to sign for something that's going to spoil in the weeks before the game.
"No, you listen to me, I have the order right here in front of me and it specifically says..." Jason yells into the phone and pauses to listen. "I did not submit an adjustment, what the hell are you talking about? I'm the only one here who does the ordering, so why the fuck would I want this two weeks early?"

As he paces around the dock, Jason notices Roy standing just outside the doorway leading into the building, holding the office phone. He arches an eyebrow at the man and moves his cell phone away from his mouth. "If it can wait, make it happen," he snaps sharply and returns his attention to the supplier.

In the end, Jason ends up agreeing to sign for half of the special order and his supplier agrees to contact him directly if he receives any adjustments to Jason's orders after he's submitted them. The driver looks relieved, which Jason can't blame him for. He's been swearing and cursing out the man's boss for the last 15 minutes after all.

Soon, the truck drives away and Jason glares at the boxes. What the fucking hell am I going to do with all this extra shit? We're all going to be eating chicken wings for the next fucking week. He closes the door to the loading dock and locks it, then starts loading up the dolly to bring everything inside.

It's not until he's in the kitchen with the last of the boxes that he remembers Roy and the phone call. Glaring at the boxes of chicken wings (he'd left those for last on purpose), Jason stalks into the main room. Roy's not there, but he sees boxes on the bar, meaning the man's probably in the storeroom. A moment later, he's proven correct when Roy comes out with his arms full.
"Sorry about earlier," Jason apologizes. "Finally got a hold of someone who knew his left nut from his right and figured out what's been going on with our orders."
"Don't worry about it, Jay. I could hear you shouting all the way from the kitchen. Tim could too by the time I got to the dock." Roy sets the boxes on the bar and ducks under it. Taking out his pocketknife, he starts opening them. "He called on the office phone figuring you wouldn't have your cell on you."

Jason runs a hand through his hair and lets out a huge sigh. "Fuck, I forgot I'm supposed to pick him up from the airport tonight."
"Yeah, well, we didn't. He said he'd text you the flight information. He was calling on the plane, so he's probably in the air by now."
"Shit." Feel like a fucking tool. Jason pulls out his phone and sees a text from Tim from about 30 minutes ago.
"So what's been happening with the orders?" Roy asks carefully. Jason doesn't miss the cautious way he's eying him.
"I'm submitting them, then a few hours after I do, a second, modified order is coming in. It's bullshit. I'm the only one doing the ordering and Kori pays the invoices. It doesn't fucking make sense. The bastard made me take half of the Super Bowl order that arrived today and promised that if they receive any modified orders from me in the future to call and confirm before processing it."

Roy's eyes widen in surprise. "Did he say how the orders are arriving? You've got a program on your computer that you plug everything into, right?"
"Yeah. You helped me install it. You know I'm shit when it comes to electronics."
"And yet, look who you're dating," Roy teases. "Go login and bring it up. I'll dig around and see if I can find anything."

Jason shrugs. "Sure, whatever."
Roy follows him back to the office. After logging in, Jason leaves and heads back to the kitchen to finish putting all the perishable food away. I'm gonna be giving wings away this weekend. Fuck me, but I am not going to be making all the crap I usually serve them with. Not that I have half the shit I need for it either. What the fuck is going on?

Finishing up, Jason heads back to the office to check on Roy. The broad shouldered ginger is typing away at the office computer, but his normally open face is pinched. It's enough to instantly put Jason on his guard. "Find something?" he asks roughly, leaning in the open doorway.

Green eyes meet his, tight and narrow with concern. "Jay...there's someone else in your computer."
"Yeah, you. What of it?"
Roy shakes his head, red hair falling across his forehead. "No, not like that. Someone else. As in, not you, not me, not anyone we know. I've only gotten as far as the supply program, but let's just say I really hope this is someone playing a prank on you and not something even worse."

Jason straightens up. "What kind of worse?"
"I think we've been hacked."
"What the fuck?!" Jason roars, arms waving wildly. "This is a small bar in the fucking Bowery. Who the hell would do this kind of shit to someone like me?"

Almost as soon as he says it, he snaps his mouth shut as a thought suddenly occurs to him. Damian ...is this something he can even do? He promised to make my life a living hell and this certainly is a good way to go about it. The little shit has no idea what he's getting himself into though. Bloody hell, where's Tim when I need him?
"Jason?" Roy asks, trying to get the bar owner's attention. "I have a couple things I can try to get this guy out, but it's probably better if we close for the night. At least until I can find out if the payment system's been compromised too."
"Fuck," Jason growls vehemently and runs a hand through his already messy black hair. "Shut it down. Shut it all down. I trust you, Roy, I really do, but if I'm right about who's doing this, we're going to need Tim's help."

Roy looks confused, but does as he's instructed, even going so far as to unplug the computer and the router. "What can Tim do that I can't?" he asks.

Jason shakes his head, in frustration, anger, he's not sure. "You have no idea."

It's already dark by the time Tim's plane lands. Jason's sitting in the cell phone lot in the Civic, waiting for a call or text from his boyfriend. He already knows the flight has landed thanks to the airline app Steph showed him how to use last weekend. Only a few days have passed since he dropped Tim off at the airport but it feels like a lifetime.

## What the hell am I going to tell him? He's going to think I'm nuts or being paranoid.

He drums his gloved fingers on the steering wheel. The heater is on but the car still feels cold in the freezing Gotham night. It's only a few minutes longer before his phone rings.

Jason swipes at the screen, scowls when nothing happens because of his gloves, and yanks one of them off just before the call goes to voicemail. "Hey," he manages to get in. "Fucking gloves."

Tim's laugh is warm and helps release some of the tension Jason's been carrying around all afternoon. "Hey, yourself. I'm just heading outside. Come rescue me before I freeze?"
"Since when are you a princess?" Jason turns the heat up higher in the car and backs out of his parking spot.
"Since I'm waiting for my handsome prince to pick me up."
Jason laughs as he pulls out of the parking lot. It's a welcome breath of fresh air, bantering with Tim. They had hardly spoken the last few days, communicating through text messages
for the most part. "Pretty sure your prince is from the wrong side of the tracks, rich boy. I'm more like Shrek."
"Yeah," Tim agrees. There's a sound of wind and cars coming from the phone, telling Jason that Tim's stepped outside. "But even he got the princess in the end."
"Then look what happened in Shrek 2."
"You've already met my family. The ones that matter like you just fine. I'll see you in a few minutes."

Jason hangs up and carefully finagles his glove back on as he drives. It's not long before he spots Tim standing at the curb and he pulls up, unlocking the doors as he does. Tim opens the back door first and throws his bags in, slams it shut, then quickly opens the passenger door and slides in. His face is red from the cold and, as usual, he's not wearing nearly enough layers.
"Hi," he says with a cheeky grin.
"Forget your coat?" Jason asks as he leans in.
Tim meets him halfway, lips brushing gently, but firmly against Jason's before he pulls back so Jason can drive. "It's in my bag. I didn't need it at all in Central and figured I'd only be outside for a few minutes at most here."
"Moron. How was your trip?" As Jason pulls away from the curb, Tim starts chattering about his friend Bart, Central City, and how he whooped Bart's ass in some game the two of them apparently spent the better part of the last three days playing together.

Man, I hate spoiling his good mood. He needed to get away and I'm glad he did, but now there's this fucking mess to deal with here.
"So, I miss anything fun and exciting around here?" Tim asks, finally pausing for a breath as he finishes his story.

Jason's hands tighten on the steering wheel and out of the corner of his eye, he catches Tim's eyes narrow as he takes in the movement. His mouth tightens before he replies. "There's a problem at the bar. I need your help in figuring it out."
"What kind of problem?" Tim cautiously asks.
"A computer problem. Roy says I've been hacked."
Tim sucks in a harsh breath. "No way."
"Yes way," Jason says sharply. "Normally I'd let Roy figure this shit out but I can't help but feel someone is trying to punk me."

Just like he knew he would, Tim gets the hint right away. "Damian doesn't have the skills to pull something like this off. He's pretty decent with computers and technology, he's a Wayne,
we all are, but he's not that good."
"I just need you to figure it out. Can you do that?" Jason asks tightly.
"Of course I can."
*****

Tim does figure it out. Fast too. And if the look on his face is any indication, he's pissed.
"Who has access to your computer system and network, besides Roy?" he asks later that evening. He's sitting behind Jason's desk and going through a screen on the monitor that is nothing but gibberish to Jason.
"Me and Kori for the most part. Steph does too but I don't think I've ever seen her back here aside from clocking in and out. And that's through her own profile that doesn't have access to the order system." Jason can't help but sound a bit defensive. These people are his family.
"And Roy set this all up?" Tim continues looking at the monitor, reading something in the mess of code.
"Yeah."
Tim gives Jason a troubled look. "Okay, I can see why you didn't let Roy do anything earlier." He hesitates a moment before continuing. "Someone has your login information. They're logging in remotely and have access to everything you've got on this computer. They're only making changes to your orders but..."

Jason finishes for him. "But they can also access payroll records and employee information." A wave of nausea rolls through him at the thought. I didn't even want to think about that earlier but now...goddammit!
"Yeah," Tim agrees. He sighs and glances back at the screen. "I can kick whoever this is out and make sure they can't get back in. Not that Roy didn't set up a good firewall for you, but who'd expect something like this to happen at a small bar?" He grimaces as he looks back at Jason. "But you're going to need to tell everyone about this. They need to check their credit reports, freeze them, notify their banks, everything. You too. I can't tell yet if their information was accessed at all, but better safe than sorry."

Jason sinks into the other office chair and buries his head in his hands. "Goddammit," he swears vehemently. "God fucking dammit!"
"I'll get started right away and see what I can find."
He waves a hand in acknowledgement. "Fuck."
"Jason," Tim says in a serious tone, making the bartender look up. "Whoever did this, I'll find them. And if Damian has anything to do with it, I'll come to you first and let you decide what you want to do. If you want me to go to Bruce, I will. If you want me to have him arrested I can make that happen too."
"You can do that?" Jason asks incredulously.
Tim nods. "If he accessed your employee files at all, yes. Anyone who's unauthorized to view personnel information and does can be charged with identity theft, even if they haven't done anything with the information."
"And if he just fucked up my orders?"
The look on Tim's face grows absolutely vicious. It's reminiscent of the smirk he wears when plotting something devious but there's an edge to it that Jason's never seen before. "Then I will make him understand exactly what I am capable of. There are lines you don't cross."
"And if this is someone else messing with me?"
"Then I'll make their life a miserable living hell. But if this is someone else, then I'd be even more concerned about ID theft. They'd have gone for those records rather than messing with your orders."
"Okay. I'll call everyone and get them in here tonight if I can." Jason gets up and pulls out his phone. He wants a bit of privacy for this.
"I should know more in about an hour."
"Okay," he says again. Before Jason leaves the office, he turns back to his hacker boyfriend. "Tim?"

The younger man looks up.
"Thank you."
Tim shakes his head. "Don't thank me. If it wasn't for me, this wouldn't be happening to you."
"Maybe, but you're still doing something about it."
*****

It's a somber group of people sitting in the booth at the back of the bar an hour later. Jason had called Kori and told her she and Roy needed to come to the bar ASAP for an emergency meeting and asked if she'd pick up Stephanie on her way. It wasn't a total surprise to her as Roy had already told her what was going on when he went home earlier. He then called Steph.

Each person reacts differently to the news.
Kori looks absolutely livid, her green eyes snapping with an inner fire that she only gets when something's truly upset her.

Stephanie looks like she's about to cry.

Roy looks like someone has slapped him in the face. Jason can't blame him. It's his system that got hacked after all.
"Jay, why Tim? Why have him look and not me?" Roy asks.
Trust Roy to read between the lines. He knows me too well. "Because I pissed off the wrong person. And if I'm right about who's behind this, then I'd need to go to Tim anyways." Jason leans forward and rests his elbows on the table, resting his head in his hands for a moment before looking at his friends. My family. "I'm sorry," he says. "This is my fault for not being able to keep my fucking mouth shut when I need to."
"Jason," Stephanie says quietly. She's sitting next to him in the booth. It kills him to see the normally bubbly blonde so subdued. "Do you know who did this?"
"Not yet, but Tim's working on it."
Roy perks up at that. He's sitting across from Jason. "He's here?"
"In the office."
The ginger haired man springs up out of the booth and books it for the hallway leading to the office.

Kori looks about ready to follow but she settles back into the booth instead. "If you're having Tim investigate rather than Roy, is it safe to assume it's someone he knows?" She's not the only one who can read between the lines tonight.
"Very likely."
Stephanie lets out a whine. "Then why are they doing this to $u s$ ? You piss off a lot of people, Jason, but their beef is always with you. Why drag us into it this time?"

The words hit Jason like a blow to the head. He feels dazed and all he can do is sit there and take it.
"Shit." Steph seems to realize what she's just said. "Jay, I'm sorry, I didn't mean that."
"No, you're completely justified in saying that," Jason says and leans back in the booth. "I'm the one who pissed off that little fucker so I'm the one at fault."

They sit in silence. It's not long before Roy comes back out, looking a bit wild about the eyes. He takes a seat next to Kori and pulls her into a loose hug, arm draped easily over her shoulders.

Jason doesn't say anything so Kori asks instead. "Has Tim found anything yet?"
Roy shakes his head. "Just that the only employee file to be accessed anytime recently is Jason's. The rest of ours haven't been touched for over a month."

Steph slumps against Jason in relief and he can't help but pull her in close for the hug she desperately needs. "Thank god," she mutters but then looks over at Roy. "Does that mean Jason's been...?"
"Compromised? Yeah, it does."
"I'd rather it was just me than all of you."
"Fuck that, Jay, you damned martyr," Roy all but snaps. "Out of all of us, you've got the most riding on your credit. This business for one, then the rest of this building. What's going to happen if your credit is shot and you need a new loan, huh?"

Jason opens his mouth to retort but closes it just as quickly. Roy's right and he knows it.
"So why exactly does this all mean?" Stephanie asks. "I mean, I hear stories about data breaches and companies being hacked on the news, but what happens when it's a person?"

Kori's the one to respond. "It means that your personal information, like your Social Security number, bank account number, and other non-public information, is out there for use by whoever has taken it. They can open accounts in your name, run up the bills, then never pay them. These missing payments, as well as maxed out cards, can ruin your credit score and thus your ability to get a loan, open a credit card, or bank account when you legitimately do so."
"What does Jason need to do to report this or check his score?"
Jason perks up a bit at Steph's question, as it's something he's been wondering about too.
Kori continues. "He needs to call the major credit reporting bureaus. There are three in the US. They can place a freeze on his credit and send him a copy of his report. It'll have his bank accounts, any loans, mortgages, credit cards, etc. If there's something on there that doesn't belong, then he needs to report that as the fraudulent account."

Steph squirms her way out from under Jason's arm to dig into her purse and get her phone out. She pulls up a search page and starts typing furiously. "Jay, give me your phone. You suck at adding contacts so I'll add these for you."

Jason wordlessly pulls his cell from his pocket, unlocks the screen, and hands it to the blonde woman. Across the table, Roy snickers.
"Send me those numbers too, Steph," Kori requests. "Even if Roy and I weren't compromised, I'm still going to place a freeze on our credit and go over our reports just in case."
"You can place a freeze even when something hasn't happened?" Steph asks as she starts typing in Jason's phone.
"Yes," Kori replies.
"Cool. I'll do the same. I can pull my reports online?"
"That's right. Or have them mailed to you."
"Online is faster. I'll do the same and show them to you if that's all right. I don't know how to read them."
"They're pretty straightforward, but I don't mind at all," Kori says soothingly. "Jason, we'll do the same for your SSN and pull them for the bar's TIN and the building's as well."

Steph glances over at Jason. "That's right, you file three different tax returns."
"How do you know that?" Jason asks incredulously.
"You bitch about it every year."
"She's got you there, Jaybird!" Roy laughs.
Tim chooses that moment to poke his head out from the hallway. "Jay? You got a moment?"
Jason takes a deep breath and lets it out. Everyone's gone silent. "Yeah," he replies and slides out of the booth. Before he goes to Tim though, he pauses and asks, "How much of what you've found out can you say in front of these guys? This shit is impacting all of us and they deserve to know what's going on."

He knows he's putting Tim between a rock and a hard place but he doesn't care at the moment. Tim may be his boyfriend, but the people behind him are his family.

A thoughtful look appears on Tim's face before his usual crooked smile replaces it. "I'm comfortable with all of it," he replies and walks across the room, tablet in hand. Jason sits back down and Tim drags one of the high top chairs over and takes a seat at the end of the table. He looks slightly ludicrous sitting higher than the table but he leans back and rests his converse covered feet at the edge of the table and props his tablet against his thighs. "Sorry, I normally have better manners than this," he comments.
"Considering the shit that's hit the fan tonight, I don't think any of us are going to judge you," Roy says with a chuckle. "So who hacked Jason?"
"An annoying local hacker who thinks he's out to save the world, but instead does just about anything for the right price and right provocation." Tim sounds disgusted. "His handle is Anarky but his real name is Lonnie Machin."

The names mean nothing to Jason but across from him, Roy nods. "I've seen that name before. Never took him all that seriously."
"Yeah, neither have I," Tim agrees. "Which is why I think someone hired him to mess with Jason. Lonnie thinks he's big time, but he's really not. He's good enough to be annoying and cause trouble."
"Who hired him?" Jason asks quietly. It's the one question he wants answered.

Tim looks uncomfortable. "I'm not sure yet. I need my setup at home to get through Lonnie's firewalls. I do know how he's editing your supply orders though. He's been in your network for about six weeks now. He installed a worm in your supply program that sends him an alert each time you send a new order out. He logs in a few hours later and sends an edited order."
"I take it the worm is gone now?" Roy asks, but he's giving Jason a worried look.
"Yes."
"Jay, can I have a word with you? Privately?" The redhead looks very concerned now.
Tim picks up on it and gives Jason a wry glance before responding to Roy. "If it helps, my handle is Redbird. I'm not as active as I used to be, but I still know what I'm doing."

Roy's eyes widen in shock. "Holy shit! You've got to be fucking kidding me!"
Kori and Stephanie look confused and Jason's not ashamed to admit this conversation is going over his head too. "Care to explain to the rest of the class?" he asks sarcastically.
"Redbird is one of the best hackers in the world! He was really making some waves a number of years ago, along with someone named Oracle. Both have been kinda quiet for the last few years though, so I thought they'd retired." Roy sounds impressed and in awe.
"Would those be good waves?" Kori asks warily.
"Yeah! They took down most of the mobs on the East coast, not to mention half the Gotham City Council on corruption charges. Talk online was that they were FBI or NSA or something."

Jason smirks at Tim. "Figured out a more adult name when you got older?"
"Of course." Tim sounds proud of himself.
"Jay!" Roy sounds surprised. "You knew?"
"Only for a few weeks. It...kinda came up as part of another discussion I'm not gonna rehash with anyone." No need to relive those memories more than he has to.

Roy is gazing at Tim like he's just met God. "Wow. Seriously man, I feel like I'm meeting royalty or something."
"I'm still the same guy as before," Tim tries to deflect.
"Yeah, but now I know just how far I can take our conversations. I knew you were good but now..."
"Can we get off tangent so Roy can stop fanboying over Tim?" Steph interrupts, sounding impatient. "We get that Tim's a badass and uses his powers for good. So how soon can he put the smackdown on this Lonnie guy and find out who's really after Jason?"
"As soon as I get home." Tim gazes at each of them in turn. "Before I go, I want to make one thing clear. None of this goes further than this table, got it? I have connections to the FBI and the GCPD to get this taken care of. No one needs to do anything other than call the credit bureaus for a freeze on their credit and request a report. Is that clear?" His voice has taken on an assertive quality, one that expects to be obeyed.

Everyone nods.
"Okay. Jason, I removed your office computer from the network and turned it off completely. Leave it off until I come back or call Roy with instructions on what to do." Roy nods eagerly at that, obviously pleased at the chance to work with Tim. "I shouldn't be more than a day."
"If the computer is down, we won't be able to process electronic payments," Kori comments to Jason. "Should we go cash only for a day or two or close?"

Jason bites his lip as he thinks. Thursday night is already gone but Friday night is usually a decent night. Plus, I have all those chicken wings to get rid of...but at the same time, that's a lot of cash for a small place like this to have on hand. "We'll close tomorrow and play it by ear on Saturday. If Tim can get us back up, I'll let all of you know."
"I'll do my best," Tim promises.
"All right, then that's that. Before everyone leaves, take a bag of fucking chicken wings. If we open this weekend, I want them gone by Monday even if we have to give them away at the end of the night."

Ten minutes later, Jason and Tim are alone. All the lights are off save for the overhead lights behind the bar, reflecting off the different bottles on the shelves. Tim has his jacket on and his messenger bag is hanging from his shoulder. He'd left his bags in the backseat of his car. The original plan for the night was to have Jason stay over at the brownstone while Roy closed for him but he'd been so focused on what was going on he completely forgot to pack an overnight bag.

Now he isn't even sure if he should leave. Everything that's mine has been violated. I feel like I need to be here even though I know there's absolutely nothing I can do to protect it. I have to trust Tim to do it for me. Fists and brawn aren't going to solve this problem; it's brains and skills I don't have.
"I feel absolutely worthless right now," he admits to Tim. "This shit is so over my head, I don't think my feet have even hit the bottom yet."

Tim wraps his arms around Jason's waist, pulling him close and rests his chin on his shoulder. "I'm not going to let you drown. I've got you. And if you want to stay here tonight, I get it. There's not a lot you can do for me at home besides keep my coffee mug full."

Jason snorts in amusement and breathes in the scent of Tim's hair. "That's still more than I can do here."
"Then go get a change of clothes at least, and your tea, then let's go. We'll need to stop by the store on the way home to get a few things as my fridge is empty."
"Since when is that news? The only time I ever see you eat is here."

## Chapter End Notes

Chibinightowl's comments on real life: ID theft is REAL. It can happen to ANYONE at ANY AGE, even little kids who won't discover their personal data's been shot to hell until years later when they open their first bank account as teenagers. I'm not sure how it works in other countries, but in the US, the three major credit bureaus are Experian, TransUnion, and Equifax. As a consumer, you are entitled to ONE free credit report from each agency per year BY LAW. You can stagger these reports so that you get them every four months or so. Just by being aware of what is going on with your credit, you can save yourself so much time and hassle later on in case something does happen.

Free credit reports: https://www.annualcreditreport.com
ID Theft Recovery: https://www.identitytheft.gov/Steps

# Milestone Eleven: Discoveries 

## Chapter Notes

As always, thanks to GoAwayOlivia for her beta work!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jason stares blankly at Tim's kitchen counters. He's at that point of exhaustion where a nervous, almost twitchy kind of energy has set in; his adrenaline kicking in for one last ditch effort to keep him going. He sighs hard and runs a hand through his hair for the umpteenth time tonight.

Jesus Christ, I sure got myself into a good one this time. I hope to God Damian's the one behind all this because I want to punch that little fucker and break his perfect nose. Maybe bruise a few ribs. Anything to wipe that smug look of superiority off his fucking face. God, that's what makes Tim's suggestion about going to the police with this so appealing. If he can get Bruce to not try and buy my silence, the little shit could get some serious jail time if he's actually used my information to open something without my knowing.

Wouldn't that be the headline? Wayne Heir Arrested for Identity Fraud...
Serve the little fucker right.
He starts moving, practically on autopilot at this point, as he preheats the oven to bake some wings. Tim doesn't have a fryer and Jason's too tired to deal with hot oil in a pan. He carefully coats each piece of meat in the marinade he prepared, wishing it had more time to develop, but at the same time, not caring because Tim will eat whatever is placed in front of him.

Tim's already ensconced at his desk upstairs, coffee in hand. He'd picked up a cup while they were at the store. When Jason originally saw what passed for Tim's home office several weeks ago, he'd assumed it was for work and online gaming. Three huge monitors angled just right created a little cave for Tim, though the effect was somewhat broken by the soft backlights placed behind each screen. He'd mumbled something about helping to prevent eyestrain when Jason asked about it.

The wings are soon baking and Jason washes up from that mess before starting on the dipping sauce. He likes a bit of heat with his wings, flavorful heat that doesn't burn for the sake of burning out his palette. But for the sauce, he prefers something a bit cooler that still compliments the heat of the wings. He's more pleased with the sauce as he seals the bowl and places it in Tim's empty fridge. He hadn't been kidding about it being empty.

Just how much does Tim spend on takeout each week when he actually remembers to eat? I'm sure it's a drop in the bucket for his bank account, but that can't be healthy. He can cook
when he wants to; I've seen enough to know he's not entirely incompetent in the kitchen. Considering how much time he's spent at the bar and my loft recently though, I guess it makes sense he's got nothing here. I've been feeding him or he's running out to get me something.

Jason knows he's trying to distract himself from what's happened and it's working to an extent. Cooking or fighting. And since he's pretty sure Tim doesn't have a punching bag, cooking it is. He leans on the counter and spaces out, possibly even dozes, and doesn't come out of it until the timer on the oven breaks the silence with a beep.

He finds a hot pad and takes the chicken out. A few minutes later, the bagged salad they bought is also ready, and a little rummaging around reveals a platter that Jason knows is there courtesy of Alfred. He heads upstairs with their late dinner. Balanced nutrition my ass but at least there's something green.

Upstairs, Tim is reading something on one of the big monitors, his glasses perched on the end of his nose as he gazes over the rims. He's frowning slightly but leans back in his massive chair and smiles when Jason sets the tray down on an end table by the desk. "Good news," he says, looking a bit smug. "I'm almost in. Not much longer now."

Jason can't help the sigh of relief that escapes and his shoulders slump as pent up tension suddenly releases. He trusts Tim with this, he really does, but hearing the confirmation helps. This is so far over my head... "That's great. Just great," he says but it's far from enthusiastic. Finding what this Lonnie guy has is just the beginning and they both know it.

Tim gets up and picks up the tray and walks it over to his coffee table. Taking a seat on the sofa, he pats the cushion next to him, inviting Jason to sit. He does but casts a curious look at the computer. "Don't you need to be doing something there?"
"I've got a program running. It'll chime when I'm needed," Tim replies around a mouthful of chicken. "These are really good, by the way."
"You say that about everything I make." Jason starts picking at his food, still not hungry. He'll eat all of it eventually. Nothing ever goes to waste with him.
"I'll eat anything," Tim agrees, licking sauce from the corner of his mouth. "But if you ever do make something I don't like, I'll let you know."

They eat in silence, at least Jason does. Tim makes comments here and there, trying to lure him into some sort of conversation but all Jason does is mumble in response. The food is soon gone and when Jason tries to get up and gather the plates, he's stopped by Tim plopping himself down in his lap.
"Hey," he says quietly, running a hand through Jason's messy hair. "It's going to be all right. I'm going to fix this."

Jason turns his dull gaze on Tim. He's beyond tired. Fucking drained. "Yeah and then Bruce is going to throw his money at me again to get me to shut my mouth and keep it shut."

Tim scowls at that. "Only if you let him. I have other plans for Damian. Want to hear them?"
Jason perks up. "Hell yes."
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It's almost an hour later that the computer chimes to alert them that Tim is needed. Jason's feeling a lot better about things now that Tim's outlined his plan. There were a number of different variables, some of which depend on decisions he has to make, but the biggest variable of them all is whether or not Damian is behind this mess in the first place.

However, there's a niggling doubt in Jason's mind about whether this is a good idea after all.
The not-so-former hacker is laser focused on the screens in front of him, fingers flying across the keyboard in a complex dance that brings him one step closer. Somewhere over the course of the last couple hours, he's rolled up the sleeves of the oversized red plaid shirt he's sporting from his flight and has shoved up the sleeves from the long sleeved shirt he wore beneath it. Black hair still in desperate need of a haircut has escaped his ponytail and frames his face, a long fingered hand periodically brushing it aside. Jason's never understood the hot nerd thing before but he gets it now. The complexity of everything is beyond his comprehension but he's got to admit, there's something incredibly appealing about watching Tim get his nerd on. And hot. The mind of this man is simply amazing. If he didn't need to concentrate I'd try and crawl under that desk to blow him. Heh, maybe I will when he's done.

A victorious grin appears on Tim's face as he enters one last command. "I'm in."
"Wow," Jason comments as he drags over a chair and flips it around to sit in it backwards. He found the folding chair earlier when searching through the closets downstairs. "So this guy has no idea you're even in here?"
"Nope." Tim starts clicking around. "Part of what took so long. I need to find what Lonnie's got and see what he's done with it. Lots of people get their information compromised but nothing ever happens. But if he's sent it on to someone then I need to find them."
"And so on and so forth," Jason mutters, not happy at the thought of a delay.
"God, I hope Damian's behind all this," Tim says as he opens and closes different files. "It'll save us so much time and effort if it is."
"Not to mention you want to hang the little fucker out to dry. That is one nasty little plan you have for him if it is."
"The best part is, it's all completely legal too," Tim replies smugly. "But let's not get ahead of ourselves here. Ah, here we are." Tim opens a file and stays there. "Interesting file name. Gremlin. Makes me wonder if that's a nickname for Lonnie's employer."

Jason snickers at the thought.
Tim does his thing, checking each item in the folder carefully as he determines when they were added and last accessed. "The good thing is that it looks like most of this hasn't been
viewed since he downloaded it. I'll need to check his email and downloads though to see if he sent it anywhere. Whoa, what are these?" The mouse stops over a new sub folder titled Movies. "Shit." Tim looks over at Jason. "Your monitor at the bar has a built in camera, right?"
"Yeah, I think so." Jason thinks for a moment. "Never used it before. Roy picked out everything back there."
"It's entirely possible Lonnie may have been recording what's been going on in the office for the last several weeks. Maybe not all the time, but off and on."

It suddenly occurs to Jason what Tim is getting at. "Fuck. Did he get a fucking sex tape of us?" Oh shit. This isn't all that bad for me, but for Tim? Christ have mercy, this could be a disaster for him.
"Only one way to find out." Tim opens the folder.
To both of their surprise, there's more than one recording. Each one is labeled with some letters and a date. "RR 12/22. That's the night of the gala," Jason comments. "What does RR stand for?"
"A few of them are labeled like that." Tim opens the file in question.
A breathy moan echoes through the speakers that Jason recognizes instantly. The angle isn't the best, but it's pretty obvious who's fucking who. Kori's jeans are down as she leans over the top of the desk, shirt and bra long gone while Roy stands behind her and rocks back and forth, in and out of his fiancée's warm, wet heat, one that Jason knows all too well.

Tim stops the recording instantly and closes the file when he realizes it too. "RR must be Red and Red, what do you think?" he tries to ask casually, but his eyes are wide and there's a bit of pink to his cheeks that wasn't there a moment ago.

Jason laughs heartily. He can't help it, this amusing as hell. "I don't think, I know. And now I want to smack the shit outta Roy for teasing me about having sex in my own office." He wisely keeps his mouth shut about the time he, Kori, and Roy had gone at it together in the small space. They'd just finished building the new desk and Roy suggested they christen it. $I$ really need to tell Tim at some point about our occasional threesomes.

Tim shakes his head but points out another file. "JT 12/30. Pretty sure this is us."
"Should we watch it?"
"Gotta admit, I'm kind of curious. I've never watched myself have sex before."
"Neither have I. And I'll admit that's one of the few things I haven't done. Let's do it." Jason grins as Tim shakes his head and opens the file.

The video starts as Tim takes a seat across from Jason in his office. He's not on the screen, the computer monitor is angled towards the bar owner, but his voice is clear as day. They
listen to their entire conversation, and then the onscreen Jason pats his thigh and Tim finally comes into view as he takes a seat on Jason's lap.

They watch bemused as things escalate quickly and most of Tim's clothes go flying. His head is lost to the other side of the desk when Jason lays him back but there's a fantastic view of his cock and Jason deep-throating it. It evolves from there to Tim prepping himself with a few lubed fingers and Jason scrambling for a condom.
"You know, if this was edited just right, no one would have any idea that's even me," Tim says clinically as the onscreen version of him lets out a guttural moan as Jason thrusts into him.

Jason gives him an incredulous look. He's been so focused on the video he almost forgot what they were doing in the first place. "You've gotta be kidding me."

Tim grins teasingly. "I want to keep this, if that's all right with you. I'll delete the others."
"Hell yes you're keeping this one. But as awesome as I am in the sack, porn star material I'm not, so this'll be the only one, got it?" Jason shakes his head at that. Not to mention that's essentially getting paid to have sex, which is something I've sworn I will NEVER do again.
"I will argue that to my dying day," Tim replies as he looks back at the monitor. "I mean seriously, look at you. All you did was take off your shirt and I turned into a gibbering mess."
"My shirt is staying on until you get this shit taken care of tonight."
"Promises, promises." On screen, Jason's pulled Tim up and off the desk and taken a seat in his office chair, Tim scrambling in his lap for a moment before riding Jason's cock like it's the last thing he's ever going to do. "Wow," Tim comments as he takes in the sight. "Okay, that's a really good view."

Jason watches his dick slide in and out of Tim's ass and has to agree. "Definitely saving this."
Tim's fingers start typing wildly over the keyboard again and different boxes start popping up on the different monitors, though the video on the main monitor still plays with an unobstructed view. "There has to be another worm or something on your office computer that turns on the camera when it senses motion. That, or he has a $24 / 7$ feed and checks it every day for anything good."
"Obviously we're dealing with someone with a puerile mind," Jason comments derisively. "All he's kept are the sex clips he's caught."
"There's way too much sex going on in that office. Three for Roy and Kori, one for us. And that's all within a five week period." Tim glances back to the video that's still playing. The onscreen him is moaning loudly. "Man, do I really sound like that? It's like a bad porno."
"You're about to come," Jason remembers. "You always get noisy when you're really close and I'm doing a good job." He can't help but sound smug. I did do a good job that night. And
"I have no complaints, but I'll admit to not remembering much of this part. I think you were hitting my prostate so hard I was getting orgasm stupid." Tim does something and the audio drops down a few notches before he turns his attention back to another monitor.

Jason tries to follow what Tim's doing, but gives up and turns his attention back to the video. Puerile mind indeed, I'm doing the same thing Lonnie probably did. Though if that guy's straight, he probably had more fun with Roy and Kori than with Tim and me. I wonder if he's realized just who it is that's in my office with me? If this recording gets in the wrong hands, Tim is screwed, and not in the fun way. Who's going to want to invest in a company when the young CEO has a sex tape on the internet?
"Okay, I must be the luckiest son of a bitch alive right now," Tim says, interrupting Jason's thoughts. "It doesn't look like Lonnie's done anything with the recordings yet. He's watched Roy and Kori more than a few times, but ours was only accessed once after he created the file."
"He has to know that's you," Jason reasons. "You were talking about your last day and evading the paparazzi before we started messing around. So why hasn't he done anything with it?"
"I don't know and that makes me nervous. But I now have the only copy, so he has no proof; buh-bye blackmail material. I'm back-tracing the worm Lonnie's using to your computer so I can destroy it. I'll have to wipe your computer completely and reimage it tomorrow. Today. What time is it?" Tim's face crinkles in confusion for a moment and his fingers pause on the keyboard.

Jason checks his watch. "After one."
"That's all? Huh, feels later." Tim goes back to work. On the screen, the video has finally stopped, the screen frozen with Jason and Tim cuddling in the chair, basking in the afterglow.

Feeling a bit useless again, Jason gets up and walks around the wide-open room, picking up dishes and empty coffee mugs. The one on Tim's desk, he knows better than to touch unless he's bringing more coffee. He goes downstairs and starts the dishes for something to do. Christ, those recordings...neither of us were expecting those, that's for damn sure. I wonder what else Tim's going to find?
$* * * * *$

A couple hours later, Jason decides he's done playing housekeeper. The main level of the brownstone is spotless and he's finished all of Tim's laundry. He's passed through the second floor a few times but Tim was still absorbed in his work. He finishes folding the last of the laundry and picks up the basket. Walking upstairs, he checks on Tim again and isn't surprised to see him nodding off over the keyboard.

I wonder how long he's been awake for? He was telling me before he left that he and Bart were notorious for pulling all-night gaming sessions. Setting the basket down on the sofa,

Jason walks over to the desk and gives his boyfriend a nudge.
Tim jerks awake with a splutter. "Wah? Oh. Hi," he finishes dully as he blinks himself awake.
Jason shakes his head. "I think you need to find a stopping point, Tim. You're drooling into the keyboard."
"Wouldn't be the first time," the younger man mutters back. "And I am. At a stopping point. I'm running a trace for an email address that Lonnie sent some of your information to. I find the owner of that, we'll be good."
"Okay." Jason nods firmly. This part he understands. "Do you need to be up for this or can I drag you off to bed? It's after three and I'm pretty sure you've had a longer day than me."

## Maybe not as emotionally draining, but long.

"I can stop here. I've already gotten everything from Lonnie's network that I need. Left a nasty little surprise in place of his illicitly obtained porn too." Tim does something on the keyboard and his screens go dark.
"Good. Now let's go. Shower, then bed."
Tim stumbles as he gets up, so Jason helps him up the stairs and into his bedroom. Leading him to the bathroom, he turns on the shower and checks the water as he's still not too familiar with the way the knobs work. When he turns around, Tim's managed to take his glasses off and get out of his plaid over-shirt. He's fumbling with the buckle on his belt.
"Need a hand, rich boy?" he asks.
A jaw-breaking yawn is his answer and Tim blinks sleepy blue eyes at him. "Take that as a yes." Jason gets Tim stripped down and divests himself of his clothes as well before he steps into the shower, pulling Tim after him.

The younger man seems to be asleep on his feet and just stands there under the warm spray, so Jason gets him washed up before switching places with him and rinsing off. It doesn't escape his attention that Tim's eyes are open just enough to stare at his chest. Even half asleep, he has a fixation on my piercings.

He smirks. "I'm not even sure you're capable of coherent thought right now, Timmy. You can play in the morning."
"S'morning already," he slurs, but doesn't make a move from where he's leaning against the cool tile at the back of the shower.
"Later in the morning. Or whenever you wake up on your own."
"Need alarm."
Jason frowns. He really wants Tim to get some rest, but he's got no idea what his boyfriend is running downstairs. "Five hours?"

Tim nods jerkily, his head bobbing deeper than usual.
Soon enough, Jason has Tim in some clean pajamas and the two of them are under the covers of Tim's still surprisingly large bed. It shouldn't amaze him at this point anymore that the shorter man likes his space; he has a tendency to sprawl unless he's cold, then he'll snuggle in close and cling tightly.

Tim's out cold before his head even hits the pillow. Jason sets the alarm on his phone and turns off the lights before settling in next to him.

Sleep is harder to come by for him as his thoughts swirl in every direction, mentally making a list of what he has to do in the morning while Tim works. But more importantly, he wonders why Tim is so willing to drive that final wedge between himself and Bruce. Another confrontation is coming, he knows it. He glances down at the young man sleeping in his arms.

He's putting himself out there for me because he cares. I get that. But he loves his family and what he is ultimately forcing Bruce to choose is one son over the other. What Damian's done to me is illegal in so many ways and he can go away for a long time for it...If I choose to press charges. Fuck. Tim has so much riding on his shoulders right now. And that video... Christ, if that ever comes out, I don't know what he'll do. He's not ashamed of me, of himself, but he lives and breaths a world where something like this could destroy his dreams before they even have a chance to get off the ground.

I won't let him give up his dream for me. We'll figure it out...even if I have to push him away to do it.

## Chapter End Notes

Oh Jason...such a drama queen.

# Milestone Twelve: A Course of Action is Decided 

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jason sits downstairs at Tim's rarely used dining room table and stares blankly at the screen in front of him. Tim had given him the laptop and pulled up what he needed before going back to his second floor office (with coffee mug in hand) to get back to tracking down the email address Lonnie's been sending things to. A legal pad, a pen, his phone, and a cup of tea are arranged around it.

## Time to put on the big boy pants, Jaybird. You've got a job to do and people to protect.

Taking a deep breath, Jason picks up his phone and pulls up the first of the credit bureaus phone numbers Stephanie had programed into his phone the night before.

The menu's pretty straightforward for once, at least for what he needs. A polite voice finally answers.
"Hi, yeah...My name is Jason Todd and I'm pretty certain my identity has been stolen..."

It takes him almost two hours on that call alone. The first call was the longest as the person helped him pull up his credit reports online for his SSN and the tax reporting IDs for his two businesses. They went over them, item by item, for irregularities. It was only on his own SSN that they found three credit cards in his name that Jason has no recollection of ever opening. All three had been opened in the last five weeks and were just getting to the point where a payment was due, so they hadn't had much of a negative impact on his credit score yet.
"I only have one card I use on a regular basis and that's the one ending in..." Jason rattles off the number from the card he's withdrawn from his wallet.

The person he's speaking with, a very nice lady who said her name was Bethany, gives him the phone numbers to the card companies that the new cards were issued through. "They'll have to place a freeze or block on those cards," she explains. "I've got the fraud alert on your credit report here and I'll be sending this to the two other bureaus so you won't have to call them. You'll need to go to www.identitytheft.gov to get started with your Identity Theft Report and the recovery plan. The site is pretty straightforward for a government website; it even has a checklist for everything you'll need to do next."

Jason heaves a huge sigh. He's got a headache of epic proportions, but speaking with a person who knows what the hell is going on and how to fix it is keeping his nerves from completely shattering. "Thank you so much for your help, Bethany. You have no idea how much I appreciate it."
"You're welcome, Jason. Good luck with everything."
"Thanks, I'm sure I'll need it."
Hanging up his phone, he looks at the notes in front of him, then glances back at the screen with the three new credit cards that were opened in his name.

Fuck this, it can wait ten minutes. I need to piss.
He gets up and stretches, then, after he relieves himself, heads upstairs to check on Tim. Other than his occasional forays down to the kitchen to refill his mug, Jason hasn't seen him since he got started.

Tim is still firmly ensconced at his desk, but he catches sight of Jason as he comes up the stairs and gets up, stretching as he does. "How'd it go?" he asks.
"Not as horrible as I thought it'd be." Jason tells him what he found and what his next steps are.
"This is good news," Tim agrees. "If you hadn't caught that ordering issue when you did, this could be a lot worse. It sounds like you have some more calls to make, but if you have a second, I'd like to show you something." He gestures back to his computer.
"Please tell me it's proof that the demon did it all."
Tim grins, looking very pleased with himself. The look says it all, but he still nods his head in affirmation. "It is. The name he used to set up the email is bogus, but the IP address he logs in from to check it is from Wayne Manor. He did try to hide it, I'll give him points for that, but he didn't do a very good job of it, at least not to someone like me."

Jason feels a huge weight lifting from his shoulders at the news. That means the others are safe. Oh thank God. But just as quickly the weight comes back when he remembers what all this means for Tim. I can't let him throw Damian to the wolves like this. The Wayne name is going to be dragged through the mud when all this comes to light. No one's going to trust a fledgling company with millions of dollars for research, let alone development of a highly experimental piece of technology. Fuck, as much I'd like to see Damian's face when he realizes Daddy's lawyers can't get him out of this one, I can't let it go that far. I can't.

Tim has continued speaking while Jason's lost in his thoughts and he starts focusing him again. "...But while ID theft can be reported at the local level, I found something even more incriminating. Check this out."

Jason peers over Tim's shoulder as the shorter man sits back down. "Is that a PO Box in my name?"
"Yes." Tim sounds extremely smug.
"Okay. So why is this important? I assume that's where all my mail for these cards is going."
"As well as whatever it is that Damian's purchased and has shipped." Tim's grin is growing downright vicious but Jason still doesn't understand why.
"Care to explain to the rest of the audience?"
"He's opened a mail box in your name for the express purpose of receiving mail and goods that are being purchased with a fraudulent credit card. Jason, he's committing mail fraud." Tim looks up at him, eyes gleaming with excitement. "That's a federal crime and one that's going to be prosecuted even if you decide against pressing charges for stealing your identity in the first place."

The gravity of Tim's words sink in. Even he knows there's a big difference between local cops and the Feds. "Oh shit. What's he lookin' at?"
"20 years, max, depending on what exactly he's done. Considering he's just barely turned 18, he'd probably only see a year or two at most."

It's too much, especially in light of where his thoughts have been. Jason starts shaking his head as he backs away from the desk. "Fuck, Tim. I can't do this. I can't, because taking that little shit down is going to screw up everything you're trying to do for yourself. I can't take that away from you. Let's just go to Bruce and tell him what Damian's done and..."

Tim gets up and follows after him, interrupting his ramble. "Jason, don't. Just don't," he says fiercely as he gets right into Jason's face. "Yes, I have a vendetta against Damian, just as he has one against me. It's always been between the two of us though. He crossed the line when he dragged you and everyone else at the bar, hell your entire building, into this when he stole your identity. Yes, you provoked him, but this is going too far. He needs to be made to understand what kind of responsibilities and obligations you have to those people, what could happen to them if months down the line you need a loan or need to finance something and can't because your credit it shot to hell. Because of him! I can't and won't stand for it. I won't."

Jason is torn between wanting to believe in Tim's plan and his own decision to let everything go. The war between his feelings is fueled by a deep-seated knot of insecurity, in spite of everything the man in front of him has told him about being worth it. "Why Tim? Why me? You're going to divide your family in half, shoot WE's reputation to hell, and God only knows what this is going to do to DI before it even has a chance to take off." Jason gazes into Tim's bright blue eyes, so close that he can see them clearly even through Tim's glasses.
"Because I love you, you moron. You're not the only one who protects what's his."
Tim's confession blindsides Jason. He...he loves me? Jesus fuck, what the hell? No, no, he can't, he can't love me. I'm nothing compared to him, nothing...

He opens his mouth, but Tim cuts him off, raising a finger and placing it against his lips. "I know what you're going to say, Jason, so don't. You are worth it. You are one of the most amazing people I have ever met. I don't know what I have to say or do to convince you, but I will, even if I have to repeat myself over and over again."
"Tim..." Jason tries to reply and brushes Tim's hand away. "You can't give all this up for me. I won't let you. You're...you're so much better than I could ever be. I'm a Gotham street rat, you have no idea what I had to do just to survive...I don't deserve you."
"No, Jason, I don't deserve you," Tim disagrees quietly, but his voice is still firm. "What you've done, what you've made of yourself even with all the shit this city has thrown at you, that's amazing. That's inspirational. And that's the man I've fallen for. You're not getting rid of me, Jason Todd. So stop trying."

Shit. What the goddamn fuck is he trying to do? Can't he see?
"Tim, I put up a good front, but do you have any idea just how broken I am inside? The things I've done, no one would want me. No one should want me."
"And yet, I still do," Tim replies with a shake of his head. "I'm still here. And if you really didn't want to be with me, you'd have cut this all off before it even had a chance to start."

He's got you there, Jaybird. It's what you've done with every relationship you've ever had as soon as things started to get serious says a voice in Jason's mind that sounds like Roy.
"What about the video?" he tries in one last attempt to sway Tim's mind. "If that were to get out..."

Tim shakes his head again. A hand reaches out to run through Jason's hair reassuringly. "I have the only copy now. You know that. It's for our private consumption only."
"But Lonnie watched it. He has to know that's you."
"So what?" Tim shrugs his shoulders. "He's got no proof. And besides, I am not ashamed of you. I am not ashamed to be seen with you. The only reason I'm not shouting from the rooftops how stupidly happy you make me is that I'm concerned for your privacy. I don't want to take that away from you."
"Your face is stupid," Jason says lamely but he knows he's been overruled and Tim knows he's won if the pleased look on his face is any indication. He turns his head to plant a kiss into Tim's palm. "You have to be absolutely insane to do all this for me."

Tim's blue gaze is steady as he pulls Jason down and kisses him, their lips lightly grazing each other's before firming into something harder. "I've been called worse," he whispers into Jason's mouth.
"I...what you said. About being in love..." Jason pauses, not sure how to continue, but he wraps his arms around the shorter man and holds him tightly. "I..."
"I'm not expecting a declaration from you." Tim presses another soft kiss to Jason's lips. 'I'll admit, I didn't plan on saying that out loud any time soon; it kind of slipped out. But I mean it." His hand grips Jason's hair tightly for a moment.

Jason closes his eyes at the sensation and opens them again. His heart is beating faster and he can feel his cock stirring to life in his jeans. I may not be able to say it, not yet (maybe not ever). But I can show him what he means to me. If Tim's willing to risk it all on a Gotham street rat, I will not let him regret it. Not once.
"Bedroom," he orders, feeling himself grow more confident now that his decision is made. "Now."

Jason leaves a very satisfied Tim lying in bed to go back downstairs and finish his phone calls. Dealing with each credit card company is a pain in the ass as he navigates each convoluted phone system before getting to a live person. But just like with the credit bureau, the fraud specialists he speaks with are very helpful. By the time he heads back up, a couple more hours have passed.

I think this is the first time this phone has ever been used this much at once. The battery is almost dead.

He finds Tim hard at work again at his computer but he looks up when he sees Jason and gives him a shy smile. "All done?"

Jason crosses the room and leans on the back of Tim's chair. "Yeah. All the cards are canceled. Fraud reports entered. All I need to do is call back with the police report number once I have that." He looks down at Tim. "You sure you want to go through with this?"

He has to check. Has to make sure Tim understands what he's doing.
The shy smile grows more confident. "I do. And I still think the fallout isn't going to be anywhere near as bad for me as you're expecting."
"We'll see."
"I'm all set to go here if you want to go back to the bar," Tim says, changing the subject. "I need your computer for the rest of this."
"Ready when you are. Should I call Roy?"
"Yeah. I'd like to see what he can do." Tim turns his attention back to his computer and does a few obscure things before everything goes dark.
"He'll fanboy over you is what he'll do," Jason mutters as he pulls out his phone again.
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The midafternoon sun is shining weakly through a thin haze of clouds by the time they get back to the bar. Roy and Kori are waiting for them.

Roy is eager to follow Tim back into the office but gives Jason a concerned look before he does. "Get everything squared away?"
"Yeah. Tim'll tell you all about it." Jason ducks under the bar to pour himself a glass of soda. He wants to head back to the kitchen but knows that the sight of all the chicken wings still in the freezer will piss him off.

He misses the concerned glance Roy, Kori, and Tim share.
"Right," Tim drawls. "Well, let’s go. I'll tell him everything."
It's not until after the two men disappear that it dawns on Jason what Tim meant by that. "Shit," he mutters almost angrily.
"Jason," Kori says calmly from her seat at the bar. "Get out from behind there and come here." She gives him an arch look and beckons him imperiously.

One does not ignore Kori when she has that look on her face. When he first met her, it used to signal the beginning of something that always ended with them getting off in some way. Nowadays, it usually means he's in for a serious talking to.

He can't blame her. There's a lot of shit going on right now.
Jason walks around the bar and tries to take a seat next to the flame-haired woman, but she pushes him back and gets up instead. Before he knows it, he's wrapped in a warm hug; one only Kori can give. She's as tall as he is but she still manages to pull his head down into her shoulder, cradling it gently as she combs her fingers through his perpetually tousled black hair. "It's all right, Jason," she soothes. "You don't need to put up a front with me. Never with me."

It's the right words at the right time and Jason chokes as the stress and frustrations and anger of the last 24 hours comes out. He tightens his arms around Kori's waist and rides it out, huffing brokenly into her slender neck. Her hair falls like a curtain over his eyes and all he sees is red. But it's the good kind of red, the safe kind of red. The red that comforts him and reminds him that he's with someone he loves and trusts.

He doesn't cry, but Jason can feel hot tears burning in his eyes. I refuse to shed a single fucking tear over this. Because that means Damian wins, that he's broken me by getting me where it fucking hurts. Christ, now I see why Tim's so dead set on this path. Little fucker is going to DOWN.

Decision made, he takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. He suddenly becomes conscious of just how physically close he is to Kori. It may have been some time since he'd been with her and Roy, but his body still remembers. Jason chuckles and plants a soft kiss into the warm skin before pulling away and putting some space between the two of them.
"Thanks," he says quietly. "I needed that."
"I know," Kori replies, her green eyes bright with unshed tears of her own. "It's always hard for you when you have to depend on other people for help. You never think you're worth it."

Jason's not ashamed at all as he gapes like a fish at her words, echoing so closely to what Tim had said earlier in the day. "How did you...?"

She smirks, a twitch of her lips that had landed her on the cover of magazines. "Because I know you, Jason. And so does Roy. We were talking about it on the way over here. Which is
why we're so happy to see you accepting the help Tim can offer."
"Roy just wants to sit in the shadow of a master and soak it all in like a sponge," Jason retorts, but there's no bitterness in his words.
"True," Kori allows. "But he also cares, Jay. About you. As does Tim. It's easy to see."
The fight goes out of him at her words. "He admitted that he loves me," Jason says. "We were arguing earlier and it slipped out."

Kori grins. "Looks like I win the pot." She looks pleased.
"What?"
The redhead shrugs. "Roy started a pool on which of you two idiots would admit you love each other first. There have been a lot of entries."

Jason gapes again. "What the fuck?" he almost shouts. "I thought that asshole was my best friend!"
"If we're not opening tonight, dinner's on me." Kori's good humor disappears as a more somber look appears. "What did you say?"
"When?" Jason knows damn well what she's prying at, but he's still miffed about the pool.
"Stop playing dumb. To Tim."
"I couldn't say it back," he admits. "I just...I can't. I've never said it to anyone, not since my mom died." When my life went from bad to worse.
"But you do, don't you?" Kori asks, concern laced through her voice.
Jason hedges for a moment, thinks back to this morning where he laid Tim out on his bed and worshipped every inch of him until he was begging for release. That hadn't been sex, that had been... "Yeah. I do."
"Then the words will come in time. Just make sure you show it if you can't say it."
"I think I did a good job of that earlier." He’s on firmer ground now and gives Kori a cocky grin. "Gotta admit, sometimes I really wish I hadn't taken out my tongue piercing."

Kori nods in agreement. "Tim has no idea what he's missing."
They sit and talk for a little while, Kori asking about how it went with the credit bureau and in getting his credit reports. She's pleased, at least as much as she can be considering the situation, that there hadn't been much damage done to Jason's overall credit.
"I had Stephanie come over before her first class today and we went over her credit report. Roy and I did the same and we all placed an alert on our reports for having had our
information compromised," Kori explains. "We just need to call them back with the police report number when you get that."

Jason can't help heaving a large sigh. It sucks that this happened to me, but it's even worse that everyone else has to take precautions too. "Yeah, I know." He looks at his watch. "I'll head down to the local station tomorrow after I get everything prepped for the day here. Tim sounded confident that things will be back up and running normally by then."
"Did he think our payment system was compromised at all by this Anarky guy?"
"That's one of the things he and Roy are supposed to be checking out right now."
They fall into a comfortable silence. Kori gets up once to make herself a drink and pours a shot of tequila for Jason. He's never been a fan of mixed drinks, preferring the straight burn of his alcohol.

It's not long before Roy and Tim join them. Both men look satisfied with something, though Roy's also looking at Tim like he'd just had a religious experience.

Jason can't help but laugh. The only time I've seen Roy look like that is after really good sex. "Have some fun back there?" he teases.
"Define fun for me," Tim replies dryly as he takes a seat next to Jason. "Your payment system wasn't touched, but we had to wipe your computer completely."
"I saved everything I knew you would need on an external drive for time being," Roy says from the other side of Kori. "The operating system is being reinstalled, which is going to take a bit. Tim did something to the router so there's a much better firewall in place, as well as a few other things." He sounds impressed.
"Do I even want to know what these other things are?" Jason asks, sneaking a glance at his boyfriend.
"I can go into the technical details if you like," Tim offers as he sneaks a sip of Jason's watered down soda from earlier.
"Pass. So the payment system is fine, my computer is shot but you're fixing it. You think we'll be able to open tomorrow?"

Roy nods. "Definitely."
"Good. I've got a freezer full of food going to waste. I'll let Steph know." Jason pulls out his phone and sends the blonde a text. He's gotten rather good at sending text messages, though he's nowhere near as fast as the others.
"So what are we going to do for tonight then?" Kori asks, twisting around on the stool so that she's lounging against the bar. "It's a Friday night. Not often we get one of these free."

Jason can't help but notice he's staring at the gorgeous redhead and jerks his eyes away guiltily. He glances at Tim again and smirks when he sees him do the same. I wonder what he
"Dinner first?" Tim replies. "I'm kinda hungry and I've only had chicken wings for my last two meals."
"Fuck you," Jason retorts, but there's no heat to it. "I don't waste food."
"I think dinner would be a good idea," Roy interrupts. "But what about after? We haven't gone out and had a night on the town in forever."

Kori's face lights up. "Oh, we could go dancing. I haven't dressed up for a long time."
From the expression on Roy's face, Jason knows he's remembering the last time. He sure as hell is.

Tim appears somewhat apprehensive, but nods gamely. "I haven't done much clubbing before. Not sure how good I'll be on the dance floor."

Kori reaches around Jason and grabs Tim's hand, giving it a quick squeeze. "I'll teach you," she promises.

Jason can't help but groan at the mental image those words produce and Roy laughs loudly. "Someone's getting laid tonight."
"Shut up. You are too."
$* * * * *$

Dinner with his friends was pleasant. It's not something Jason gets to do very often anymore and with Tim along, it felt like a double date. Roy even says so and insists they need to do this more often.

Afterwards, Kori still feels like dancing, so they part ways to get ready. Tim looks even more apprehensive as he and Jason enter the loft. "What do I even wear to this place?" he asks.
"Whatever you feel like," Jason replies as he crosses through the living room and into his bedroom to look through his closet. "Jeans are fine and you can wear whatever on top. It's not one of those party clubs you find downtown. The music here has an edge to it that tends to keep the kids away." He pulls out a black t-shirt and tosses it on the bed, then heads over to the bathroom. "You'll probably want to wear your contacts," he says over his shoulder. "Get those in, then I can make up your eyes if you want."
"What?" Tim asks in surprise. "Makeup?"
"Yeah, makeup. Nothing fancy, just some eyeliner and maybe some mascara. Gotta show off those baby blues."

In the bathroom, Jason washes up quickly and takes off his henley, tossing it in the hamper. When he turns around and inspects himself in the mirror, trying to decide if he wants to shave
or not, something catches his eye through his undershirt. He grins. I forgot I was gonna change those out. Wonder what Tim will think of the new jewelry?

Rooting around in one of the drawers, Jason pulls out two small sealed bags and takes off his shirt. It doesn't take long and he slips the shirt back on, feeling smug. Another small bag grabs his attention and he smirks as he picks it up. I forgot about you too...yeah, time for the barbell to come out. He unbuttons his jeans and pushes down his briefs and gets to work.

He manages to get everything buttoned back up when Tim knocks on the door. "It's unlocked," Jason calls out.

Tim enters, wearing one of his band t-shirts over a long-sleeved white shirt. "This okay?" he asks nervously.
"Yeah, it's fine." Jason reaches into the drawer again and pulls out his eyeliner and mascara. "Put your eyes in while I work on me, then you can decide if you want it or not. You don't have to, it's up to you."
"We'll see," Tim replies as he takes off his glasses and picks up his contact case to start putting them in.

It feels oddly domestic, standing here in his bathroom with Tim next him, both of them leaning over the counter and faces up in the mirror to see what they're doing. Jason can't help but chuckle as he tries to avoid poking himself in the eye with the dark pencil he's using.
"Something funny?" Tim shoots him a look that Jason catches in the mirror.
"Us. I mean, look at us." Jason blinks, inspecting the line he's finished drawing. It's been awhile since he's done this. But I haven't lost my touch. "We're domestic."

Tim laughs softly as he does something odd with his eye to slip in his contact lens, then blinks quickly to settle it in place. "I guess we are. Does that mean I can get an actual coffeemaker for when I'm here?"
"No." Jason makes a face and starts working on his other eye while Tim pouts.
He finishes with his contacts and takes a seat on the counter, staring intently while the taller man works on his eye makeup. Jason ignores him as he inspects his eyes. He digs out some hair gel and runs it through his hair, giving his normal waves a slightly gravity defying effect.

Nodding in satisfaction, Jason turns to Tim. "So, whaddya think? Want in on this?"
The other man's eyes are wide as he nods slowly. Jason can't help but smirk. He looks good and knows it. "All right, then. Close your eyes."

He hasn't done anyone's makeup but his own for years, but Tim is a blank canvas waiting for a brush. Jason puts more effort into creating a smoky effect at the outer corners of Tim's eyes, carefully lining the small crease. Shame one of the girls isn't here; I could borrow their eye shadow. Only so much I can do with a pencil. "Okay, open and don't blink." He holds up the wand for the mascara and adds the finishing touches.

Capping the mascara and twisting it shut, Jason nods slowly. He's pleased with how it turns out. I knew Tim would look gorgeous. His eyes were made for this shit. "Looking good. Want me to do your hair or are you just going to pull it back?"
"Do my hair?" Tim asks. He’s still staring intently at Jason.
"That a question or a request?"
Tim blinks slowly, like he's coming out of a trance. "Do my hair," he says more firmly.
"As you wish," Jason replies with a sardonic twist to his lips, but the tips of Tim's ears pink at the words as he gets the reference. Choosing to ignore it, he combs Tim's hair quickly and grabs his gel again, running his fingers through the black locks. It's too long to have the effect he was hoping for, but it still looks good.
"There, now you're all dolled up. Turn around and tell me what you think."
Tim almost reluctantly slides off the counter and turns to look in the mirror. "Wow," he says, sounding and looking surprised. "I didn't know I could look like this."
"You look fucking hot," Jason agrees as he stands behind Tim and rests his hands on his hips. "I might have to put a collar on you tonight, let everyone know who you belong to."

Under his hands, he can feel Tim shudder slightly.
"That a good or bad reaction, rich boy?" It occurs to him they never did have that kink talk.
"I don't know," Tim admits. "Not sure if I like that kind of thing, but I've always thought the clothes and costumes look cool."

Jason leans in and licks the shell of Tim's ear. "Got a costume kink, huh? I could be down for that. Shit's expensive so I never got too into it."

Tim shudders again and braces his hands on the bathroom counter. "Do you have a collar? Or were you just joking?"
"Joking. Right now though, wish I fucking did."
"Do we have time?" Tim breathes harshly, but he turns his bright-eyed gaze on Jason in the mirror.
"Time for what?" the taller man teases knowingly.

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"Jason."
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He checks his watch and grins. "Got at least thirty minutes before we have to go anywhere. Kori always takes forever to get ready."
"Thank God." Tim twists quickly in Jason's arms and pulls him down, lips meeting for a furious moment before Tim pushes him back a step and falls to his knees. He starts working
at Jason's belt, a deft hand at it now.
Oh, shit, he's going to find that a lot sooner than I expected. He hardens at the prospect and leans against the wall behind him in the narrow space, ignoring the towel rack digging into his back.

Tim unbuttons Jason's jeans and slowly lowers the zipper. He starts to mouth at the cotton of the black boxer briefs and pushes the faded denim lower over Jason's hips. A moment later, the briefs are pulled down too. He gasps at the sight of the gunmetal gray ring and the smooth red bead enclosing the ends. His breathing quickens and he looks up at Jason with wide, hungry eyes. "Jay..."

Jason can't help it. He smirks, feeling inordinately pleased with himself. "See something you like?"
"Yes," Tim all but gasps as his lined eyes drop back down. He licks a stripe from the base of Jason's cock to the tip, his tongue playing lightly with the new ring before his mouth closes over the head.

The taller man savors the moment and the damp warmth before running a hand through the other man's not-so-styled hair, then down along his cheek, his thumb catching the corner of Tim's mouth. He pulls back and glares up at him, not happy about being interrupted. "Care to take this to the bed?" Jason asks.
"Why?" Tim gives him a firm stroke, hard enough that Jason momentarily forgets why he distracted his boyfriend in the first place.
"I changed something else out too."
Tim surges to his feet, hands catching at the hem of Jason's white undershirt and peels it up to reveal the muscled torso beneath. His eyes dart back and forth at the matching smoky gray rings and red beads before returning upwards to meet the taller man's amused gaze. "Bed," he agrees and drags Jason out of the bathroom.
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They're twenty minutes late getting to the club, but neither of them care.
And despite the long night out with his closest friends, Jason gets up early the next morning and, rather than starting his normal prep for the bar, goes instead to the local police precinct to file his police report. He's there for a good hour, talking to the officer who dutifully takes his report and asks questions.

As he leaves, Jason stares up at the gray Gotham sky, heavy with the promise of more snow, and grimaces, shoving his gloved hands into his heavy coat pockets before putting his head down against the cold wind and starts walking home. I know this was the right thing to do. But Jesus Christ, I sure hope Tim knows what he's doing. It's just a matter of time now.

Damian Wayne's days as a free man are numbered.

## Chapter End Notes

So this is the point where I'm now debating about making a few small edits to the Super Bowl Special so that it fits better with this story line. If I do, I'll you all know next week as this one-shot now occurs between this chapter and chapter 13.

Chapter 13...in which Tim's least favorite redhead visits the bar. Dun dun dun...

# Milestone Thirteen: Coming Out 

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A few weeks pass. Super Bowl weekend is pretty damn successful considering everything that happened in the weeks preceding it, though Jason would have been happier if Bruce hadn't shown up. Keeping his mouth shut was hard. Meeting Tim's best friend Kon had been fun though. He'd stayed in town for a few extra days to visit with Tim and the three of them spent quite a bit of that time together. Kon pummeled him with questions and shared embarrassing stories about Tim in return.

All in all, a good weekend, even though Jason's pretending he never heard anything about a bet. He convinced Tim to share the details (it took a couple days to start negotiations; Jason was so exhausted that night after Super Bowl that even Tim's Shirley Temple Surprise couldn't keep him awake) and was surprised to learn most of the months their friends were betting on were around the one year mark and that Jason would be the one to ask.

What the hell? I can't even fucking say I love you, so what makes people think I can pop a question like that? Besides, we haven't even been together four months. Or is it five now? Shit, I can't even remember what day it was that we started dating.

He hasn't heard anything back from the police yet, but it's not a big surprise. The GCPD are notoriously slow about anything that's not a homicide. Tim tells him that he's more likely to hear from the FBI first. The not-so-former hacker had sent everything (sans the videos) to his contact there.

Jason closed for a week after the Super Bowl, but the weather was crappy, so he didn't get a chance to get out and do much of anything. Tim offered to take him on a trip somewhere, but when Jason asked how much of that time he'd be working on DI, Tim had the grace to admit it would be quite a bit, so nothing came of that.

Staying in his pajamas at home all day was nice though and he started experimenting on some new recipes for the bar to mix things up a bit. Tim had pouted when he learned the curry and the chili were coming off the menu, but Jason pointed out that they both took way too much time to prep.
"I'm a bartender, not a cook. I don't run a restaurant; I'm not crazy enough for that shit," was his excuse. Tim kept his mouth shut, but the look he gave him said otherwise.

The savory turnovers he came up with were really good if Tim's reaction was any indication. They were hell of a lot easier to make ahead of time and reheat too.

And life, as it inevitably does, moves on.
It's a slow Wednesday night during the last week of February when Jason notices the woman entering the bar. She stands out for two reasons. One, she walks in alone, which is unusual
for the area. Two, she's got bright red hair, which always catches his attention. The woman is nowhere near Kori's height and definitely leans towards the pale side; she's not an unhealthy pale, but even Roy can tan some when he's careful about it (how Kori can be as tan as she is with her hair color is still a mystery to all of them, but she's adamant she doesn't use spray tanner or a tanning bed).

The woman looks around, taking in and assessing her surroundings before she approaches the bar. Aside from a couple regulars down at the end, it's empty.
"Hello there," Jason greets her and puts down his book. "What can I get started for ya?"
"What have you got on tap?" she asks as she sits down and takes off her heavy winter coat. Underneath, she's in a sensible and warm looking sweater.

He rattles off the list and she picks one. A couple minutes later, Jason sets down a napkin and the tall glass in front of her. "Anything else?"

She takes a sip of beer and stares intently at Jason, an assessing look in her green eyes. "Are you Jason Todd?" she asks.

Instantly, Jason's guard goes up but he tries not to show it. "Depends on who wants to know," he says with a disarming grin.
"The people of Gotham, for one." She reaches into her purse and withdraws a business card, handing to him. "I'm Vicki Vale, a journalist for the Gotham Gazette."

Oh Jesus fucking Christ. Tim and Bruce both warned me about her. It's a good thing Tim's at home tonight. Fuck.
"Yeah?" Jason asks, trying for disinterested and not sure how that's coming across. "And why do the people of Gotham want to know about a bartender from the Bowery?"
"Well, to start it's not every day I get a tip that Timothy Drake-Wayne is actually gay and dating a small business owner who lives on the...let's just say other side of the tracks, shall we? Sounds like quite the story." She smiles ingenuously, but Jason's not buying it for a second.

Bloody hell. I'll bet a month's worth of free beer that I know who delivered this 'tip' to her. Shit. But Tim prepared me for this, just in case. Told me to be honest and open to a point. That Vicki's fair if you don't go the bullshit route with her. And he doesn't want to hide...not anymore.
"I prefer the term 'working-class', thank you very much," Jason says as he crosses his arms over his chest. He knows it makes the muscles there and in his arms stand out, even under the long sleeved shirt he's wearing. "Unlike some people I know, I do work for a living."

Vicki smiles broadly. "So it's true then?"
"Yeah, it's true. I wouldn't say Tim's gay though; he's got a fine appreciation of the fairer sex." Jason grins mockingly at the redhead.
"I don't know," Vicki disagrees, giving Jason an appreciative onceover. "I'd say you're pretty fair looking yourself."
"So I've been told. Question for you... what kind of scandalous story are you planning on writing? Tim's a Wayne, their shit is all over the news on a weekly basis in this town. But I'm not. What you see is what you get. Tim comes here because he can be himself; he doesn't have to hide behind that fake grin and the business suit. I'm not telling you how to do your job, but it would be nice if he could keep that little bit of normalcy after this goes public."

Vicki sits back on the barstool and takes another sip of beer, though her eyes never leave Jason. "You could have denied knowing Timothy at all and sent me on my way, but you didn't. Why?"

## Tenacious as hell. Answer a question with a question.

"Because Tim and I aren't hiding what we are," Jason explains and forces himself to relax his posture somewhat. "We're not advertising, but we're not hiding. If you were to ask around here on another night when I'm not around who I'm dating, any of my regulars would tell you a black haired guy named Tim. They'd tell you he used to wear a monkey suit here all the time, but recently started dressing like a normal guy. That he's easy to talk to and not to dare go up against him in a game of pool because he'll wipe the floor with you and grin the entire time he's doing it. That he loves his fried pickles and isn't afraid to hop behind the bar and help out when it gets busy. Most people like him and the homophobes know not vocalize their thoughts as everyone else will hand them their ass as they kick it out the door."

The redhead nods slowly as she processes what Jason tells her. "I remember seeing you with Timothy for a short time at the Wayne Christmas Gala in December. How long have you been dating?"
"Sometime in late October or early November. I think he started coming here in September." Jason shrugs. We're not hiding he keeps reminding himself.

Vicki gives him a sharp look. "You're being very honest with me."
Jason smirks at the woman. "I got nothin' to hide and neither does Tim. Yeah, he gave me some tips for how to deal with you and the others and we talked about what to say when this finally happened, but in the end, Tim's comfortable with who he is and I've never pretended to be anyone other than myself. If I'm gonna be blunt, I still don't know what the hell he sees in me, but whatever it is, he seems to like it."
"What about his family?" It's a loaded question and they both know it.
"They're crazy, but they like me too. Most of 'em..."
Vicki chuckles. "I'm going to out on the limb here and say it's either Bruce or Damian that doesn't."
"I'm curious as to what makes you say that." Jason leans against the back of the bar. He wants to try and get her talking some more, but the look in her eye tells him she knows
exactly what he's trying to do.
But she humors him and goes along with it. "Bruce simply for the fact that Timothy is his son and no parent ever thinks anyone is good enough for their kids. I've been covering the Wayne's for long enough to know that Bruce is more family oriented than he's portrayed in the press. No kid of his is getting roped into marriage for the sake of business. So that leaves Damian. That kid is a holy terror. He's the assignment no one wants to get back at the office."

Jason can't help it. He laughs, loudly, and shakes his head. "It's nice to know the demon doesn't have the press in his pocket. I'm pretty sure that tip you got about Tim and me came from him, however indirectly that may be. The little shit hates me, but it's a toss up whether he hates Tim more."
"Their feud is the stuff of legend," Vicki agrees. "He probably hates you because you make Timothy happy."

He keeps his mouth shut at that one and shrugs instead. The reporter doesn't need to know the exact reason why Damian Wayne hates his guts. "He's so fucking constipated with that stick up his ass, he wouldn't know happiness even if it gave him a hand job. That kid needs to get laid, seriously."

Vicki bursts out into laughter of her own. "Oh my God," she says, catching her breath. "Please, let me quote you on that. Crap, I think that's the best thing I've ever heard anyone say about the brat."
"Sorry, but if I did, he'd probably firebomb this place." If there's one thing I've learned about Damian, it's that he's vindictive as hell against any perceived slight. Exhibit A, my jacked up credit report...
"You're probably right." Vicki takes another sip from her beer and stares contemplatively at Jason. "Okay, so I've made my decision. I am not going to write an article about you and Timothy, at least not this way. You're right, I bet my tip did come from Damian and that would be feeding into whatever plot he has brewing against his brother. I like Timothy. Always have even though I know I don't make it easy on him. And I like you. So here's my deal."
"Shoot."
"You two need to officially come out as it were. Or rather, Timothy does. Once it's all out in the open, people will be scrambling for that first interview with him, and possibly you. Give it to me and I'll make sure there's nothing salacious or scandalous about it. I'll keep this place," she gestures to the bar around her, "anonymous. Everybody needs a place they can go and just be."

The offer takes him aback. Their story is quite the scoop and he knows it. For her to give it up like this... "You have to know I can't just say yes without checking with Tim on this, right?"

Vicki nods and raises her beer. "I have a glass to finish before I go anywhere. Feel free to give him a call."

Jason nods and walks away, checking in with his two regulars first to see if they need anything, before taking his phone out of his pocket.

Tim answers after a few rings. "Hey!" he says brightly. "Did you close early?"
"Kinda wish I never opened today," Jason replies. He decides not to beat around the bush. "Vicki Vale is sitting at the bar right now nursing a glass of Sam Adams."
"Fuck," Tim curses vehemently. "How's it going? Do I need to come over? I can be there in twenty minutes."

Jason can hear Tim start moving around on the side of the line. "It's going pretty well actually. So get this..." he summarizes what they talked about and her offer. "I know jack shit about her besides what you and Bruce have said, but she seems legit."
"If that's what she's put on the table, then yeah, she is. She must really like you." Tim sounds impressed.
"We bonded over our dislike of the demon."
"Like that's hard," Tim snorts. "Okay, tell her we accept. And in return for her generosity, I'll give her a one-on-one interview about us. Unless you want to sit in?"
"I'm gonna have to at some point, aren't I?"
"Yeah."
Jason sighs dramatically. "Fine. Just because I like you, I suppose I can fit this in to my oh so busy schedule."

Tim laughs. "I got an invite to a new restaurant opening up next week. High end, fine dining, all the stuff you secretly love, but enjoy mocking more for being pretentious as hell. Care to be my plus one? We can have our official coming out then."
"Am I gonna have to wear a monkey suit?"
"Suit, yes. But no tie. Let's run down to Jacob's tomorrow and see if he has anything on hand that can be tailored to you quickly. I knew I should have ordered a suit for you in December when we got your tux." Tim sounds momentarily distracted.
"The things I have to put up with because of you. I hope you're worth it," Jason teases.
Tim laughs again. "I've been told I'm quite the catch," he replies archly.
They hang up and Jason heads back up to the front of the bar to give Vicki the news.

The next week, Jason fidgets in the front seat of the Audi while Tim drives them across town to a part of Gotham he's never been to before. His new charcoal gray suit is surprisingly comfortable, but he's even more pleased that he doesn't have to wear a tie with the red dress shirt he's wearing beneath the jacket. He even gets to wear the collar open. The suit matches my jewelry. I wonder if Tim did that on purpose. He probably did, the little shit.
"I don't know what you're fidgeting about, but if one of us should be nervous here, it's me." Tim casts an eye over at Jason before returning his attention to the road. He's wearing his contacts, so Jason has an unobstructed view of his face.
"Sorry," Jason mutters as he tries to stop bouncing his knee around and focuses on sitting still. "It's my first time out to something like this. At least at Christmas, I could hide in the crowd and no one gave me a second look. Here... well, I'm just wonderin' if I should keep my mouth shut so I don't embarrass you."
"It'll be hard to eat with your mouth shut," Tim tries to tease but it falls flat.
"You know what I mean."
"Yes, and I don't care that your accent doesn't match mine. The people here tonight are not my friends. Most of them may be in the same age group, but I don't care about the opinions of any of them. Tonight, I am Tim Wayne and that means I'm at the top of the food chain. They can kiss my ass." Tim takes a corner a bit sharply to emphasize his point.
"Just get us there and back in one piece and I'll let you kiss mine. Should I drive us home?"
Tim shakes his head. "I'll be fine. I never drink much at these things."
"Tam your usual date?" Jason asks to fill the silence. He's trying hard not to babble, but the slow panic setting in his killing his resolve.
"Usually. But I've brought Kon and even Bart to restaurant openings before. They'd rather do this than go to any of the fancier events I get stuck going to."
"Oh," Jason replies, not even trying to hide his surprise. "That makes me feel a lot better actually." It really does because he's seen what passes for table manners from Kon.
"Good," Tim nods and gestures to the busy street in front of them. "We're almost there. I've got to valet park. Let me get out first and come around to open your door."
"That way I don't have to stand there with my thumb up my ass waiting for you to hand over the keys to your baby?"
"Something like that," Tim smiles at him. "You're my boyfriend. I've got to make you feel special somehow tonight."
"You already do." Jason reaches over, rests his hand on top of Tim's where he's holding onto the stick-shift and gives it a quick squeeze.

The look Tim gives him in return in blinding. He's still wearing it when they park out front of the restaurant and he opens the car door for Jason, holding out his hand for him to take as Jason unfolds himself from the front seat and stands tall. He can feel the eyes on him as he accepts Tim's hand.

Together, they walk into the building.
Dinner goes better than he expects, though to be honest, he wasn't sure what to think in the first place as Tim didn't know what kind of restaurant this was supposed to be other than it was a fusion place of some kind. It looks sharp, Jason would give them that, but the food leaves much to be desired. Is this what passes for seasoning at places like this? Everything I've had tastes bland.

He says as much to Tim in a quiet voice as they eat dessert.
"I know," Tim agrees, taking another small bite of the delicate looking confection on the plate in front of him. "This is supposed to be tasting menu, highlighting the best of what this place has to offer. I'm not impressed. This is why I prefer the little mom and pop kind of restaurants. The food there has soul, as well as flavor."

Jason chuckles and takes a sip from his cocktail, silently agreeing. The drink is the only thing that's been good all night. He can taste ginger and mint, but he's not sure what else is in it. It goes down easy though, which is enough to make him wary of the second one he's brought by the overly attentive wait staff. The owner had all but fawned over Tim when they arrived. I bet he designated this table VIP. That waiter is practically hovering. "So how do you let them know you think the food sucks?"

Tim picks up his glass and swirls his drink around for a moment before taking a sip of his own. He's still on his first one. "I simply don't come back."
"Harsh."
"The chef needs to be taking more care in making sure the food is properly seasoned before it goes out. The décor is nice, the drinks are good, but everything is woefully under seasoned and uninspired." Tim mockingly arches an eyebrow. He looks sharp in his light gray vest and lavender dress shirt, easily dominating the room with his sheer presence. "I'd give it two out of five stars."

Jason can't help it, he laughs at the uppity act Tim's putting on. "And here I thought you were sleeping when I had that show on."
"I almost was. You were laughing at..." Tim trails off as something catches his attention from across the room. They're tucked into a corner table (Tim's request) where they have a good view of the dining room. Jason didn't ask why but he suspected it had to do with being able to see who approaches them. There are plenty of people here who would love to be seen speaking with Tim Wayne. They've been interrupted several times already by people who tried to make small talk with him while giving Jason curious looks.
"What is it?" Jason leans back and looks around casually from his spot next to the middle Wayne heir. It doesn't take him long to spot Damian at the front of the restaurant. "Shit," he swears vehemently, but quietly. And people say I have no manners.
"I don't think he's seen us yet," Tim comments idly and picks up his cocktail again, taking a sip. "He occasionally comes out and does events like this, so it's not too much of a stretch. It could just be coincidence."
"Coincidence my ass. He's trying to stir up trouble since his last scheme with Vale didn't work."
"I'm still proud of how you turned that around to work in our favor." Tim gives him an approving look and Jason can't help but preen under the praise.
"I have my moments."
"You have them more than you realize." Tim's gaze tracks back to his younger brother. "As much as I'd love to pick a fight with the brat, now is not the time. Playing ignorant of everything suits our needs much better, don't you think?"

Jason gets it, he really does. We don't want to show our hand too soon. This isn't the knockdown fight I'm used to. This is more psychological. Makes it harder, but damn, I can see why Tim enjoys this kind of thing so much. He grins viciously. "This is your arena, not mine. I'll follow your lead. If I want a fight, I know where I can find one tonight and not get arrested for it."
"Bring it on. I'll kick your ass all over your roof." Tim grins suddenly, sharper than a tack. "He's spotted us. Here he comes. I wonder if he's going to try and be subtle to find out what happened to Lonnie."
"Do teenagers even know how to be subtle?" Jason asks, then notices the young woman hanging on Damian's arm. "Who's the gal with him?"
"She's Amanda Kane, and technically a cousin of Bruce's. Of all the women I see around Damian, she's usually the one who can put up with his crap the most." Tim's eyes narrow slightly. "She's plays the part of vapid airhead very well, but she's actually very smart. It's the only reason Damian hasn't tossed her to the curb."
"Ambitious?" Jason eyes the blonde woman warily.
"Yup."
The young couple approach the table, Damian's haughty façade cracking slightly to sneer at Jason. "I see you finally have managed to remove yourself from the Bowery, Drake, though you did bring the trash along with you."

Jason bites his tongue, hard, to keep from ripping into Damian for everything he's put him through. I gotta let Tim handle this. I want to punch him so hard for what he did to me that
his teeth will still be rattling into next week. Lucky for him, Damian's date Amanda stands between him and the youngest Wayne.

Tim's smile grows even sharper, showing a hint of teeth. "Haven't you ever heard of the phrase 'a diamond in the rough', Damian? All that glitters is not always gold after all."

Jason loves it when Tim makes literature references and can't help cracking a smile at that one.

Damian's eyes flash and he glances at his brother's date. "At least Amanda is wearing makeup appropriately," he snidely comments.
"What, you don't like what it does for my eyes?" Jason retorts, blinking exaggeratedly and showing off the dark eyeliner he'd put on earlier when getting dressed. Tim encouraged it, saying it fit his image, especially with the visible piercings. "I thought you'd be above cultural stereotypes. Defying the norm and all that shit. You're a Wayne after all, you're supposed to start trends, not follow them." He can't help the dig. He has to, as the alternative won't be so pretty. A night in jail for assaulting Damian Wayne is not how he wants this evening to end.
"Tasteless," Amanda announces, glaring down her straight nose at Jason. He idly notices her eyebrows are slightly darker than her hair. That's either a bad pencil job or she's not a natural blonde. I wonder if Damian's unbent enough to find out.
"Taste is a matter of opinion," Tim interjects. "Is there a reason you're interrupting our date, Damian?" he asks, cutting right to the chase.

Jason waits, curious to see what the kid comes up with.
"I was simply curious as to your welfare, Drake," Damian tries haughtily, but his eyes are still on Jason. "You haven't been around since the holidays. Father does worry about you, though I certainly can't understand why as you've consistently displayed a habit for poor life choices."

Tim takes the last sip from his drink and sets down the empty glass. "Try having a life first before you comment on mine. I'm very happy with the choices I've made, especially of late." He reaches out and clasps Jason's hand tightly. Jason almost wishes the brat could pick up the subtext of the simple action.

Damian looks like he wants to say something, but visibly reins himself in. "Come, Amanda. Let's leave the trash to stink up their corner." He all but stalks away, the blonde teetering along on her high heels trying to keep up.

Jason finishes his cocktail with a final gulp and glares after them. Tim's hand tightens on his. "That went well," he comments. "I don't think I've ever wanted to hit Damian so hard in my life."
"That makes two of us," Jason agrees. "We done here?"
"Yes. Want to get a pizza on the way home?" Tim stands up and puts on his suit jacket.
"From the little place with the spumoni?" Jason gets up as well. "That place was good." Tim and his takeout, but damn if that wasn't some of the best pizza I've ever had. And the ice cream...I'll never look at neopolitan the same way again. I have a new love for pistachio.

Tim checks his watch. "Yes. If I call it in now, we'll make it before they close."
"Lead on," Jason waves and follows after Tim as they leave the restaurant.
*****

The next morning at the brownstone, Jason wakes up to Tim suddenly sitting on him and shoving his tablet in his face. It takes him a second to focus on what he's seeing. "Good morning, sunshine," he rumbles.

Tim grins and shoves the tablet closer. It's apparently one of his rare hyper mornings. "Morning. Look at this!"

Jason pushes the tablet back a bit so he can read without going cross-eyed. His eyes widen at the picture and the short story. "We made the society news."
"Yup. Complete with plenty of no comments from Bruce. It even references the argument with Damian, though it just says we were observed exchanging heated words before Timothy Wayne and his date left the restaurant." He grins like a mad man. "They're chomping at the bit trying to figure out who you are."

Stretching, Jason tries to dislodge Tim, but he just shifts until he's straddling Jason rather than sitting on his stomach. "I take it we're having an interview with a certain someone today?"

Tim nods vigorously. "I need some coffee first, but then I'll give Vicki a call."
"We can have it at the bar," Jason says, running his hands lightly over Tim's thighs. "It all started there."
"Are you sure?" Tim asks as his expression grows serious.
"I'm sure," Jason nods. "She knows where it is already. And, if she's half the reporter you said she is, she knows I own the whole building by now."
"Okay," the younger man agrees and drops his tablet onto his side of the bed as he gets up. "Let's go make some more news."

## Chapter End Notes

Damian had to make an appearance. I think he was well overdue.
Next week: Fluff! Because I need a break from all the drama going on here. And so does Jason.

# Interlude: The Article 

## Chapter Notes

> Rather than the fluff piece I promised last time, someone ${ }^{* * *}$ cough*** Janna *** cough*** got the wheels turning on what Vicki's article would actually be like. So here we go. Please keep in mind that journalism is not my forte, but I did take inspiration from some good magazine pieces I've read recently.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

## Timothy Drake-Wayne: Out and Proud

## An exclusive by Vicki Vale

There's a small bar tucked away in Gotham's East End, one of those little pieces of Americana that still manage to hang on in this day of micro-breweries and gastro-pubs. It's a working class bar in a working class neighborhood, where the people who work there know you by name.

As I walk in, the ruggedly handsome bartender looks up from his book and flashes me a crooked smile as he sets it down. "What's your poison today, Vicki?" he drawls in a lower Gotham accent. "I still got some of that winter lager you liked last time."

The bartender is Jason. He's also the chef and master of the small kitchen in the back, whipping up elevated but still tasty bar snacks for his clientele. The young man also wears another big cap...he's the owner.
"Sure, pour me a pint," I reply. "Is the kitchen open yet? I skipped lunch today."
"I'll see what I can do," Jason offers as he pours my glass of beer and hands it to me. He nods his head to the side, directing my gaze further down the bar and to the back by the pool table. "He's waiting."

I take a sip of the cold lager and head to the back of the bar.
There's another young man in the bar, this one playing a one-man game of pool. He shoots me a crooked smile of his own as he sees me coming, and calls out, "Two-ball, side pocket."

What looks to me to be an impossible shot is deftly completed by the black-haired young man. He gives me a pleased smirk as he stands, blowing strands of hair out of his light blue eyes from where it's escaped the half ponytail he sports.
"I didn't know you played," I say as I set my glass down on the high top table nearest the pool table. There's a glass sitting there already, along with half of plate of fried pickles. Looks like the kitchen is open after all.
"I've got a good eye for the angles," the young man replies as he takes a seat at the table. I sit down and join him.

From behind me, I hear Jason snort in amusement as he continues on his way to the kitchen. "Bullsh--. You're a shark, Tim. Good thing you don't play for money, otherwise you'd wipe out everyone."

The young man, Tim, attempts to look shamefaced, but the effect is ruined by the devilish twist to his lips and the laughter in his eyes. "The highest stakes I'll play for is a plate of Jason's fried pickles. They're amazing."

It's hard to believe that the man in front of me is Timothy Drake-Wayne, the middle son of Bruce Wayne, and a former Vice President of Wayne Enterprises. I've interviewed Timothy many times over the years, but never once have I seen him this open and relaxed. Perhaps it's the lack of a suit and tie, but Tim looks more at ease in this small bar in a pair of ripped jeans, worn sneakers, and a blue button down shirt that's wide open revealing the white undershirt beneath than anywhere else I've met him before.

Of course, it could also be because Jason is his boyfriend.
That's right. Two nights ago, Timothy Wayne came out as bisexual with his boyfriend of four months at the grand opening of Ginger in Gotham's Diamond District (see Ruth Gardner's review on page 8 ).

As Tim explains while we wait for Jason to join us, he never felt that he was in the closet. "I've known for several years now that I'm bisexual." His face takes on a pained expression momentarily. "I didn't hide once I figured it out, but I didn't advertise either. I had what I thought was a certain appearance to keep up, so I did. To be honest though, it wasn't until I met Jason that I realized just how ridiculous that was."

Tim's candor is insightful and revealing, as is the look he directs towards the kitchen.
He smiles ruefully and shakes his head. "When I first came here, he was somewhat overwhelming. Then he opened his mouth and spoke nerd. It would have been easy to hop into bed right away, but luckily, I'm not into one-night stands."
"But you've been photographed with some rather lovely ladies over the years, Tim," I reply.
"Most were hired models," Tim explains, taking a sip of what he says is a jack and coke. I certainly never pegged him as a whiskey drinker, having only ever seen champagne in his hand before. "When I was in California, my best friend's girlfriend went with me to a few events I had to make an appearance at. Man, he gave me hell for that." He laughs fondly at the memory. "But back here, even you know my usual date is Tam Fox."

Tam Fox is the daughter of Wayne Enterprises CFO's Lucius Fox, a long time confidante and friend of Tim's.
"What does she think of all this?" I ask and take another sip of my lager.
"She thinks it's hilarious," Tim replies. "I've never hidden who I am from my friends. They've all known for a long time. When Jason and I first started dating, that was when things got a bit tricky as I had to come out to my family."

Before I can delve into that revelation, Jason returns with a plateful of food that he sets down in front of me. Tim's eyes widen at the sight of the fluffy dough pockets and turns an accusing gaze on his boyfriend. "I thought you said you ran out!"
"I lied," Jason replies as he leans against the pool table, muscled arms crossed loosely over his broad chest. The man is not only handsome, but built. I learn later that he lifts weights and does some boxing in his spare time. "You go through those faster than you did the curry fries."

Tim grins and directs his attention back to me. "No shame. Jason's fantastic in the kitchen, so if you don't like his take on samosas, I will gladly clear that plate for you."

I take a careful bite, making sure to get a good dollop of the chutney along with it. The little pocket is a bite of heaven. "Mine," I declare and pull the plate closer.

The two men laugh easily as I dig in to my late lunch.
"Ironically enough, it was Jason's food that brought me in here in the first place," Tim explains while I eat.
"How's that?" I ask. "This place isn't exactly where one would expect to find a Wayne heir wandering around."
"It all started late one Tuesday night in September..." Tim goes on to explain how he accidently found the bar after a rough day at the office. The rating on Yelp brought him in, along with the promise of fried pickles, but after that first night, it was the man behind the bar he kept coming back for. "There was just something about him," he tries to explain, giving Jason a shy look as he does. "He knew exactly who I was, but it didn't bother him. Didn't phase him in the slightest. Here, I'm just Tim. I don't have to be anyone else but me."

I turn my attention to Jason. "I can't imagine that Tim advertised who he was when he first started coming here. How did you find out? Did you recognize him from the news?"

Jason laughs, low and easy as a grin spreads over his face. "I carded him."
"You what?" I gape in astonishment and glance back over at Tim, who's chuckling too.
"Yep. I said those glasses of his make him look 16 and asked for some ID."
Tim's not wearing said glasses today, but I've seen the ones Jason's referring to. He wears them often. "I can see that. So what did you think of your esteemed visitor after that?"

Jason shrugs, the movement doing wonderful things for his broad shoulders. "The whole night felt like the Twilight Zone. It was a slow night, so we had plenty of time to talk. We bonded over Adventure Time."
"Don't let Jason's attitude fool you," Tim interjects. "He's better read than I am. Eclectic tastes too, but he definitely has a penchant for the classics."

The look Jason gives Tim is fond and amused all rolled into one.
"So from the sound of it, you kept coming back," I ask Tim, taking another bite of the wonderfully seasoned samosa.
"I did. It wasn't long before I discovered I was becoming a regular. Tuesday nights were quickly becoming the highlight of my week."
"Mine too," Jason agrees. "I never thought anything would ever come of it, but damn if Tim wasn't just so easy to talk to. We've got a lot in common, but at the same time, we're living in completely different worlds."
"What do you mean by that?" I ask Jason.
"Look around you," he explains. "I'm a working class guy in a working class neighborhood. I grew up on the streets and was in and out of juvie and the foster system all the time. It wasn't until someone took a chance and gave me the opportunity to make something of myself that I finally got my act together. I've read some of your work, Vicki, so I know you understand better than most just what kind of life is out there on those streets," he finishes in a serious voice. "I'm one of the lucky ones."

In more ways than one, I discover as Jason tells more of his story. He's right too; he and Tim come from completely different aspects of life. But the similarities can't be missed. Both of these men are incredibly smart, they're hardworking, and both are used to shouldering the responsibilities that come with running a business.

As the interview progresses, I also see just how dedicated they are to each other. This is a relationship that's been built on a solid foundation. Their differences (and there are quite a few I learn too) mean they have to work on communication because what's normal or makes sense to one man doesn't necessarily mean the same to the other.

I know I've been granted a rare glimpse into the personal life of Tim Drake-Wayne when he decided to grant this interview, but there's one question I'm dying to ask. "What was your family's reaction to Jason?"

Both men start laughing, Jason shaking his head in obvious amusement as Tim gestures for him to start. "Tim wasn't as sneaky as he thought he was when he started coming here. The weekend after we first had lunch together, his brother Dick showed up. Didn't say much, but he was back a few weeks later when Tim was outta town for a business trip. Of course, we weren't quite official yet, so I didn't say anything, but you could tell he knew something was up."

Tim huffs a small laugh. "He thought I was coming here and getting smashed."
"Yeah, right. The only reason I make money off of you is because you tip so damn well. Most of the time, you drink water."
"And Bruce?" I ask, getting a feeling that the big man himself has been here too.
"Somehow, Bruce already knew," Tim replies with a shrug. "He came here the afternoon I handed in my resignation letter at WE."
"Tried to bribe me into staying away from his son," Jason grouses, but there's no anger. "I get why he did it, but on that day? Yeah, he was lashing out because I was an easy target."

I give Jason an obvious once over. "Jason, you're just as built as Bruce. Hell, with those shoulders, the muscle, and your height, you could probably stand toe-to-toe with him." It's true too. In person, Bruce Wayne is very physically imposing. He certainly keeps in shape for a man his age.
"I don't think he came here expecting to go a few rounds with me," Jason replies with an easy shrug of those shoulders. "Once I realized what he was doing, I turned the tables on him. I'm a bartender, I hear people talking about their problems all the time. I even pay attention when I don't have anything better to do. Bruce came here because he knew I had to know what was going on with Tim and why he resigned."

I give Tim a curious look. "I know you've said no comment many times on why exactly you quit WE. That still the case?"

The smile I receive in reply is all sass. "No comment."
I turn back to Jason. "So you turned the tables on Bruce?"
"I did," Jason nods slowly as he remembers what was obviously an important event in his and Tim's newly blossomed relationship. "Once he realized I wasn't after Tim for his money, we talked. He wasn't judgmental at all. He just wants Tim to be happy."

Knowing my time is almost up, I ask one more question, shifting my attention back to Tim. "Are you happy, Tim?"

He reaches out and takes Jason's hand, giving it a firm squeeze. The look they share says it all. "Stupidly happy."

## Chapter End Notes

Next week will be the fluffy chapter! (like this wasn't fluffy enough :P)

# Milestone Fourteen: Hot Toddies 

## Chapter Notes

I almost didn't post this chapter today as it's nothing but fluffy filler to indicate the passage of time. But, since I'm still working on what will be the climax of this arc (darn the distraction that is Dog Days), I finally decided to do so. Things pick up again next week, promise!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The article was a huge success. Vicki deftly wove the story of how one of the most successful young businessmen in the world crossed paths one fateful night with a young small business owner in the Bowery, successful in his own right after one man took the chance on a young punk and helped him turn his life around.

The public eats it up. The LGBT community loves that another high profile person has come out, especially one in the business world (not to mention someone as photogenic as Tim). Vicki had begged for a picture of the two of them together, but, in the interest of keeping Jason out of the news for as long as possible, the only one they approved was one where Tim is mostly blocking Jason's face as he leans in to whisper in his ear. Bruce congratulates them both and sends flowers to the bar for some reason neither of them understand.

Jason's just happy that Vicki respected their request for his privacy and only refers to him by first name. He has the distinct feeling she's humoring him but they did give her what will likely be the biggest story she writes this year. Privately, Tim tells him that the DI story is still Kon's to break first but if Vicki continues to honor their request for privacy, he'll do a second interview with her.

A couple of days later, Jason is thinking about closing up the bar for the night when his cell phone rings. He's gotten a lot better about carrying it around (damn Tim and being a notorious texter), plus it's easier than running back to the office to take a call. His eyes widen slightly when he sees the name.
"Hey, Tam. What's up?" He hasn't seen the woman since the Super Bowl, but he knows from both Stephanie and Tim that her and Steph are testing the waters. He'd been right about his blonde waitress having never dated another woman before, but Tam certainly hits all her buttons. So far, so good on that front.
"Hey there, Jason," Tam replies in that smoky voice he just loves. "Do you got a sec?"
"For you, I'll give ya a whole minute."
"Charmer. It's Tim. Have you talked to him today?"
Jason's instantly on alert. "Just texts. Said he was tired tonight and didn't feel like driving across town. You guys had a meeting today with some people for DI stuff, right?"
"Yeah, and that went fine. Contracts are being written up as we speak. But that's not what I'm calling about."
"Figured. What's wrong with Tim?"
Tam sighs in exasperation. "He's overdoing it again. Has he seemed under the weather around you the last few days? Because he sure has with me."

Jason thinks back to the last few times he's seen Tim. The younger man hasn't been around much since Vicki's article was published, saying he didn't want someone to follow him to the bar and lose that normal Vicki tried to preserve for him. But if memory serves, he's been looking a bit more tired than usual the last few days. "He's been looking like he could use some more sleep. He hasn't stayed here since the night before we went to the restaurant opening."
"That was last week..." Tam trails off as she thinks. "I think he's hiding it from you because he doesn't want you to worry. But he's pulled this crap with me too many times. Would you mind making a surprise appearance at his house? I just dropped him off, along with a large order of that spicy soup he likes when he's sick. Unless someone else hen pecks him, he'll probably pass out in front of his computer like he usually does."

Shaking his head, Jason sighs. "Fuckin' moron. Yeah, I was thinkin' about closing soon anyway. I'll get a few things together and head over."
"You got a key?"
"Yeah. I've also got the code for his garage. Easier that way."
"Okay. Thanks, Jason. I'll rest easier knowing someone else is worrying over him."
"No worries, girlie. I'll drop you a line in the morning."
He hangs up and immediately heads to the front door to lock it and turn off the lights in the window. It's barely after 10, but the slow Thursday night isn't going to get any busier. Everything gets closed down for the night, but before Jason heads upstairs to pack his overnight bag, he grabs a bottle of some of the decent whiskey from the back of the bar.

## If this doesn't make him at least smile, then I'm off my game.

He takes a quick shower and puts on some fresh clothes, then makes a detour to his kitchen to grab a few things. Knowing Tim, these ingredients won't be in his kitchen (though he has been better about keeping his kitchen stocked, at least with non-perishable items). He shrugs on his brown leather jacket over his red hoodie and puts on his motorcycle boots. Checking his pockets to make sure his gloves are there, he grabs his backpack and helmet before
locking up and heading back downstairs to the loading dock where he keeps his bike tucked away in a storage container.

The drive from the Bowery to the Upper West Side goes fast at this time of night, for which Jason is quietly grateful. It's cold, but he's ridden in worse. Soon enough, he's pulling up in front of Tim's now familiar brownstone. His Civic is parked in the short driveway, but Jason walks his motorcycle up to the garage and takes off one of his gloves. He keys in a code and presses his thumb to the scanner. The garage door opens with a quiet rumble.

He closes the garage door behind him and in the low light parks his motorcycle next to the Audi. There's not a lot of space, but he seriously doubts this car is going anywhere for the next few days. Even sicker than a dog, I doubt Tim would let me take his baby out without him along for the ride. Heh, I'd be the same way if he asked to drive my bike, so I can't fault him there.

Jason walks up a few short steps and uses his key to enter the brownstone. The door opens into the hallway leading back to the kitchen. He heads back there first to drop off his backpack and take off his jacket and heavy boots. He glances into the living room before heading upstairs to look for Tim. The other man spends more time on the second floor than anywhere else in the house.

Sure enough, Tim's sprawled out on the sofa, an empty takeout container of pho sitting on the floor, along with a wastebasket half full of tissues. The TV is on, but it's on some BBC nature documentary that Tim revealed long ago helps him get to sleep when he's by himself. "The accent's soothing," he tried explaining once to an incredibly amused Jason.

He looks half asleep but perks up when he sees Jason coming up the stairs. Scowling, Tim reaches for tissue and blows his nose. "Tam tattled I take it?" he sniffs as he tosses the used tissue in the trash. He sounds horrible.
"Yeah, she did," Jason replies as he walks right up to Tim and lays a hand over his forehead. He's warm, but it's not too bad. "Now I know why I haven't actually spoken to you for the last two days."
"I didn't want to worry you. You've got enough on your plate." Tim finishes with a loud hacking cough that sounds extremely painful.
"Right, because waiting for the police to call is so time consuming." Jason shakes his head at the hot mess he calls a boyfriend. "You take anything for that?"
"Yes?"
"Spicy soup doesn't count."
"I ate this and took a decongestant. It hasn't kicked in yet." Tim pulls his afghan tighter over his shoulders.
"Right, probably going really well with all the coffee you've drank today."

Tim smirks weakly at him and clears his throat. "I stopped at noon and switched to Earl Gray. You should be proud of me."

Jason chuckles in surprise. 'I am. That's quite the accomplishment. So I'm gonna go do a few things around here and when I'm done, I'm going to drag you up to the shower and put you to bed. Do you have a humidifier somewhere?"
"Upstairs bathroom."
"Good. I'll be back."
Jason jogs upstairs. The bedroom isn't as bad as he expected, but the bed sheets are all twisted, which means Tim's been tossing and turning as he tries to get comfortable. He strips the bed and tosses everything into a pile before he replaces it with fresh sheets. In the bathroom, he finds the promised humidifier packed away and takes that out. He fills it at Tim's sink, vaguely remembering being told that the water in this house is filtered six ways to Sunday, so he doesn't have to worry about boiling water and letting it cool downstairs before getting this set up.

The humidifier is soon chugging along on top of a towel Jason placed on Tim's nightstand. He picks up the soiled bedding and heads back downstairs. Tim ignores him as he passes through the second floor, looking more asleep than he did before.

## Good. He needs it. Just gotta get him upstairs.

Downstairs, Jason sets a full kettle on the stove to get some hot water going and starts the laundry. He digs through his backpack and pulls out the small bag of items he collected from his kitchen, as well as the bottle of whiskey.

This should seal the deal. Tim will be sound asleep within ten minutes after drinking this.
The drink is soon mixed up and Jason carries the warm mug upstairs, again bypassing Tim and taking it right to the bedroom.

Back downstairs, he picks up the TV remote and turns everything off. The only light is from the backlights Tim uses behind his monitors. Turning, Jason spies Tim sitting up and clutching his tissue box and his afghan tightly in his hands. His hair is a wild mess.
"You look pathetic," Jason comments as he helps Tim to his feet and wraps an arm over the shorter man's shoulders.
"Your face is pathetic," Tim mutters as he leans into Jason.
"Nice comeback. I'll need to remember to add head cold to the list of things that make your wit disappear." They stop in front of the staircase. "Do I need to carry you or have you got this?"

[^0]"Seriously? That's your scale for determining how sick you are?" I sense a story here. I bet I can get it out of Tam in the morning.

Tim clams up as he focuses on the stairs.
Upstairs, Jason takes the box of tissue and tosses it on the bed and fights with Tim for the afghan. "This thing is getting washed tonight. And so are you. Shower, then bed."

He manhandles Tim into the bathroom and gets the shower going, starting it as hot as it'll go to get the room warmed up. I have no idea where Tim's thermostat is. Knowing him, it's keyed to his phone or his tablet. He helps Tim out of his sweat soiled pajamas and turns the water temperature in the shower to something more tolerable.
"If you can wash yourself, great. If not, just stand there until I'm back and I'll lend you a hand."

Tim idly waves a hand, his eyes closed as he stands under the warm spray with his head back.
Jason picks up the old pajamas and the afghan and tosses them down the stairs to be added to the wash later. It's way too early for me to go bed. Laundry and disinfecting everything will keep me busy enough. I rarely get sick, but better safe than sorry.

He returns to the bathroom with a clean pair of pajamas and sets them on the counter. Through the steamed up shower doors, he can just make out Tim moving about. "How're you doing in there?"
"Fine."
He waits while Tim finishes with his shower. Soon enough, he's dried off, dressed in clean pajamas, and bundled off to bed. As his sick boyfriend sits on the bed, Jason reaches over and picks up the mug he'd left on the nightstand earlier. "Here, drink this before you lay down."

It's still warm, but not blisteringly so. Tim takes it and raises an eyebrow at the color. He takes an obliging sip and instantly starts coughing. "Holy shit," he rasps. "What is this?"

Jason grins. "A hot toddy. My own mix, though I added a bit more whiskey than usual to knock your ass out. Now drink up."
"A hot...toddy?" Tim starts snickering and takes another sip. Knowing what to expect this time, he doesn't cough the second go around. "Why am I not surprised you know how to make these."
"It's a drink that uses my last name, how could I not?" Jason retorts, still grinning. "I only break them out when people get sick. They're easy enough to make, but I prefer the good whiskey with them than the rotgut I keep on hand at the bar."
"Appreciated." Tim takes another sip, then another, larger this time, and hands the empty mug back to Jason. "This thing is dangerously good."
"Yeah, a little bit goes a long way. Time for bed, Tiny Tim." Jason pulls back the sheets and Tim shifts around to swing his socked feet up into bed.

He glares weakly at Jason as he lies back against the pillows. "I hate that name."
"Yeah, I'm sure you do. Get better soon and I'll stop calling you that."
Tim huffs a small laugh as he settles back into bed. "You're an asshole."
"Never pretended to be anything other than myself. You need anything else?" Jason picks up the tissue box and sets it on the table. "I'll bring a glass of water up in a bit, as well as your trash can."
"I'm good." Tim gives him a small smile and closes his eyes. "Thanks, Jason. I should have called you sooner." He yawns.
"Damn right you should have." Jason tousles Tim's hair. "I'll see you in the morning."
As he steps away, Jason pauses, looking back down at the sleeping man. He could have sworn he heard Tim say Love you, but it was lost in low hum of the humidifier.

I love you too he mouths and quickly walks away.

## Chapter End Notes

Next week: When it rains, it pours. What else can possibly go wrong for Jason?

# Milestone Fifteen: The Other Shoe Drops (What Else Can Possibly Go Wrong?) 

Chapter Notes

This is going to seem like a rather mundane chapter, but I swear, I'm leading up to something.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's a freezing morning a few days later when Jason wakes up to a loud knock on his front door. He groans and rolls over to look at his clock. It's barely after five.

What the hell is going on now? I went to bed maybe two hours ago.
There's a second knock, louder and longer than the first one.
This time, Tim wakes up. "Whazzat?" he asks fuzzily. He's still somewhat stuffy from his cold, but the worst is over. He'd insisted on coming over the night before, finally sick and tired of his and Tam's mothering.
"The door. Probably someone from downstairs needing something. Go back to sleep." Jason untangles himself from Tim and fumbles for his slippers as the other man mumbles something before falling back into the covers.

## Some mornings, I hate being a landlord.

Crossing the dark loft easily, Jason turns on the living room light and slips on his hoodie over his t -shirt from where he'd left it on the back of the sofa. Approaching the door, he peers out the peephole before opening it. He recognizes one of his tenants standing there.
"Buenas dias, Jason," Raul greets him. The man's in his mid 50s but with his graying hair and lined skin, he looks older. Jason can remember him living here when Mike was still alive and kicking. He rarely comes to the bar at all but he always makes a point to bring him tamales over the holidays when his wife makes them. "Sorry to wake you, but the water is cold."

The man's English has never been the best either so it takes Jason a moment to realize what he's actually saying. "No agua caliente?" he asks in his own broken Spanish.

Raul shakes his head. "No. Hace mucho frio."
"Dammit," Jason curses. "Uno momento." He closes the door and trots back to his bedroom to grab some thick socks. He puts them on, as well as his boots, before grabbing his keys and
heads out the door.

The two men go downstairs together. Jason unlocks the door to the basement and turns on the lights. He's always hated closed-in, dark places so he's put some extra money into the lighting down here so that there are no dark corners. They walk through the communal laundry area and he unlocks another door at the back of the room. It too is well lit as he hits the switch, but he also grabs the flashlight he keeps on a shelf by the door too.
"I swear, I hope it's just the pilot light that's gone out."
Raul nods in agreement. He'd been there when the pipes on the first floor burst one frozen morning right after Mike died. It had been Jason's first real test as the building manager and he's still proud of how he got through that mess.

The water heater is massive and old and Jason knows he's going to need to replace it sooner rather than later. With all the shit that's happened recently though, he's been praying for later.

The small puddle of water on the floor in front of the heater is the first sign that something's wrong. Raul spots it too and lets out a groan.
"Start boiling water," Jason says as he kneels and turns on the flashlight. He opens the panel for the pilot light. It's out. "Fuck." He starts shining the light around in the panel but he has no clue what he's really looking for. Turning the light back on is the extent of his skills here.

Instead, he shines the light onto the floor and follows the trail of water as best he can, crawling when he has to. It's through this process that he spots the crack in the base of the old heater. "Fuck," he swears again, more emphatically than last time. "Hey Raul, get me the duct tape?"
"Si. Donde esta?"
"Shelf by the door."
The man finds it quickly and reaches down and around to hand it to Jason. "Es mala?" he asks.
"Quizas," Jason replies as he tries to finagle the flashlight and the tape so he can move and still see what he's doing. Gonna need to seal this better than with just tape but it's all I got handy without turning off the water and draining the heater. Dammit, why did this have to happen now?

Makeshift repairs are soon done and Jason crawls back out and opens the panel for the pilot light again. Raul hands him a lighter without being asked. Seconds later, the light is burning again, bright and blue.
"Give it maybe veinte o treinta minutos," Jason says. He really needs to work on his Spanish. Yet another thing to add to my list of shit I'll probably never get to.

Raul shakes his head and Jason knows he doesn't have time before he leaves for work. "Lo siento," he offers and the older man pats him fondly on the shoulder.
"Nada que puedas hacer," he shrugs.
Jason's not sure what that means, but he gets the sentiment. There's nothing more he can do for now but get back upstairs and call his plumber.

A few minutes later, Jason hangs up the phone in his office, having left a message with the man he's been using for years. He then turns on the computer and types up a notice about the hot water being on the fritz and that he's working on it for the businesses and tenants in the building. He prints half of them in English, then uses Google Translate to print a bunch in Spanish. Grabbing his tape, he then proceeds to stuff everyone's mailboxes and posts the notices all over the building, floor by floor. He finally makes it to his floor and tapes the last ones of both languages on his door.

Because there will still be someone who makes it all the way up here without having read a single flier or thinks they're special and deserve extra attention. Assholes.

He's tired but as he lies down next to Tim, Jason knows it's going to be hard to fall back to sleep. Still, Tim's comfortable to cuddle next to in the warm bed and he soon finds himself in a light doze, one ear trained on the cell phone resting on his nightstand.

The expected call comes just after eight.
Jason's barely slept and he scrambles for the phone so as to not wake up Tim. "Hey, Tom, how are ya?" he says as he walks quickly across the loft and into the kitchen.

He explains what's going on in more detail to the plumber.
"Sounds like she's finally given it all she's got there, Jay," the man drawls in his thick Jersey accent. "I can be by in about two hours to see if there's anythin' else I can coax from her. But ta be honest, best start lookin' for a replacement."
"Yeah, I've been thinkin' that myself. Got any suggestions?"
Tom gives him the names of a few places to look and Jason jots them down on the notepad he keeps on his fridge. "All right, see you soon," he says and hangs up.

Sighing, he glares at the list. Jesus, when am I gonna catch a break here, huh? Bigger question is, how am I paying for this? I've got a line of credit from the bank, but I'm not sure it's going to be enough. I could borrow from the bar account, but Kori hates it when I do that. Some shit about comingling funds...

He gives up on any hopes of getting back to sleep and starts getting some tea ready. His kettle is soon on the stove and when he turns around to rummage through his tea drawer, he spots Tim sitting on a stool on the other side of the counter. The younger man looks half asleep sitting there, an elbow planted firmly on the countertop keeping his head upright.
"Fucking ninja," Jason mutters under his breath. "How long you been there?" he asks a bit louder.

Tim yawns in reply. "Whaz guh on?" he tries to ask but it comes out garbled. He clears his throat and makes a visible effort to pull himself together. Jason cracks a small smile as it's patently ridiculous just how not present Tim is most mornings before his first cup of coffee.

He tries again. "What's going on?" he asks more coherently this time.
"No hot water," Jason replies. "The old boiler in the basement is on her dying breath as we speak."
"Oh." Tim blinks sleepily as he processes what he's been told. "No shower then?"
"Not unless you want your balls to shrivel up and go into hiding."
"No." Tim shakes his head. "Fixing it?"
"Gotta start looking for a replacement. Not gonna be easy either as this building's older than hell and her plumbing is just as ancient." The main takeaway from the burst pipe situation a few years ago was that Jason learned a lot about the condition of the building's plumbing system in a very short period of time. The pipes were ancient, but they were galvanized steel, which lasts practically forever, and were in relatively good condition. It was just the system to move water through the pipes that needed work.

A remodel on the building's cooling and heating system, yes. He could make that happen. A full revamp of the complicated boiler system down in the basement? Nope.

Not yet. Not unless he can get a break from the bank. But they're never interested in lending money to anyone who calls the Bowery home. Fuckers.

Tim tries, he really does, but gives up with a shake of his head. The kettle whistles behind them.
"Want me to get your press out?" Jason offers and Tim nods.
While Tim's coffee does its thing, Jason gets more water ready for himself.
He starts thinking logistics of how to keep the bar up and running without hot water either. He can easily boil water in back for dishes, but the dishwashers are out of commission until this is fixed. Different scenarios and plans run through his mind as he gets his tea ready. The kettle whistles again.

By now, Tim's poured his own warm beverage into a mug (the one act he ever seems fully capable of in the morning) and follows after Jason to the sofa where he curls up against one of the arms and faces Jason. After several minutes, life finally comes back into his eyes. "So...the water heater's busted."
"Yup."
"Need me to look for one online?" he offers.
Jason takes a sip of tea. He opted for a stronger black tea blend this morning that packs quite the caffeine punch. Gonna need it today. "I've got some places to call in a little bit when they open. Tom will be here in a couple hours to see what he can do to baby the old girl along this last time until I can get a new one installed."
"How long will that take?"
"If I’m lucky, a week."
Tim arches an eyebrow. "If you're unlucky?"
"Two to three. It depends on where the new one is shipped in from."
"I can't believe a building of this size only has one water heater." Tim shakes his head.
"It's massive," Jason explains. "This is an old building and that boiler is just as ancient." He can't help the bitterness in his voice and hopes Tim isn't quite awake enough yet to catch it.

His luck is not with him today. "Are there pipes that need replacing too?" Tim asks.
Jason huffs in exasperation. "Fucking hell, everything needs to be replaced. But the pipes are in semi-decent shape, so they're low on the list. It's the boiler system that needs an update."
"Then why have you put it off?" Tim asks carefully.
"Because the fucking bank won't give me the loan to do it. The last time I asked, the loan officer said the bank wasn't willing to take on a risky loan like this because of the area."

Tim scowls. "Because this is the Bowery."
"Exactly. The assholes downtown think everyone who lives here are drug dealers and whores. Fuck them, this is a working class neighborhood, just one with a lot less class. There are plenty of good people here trying to make a living." Jason's gone over that last conversation with the bank in his head so many times, trying to see if there had been something he could have said or done to convince them otherwise.
"But you got the loan to improve the air ducts and the heating/cooling system."
"Yeah, I got lucky on that one. I was wet behind the ears, had just taken over all of Mike's accounts, and the bank thought they could fleece me."

They hadn't. Jason's secret weapon was Kori and her amazing head for numbers. Over the last five years, they've managed to payoff just over two thirds of that original loan. But now, with the fraud alert on his credit, as well as the freeze, it's going to be much more difficult.

Too many fucking hoops to jump through. God, this sucks. Damian, you limp-dick little pussy, if I see you anytime soon, I'm gonna punch you this time, to hell with the consequences.

Tim's quiet for a few minutes as he thinks over something. He's got that look on his face that tells Jason whatever it is, it'll be worth the wait.

Finishing his coffee, Tim leans over and sets the mug down on the end table before turning his attention back on Jason. He's got his business face on. "I'm going to tell you something that only Tam and Vic know right now. Very soon, I'm going to be purchasing a rather large strip of land just south of here, along the Sprang. It's all warehouses right now, but within the next six months, I'll be starting a massive renovation project to turn those buildings into the new DI research facility where Vic and I can work on our chip."

Jason gapes. He can't help it, this is completely news to him. "Wow. That's what you've been working on these last couple weeks, isn't it?"
"Yes," Tim nods. "I'm buying the property outright, so there's no mortgage or loans involved. However, once this news gets out and renovations start, guess what's going to happen to the property values around here?"
"They're going to start going up." Jason's had enough business classes to get where Tim is going with this. "Then the banks that do agree to lend money to projects around here will go wild on the interest rates and charge more than they ever could before."
"Exactly. If I wasn't going to be so busy with DI, I'd be tempted to buy similar buildings to this one and renovate them too, just to make sure housing costs stay as they should. Neighborhood gentrification is one thing, but driving people out who already have a hard time keeping a roof over their heads is another. I'm going to make a suggestion to Lucius about it so the Wayne Foundation can get involved in some low income housing projects around here." Tim's gaze grows fierce. "Anyways, I have a business proposal for you. I want you to hear me out before you say anything, then feel free to ask me all the questions you want."

Jason has a feeling he knows where Tim's going with this, but nods slowly.
"I remember you saying that Kori is on all of your business accounts. I assume this also means she's a cosigner on your current loan or line of credit, correct?" Tim waits for Jason to nod again and continues. "The bank will look much more favorably on your loan application if you take on another business partner, especially one who doesn't have a freeze on their credit right now. My proposal is this...I am offering you the use of my name to get the loan you need for whatever repairs and renovations this building needs. We will get it at a fixed interest rate so that the bank doesn't jack it up later when my plans go public. I am not lending you money, because frankly, I know you won't take it. But if you add me as a partner to your building account, then I can at least help you this way."

Tim finishes and leans back against the arm of the sofa to wait.
Jesus fucking Christ, does he really mean it? At this point, I'll take anything I can get, even if it is his money. But his name...damn, but there's not a bank in the city that would turn me
down with Timothy Drake-Wayne as a business partner. There's absolutely nothing in it for him either. I pretty much break even when it comes to the building each year; the real revenue comes in from the bar (fuck if I know how that happens). I can only raise rents so much before there's trouble but if I can get this project done, then the money I'll save in utilities should offset the additional loan payment I'll have to make each month.

Jason shifts so that he's leaning against the other arm of the sofa and faces his boyfriend. "I've got a few questions."
"Shoot."
*****

In the end, Jason agrees to Tim's offer.
Kori meets them at the bank, looking sharp in a tailored dress and a jacket of her own. She gives Tim a hug when they enter the bank together. "Thank you for doing this, Tim," she says quietly.
"Of course," he replies with a smile. "So, let's go freak out the staff, shall we?"
It's only when the financial specialist realizes just who she's adding to the account that she loses her composure momentarily. She's dealt with Jason and Kori before and while she's friendly enough, she never goes out of her way to be overly helpful. All this changes in a heartbeat as she reads the name on Tim's ID.

The woman doesn't get up, but she must have sent something to the branch manager as the man almost runs over to the small cubicle to greet Tim solicitously.
"I'm sure Carrie here will have you added to this account in just a few minutes," he almost babbles as he tugs nervously at the hem of his suit coat. "How else may we be of service today, Mr. Wayne?"

Jason has to bite his cheeks to keep from laughing at the pudgy man. This guy, along with the loan officer, have been the bane of his existence since he took over the accounts after Mike died. Next to him, Kori looks equally amused.

Tim, however, has his game face on and cuts right to the heart of things. "My associates and I actually want to speak with your loan officer. Are they in today?"
*****

A couple hours later, Jason crows in excitement as the three of them walk back into the bar. He'd spent the drive home on the phone with Tom, letting him know the downstairs plumbing remodel he's been harping on him about can finally move forward. It's still going to be a pain in the ass and a ton of work, but it's something the building desperately needs. He'll need to make more fliers to post around the building as the water will be intermittently turned off as the work progresses.

The one caveat Tim imposed on the project was that Jason get a few quotes for the work that needs to be done. He understands why Tim insisted on it, he really does, but sometimes the cheapest option isn't the best. But Jason now has a business partner, so he can't ignore him. Not when said business partner has experience in running a billion dollar company and is working towards getting his own business off the ground.

For the time being, Tom repairs the crack on the old boiler. As he explains to Jason, it needs to be coaxed along until the renovation gets off the ground. "It's overworked is what it is. Chuggin' along all day, then doin' double time in the evenin' when folks is home. I turned off da hot water to the washin' machines and turned the temperature down some. She'll still be hot, but not as hot as she used ta be."

Warm to tepid water is something he can deal with. It's better than stinging icicles of cold water.

But for now, Jason wants to celebrate. He's never gotten a leg up on the bank before and even though there's a lot of work ahead, he's over the moon.

He ducks behind the bar and reaches for the top shelf vodka, pouring three generous shots for himself, Kori, and Tim. "To dicking over the fucking bank," Jason toasts.
"To a new business partnership." Kori raises her glass.
"To hot water." Tim raises his glass.
"I'll drink to that," Jason says and slams his shot back in one swift swallow.

## Chapter End Notes

Next week...someone gets arrested. FINALLY

# Milestone Sixteen: Good News at Last 

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jason hates March. Yes, March Madness and the NCAA basketball tournaments keep him plenty busy, but the weather is bipolar, often alternating between balmy spring temperatures and frigid deep freezes, which he despises. Tim loves the nights where he can use Jason as his own personal space heater.

Despite all appearances to the contrary, Tim does not spend all his time at Jason's or at the bar. More and more things are starting to pile up now that DI officially owns a strip of land and warehouses at the south end of the Bowery. He spends a good amount of time at the bar, but he also spends an equal amount at home working on DI related things.

Which is fine with Jason. They're not joined at the hip and have their own lives to lead. Very different lives, a fact that's becoming more glaringly obvious to him as the weeks pass.

It's nearing the end of March, just a couple weeks after the water heater debacle, when Tim walks into the bar one Tuesday night, carrying his overnight bag and wearing a big grin. He takes his usual seat and sets the bag on the barstool next to him.
"You look happy about somethin'," Jason comments as he walks over. Haven't had a chance to talk to him for a few days, just texts. I need to remember to tell him what Tom found downstairs yesterday. Jesus fuck, when am I ever gonna catch a break?
"You will be too when you hear this." Tim's grin grows sharp. "Lonnie Machin was arrested today."

His breath catches. His news can wait. "About fucking time. GCPD or the Feds?"
"FBI. I'm trying to keep my distance and not prod my contact for information, so I'm not sure if it's because of your case or something else. Lonnie's been a hacker for years so it's very likely he's been on their radar for sometime." Tim shrugs apologetically. "Still, I think that's good news."
"Makes me wonder just how much you're on their radar when you put it that way." Jason shakes his head.

Tim shrugs disinterestedly. "I know I am. But I also work with them rather than against them."
"So you're on their 'approved list'?"
"Sure, that's as good a way of putting it as any."

He sighs in exasperation. "Just promise me I'm not going to be raided by the FBI or the NSA for anything you may have done while connected to my wi-fi, okay?"

Tim grins at him in the way that makes him want to strangle the younger man.
"Want your usual?" Jason asks instead as he suppresses the urge.
"Sure. I haven't been on this side of the bar for awhile."
"Ain't that the truth?" Since the New Year, it's more common to see Tim behind the bar than in front of it, lending a hand when Jason gets swamped or trapped in the kitchen. It's one of the reasons why he switched up the menu again. Since the change last month, he's been out front more often, chatting up people and doing his job. He has more fun when he's changing up the menu than when he's serving the final results.

But he can't deny that the food he serves is part of what makes this place so successful. Damned if I do, damned if I don't. This is why I can't see myself going to culinary school. I have no desire to open a restaurant. I like the creative process and yeah, I get a thrill when people say they like my food, just not on that scale. Elevated bar and street food it is.

As Jason brings the plate of fried pickles back up front, he can't help but roll his eyes when he takes in the sight of his boyfriend. He must have had a meeting today because he's got a dress shirt on under the navy blazer though the tie seems to have been tossed by the wayside. His hair is pulled back, still in desperate need of a cut. Tim likes it long and refuses to get more than a trim.
"You know, you sitting there like this reminds me of the first time you wandered in here."
Tim arches an eyebrow as he picks up a too hot pickle and quickly drops it. "How so?"
"Your no-longer-professional suit. I guess I'm feelin' nostalgic." Jason shrugs. "I can be sentimental when I want to be."
"You're a big softie under that gruff exterior."
"Shhh, don't announce it to the world."
Someone at the other end of the bar calls his name and Jason gets pulled away. When he returns to Tim, he's almost done with his food. "So I was thinking about Lonnie," he starts.
"Yeah?"
"Even if he's been arrested on other charges, the FBI is still going to confiscate his computer and equipment. So if they haven't made the connection yet, they will. The only thing I removed from his computer were the videos." Tim wipes one of the last pickles though the spicy aioli and pops it in his mouth. He chews thoughtfully.

Jason sees where Tim's going with this. "It's just a matter of time then."

Tim nods and swallows. "I'm debating the merits of telling Bruce now or waiting until afterwards. If he has no idea what's going on, he'll be more apt to throw everything he has at Damian to get him out of prison."

Chewing his lip, Jason thinks it over. As much as he wants to keep Bruce in the dark for as long as possible, he knows Tim is right. "What happens if you warn him too soon? This is his son we're talkin' about here."
"That's the risk. I don't want to miscalculate. Not like last time."

They both pause as they remember the fallout from when Tim submitted his resignation from WE.
"Yeah, seeing Bruce Wayne wander in right after I open for the day was a real kick in the pants. Next time someone from your family comes in here to chat about their problems, I'm charging for it," Jason teases as he leans against the bar, arms loosely crossed.
"It's because you're easy to talk to," Tim replies, taking a sip from his jack and coke.
"Uh, no. Asshole, remember?" Jason gestures to himself. Before he lets Tim reply, he asks another question. "Going back to Lonnie though, do you think Damian's going to find out? That he's been arrested."

Tim toys with another pickle. "That's another of the variables I'm weighing. I only found out because I've been keeping tabs on him. Since we kicked Lonnie out of your network, he only contacted Damian once to let him know you must have discovered him because he couldn't access anything anymore." Tim smirks. "Said whoever you have keeping him out is very good too." He sounds pleased.
"Yeah, yeah, keep patting yourself on the back. Did Damian reply?" He's very curious about this as Tim's never mentioned it before.
"Yep. Said Lonnie's services were no longer required and that a final payment would be sent the usual way." Tim looks up at Jason and scowls. "He also said that Lonnie could do what whatever he wanted with the information he'd collected from you."

What the hell? "And you didn't tell me this?" Jason's voice grows loud at the news. Heads turn from down the bar but turn away quickly when they see who he's yelling at.
"He didn't do anything with it besides what he initially sent to Damian. It's just sat there for the last eight weeks," Tim retorts. "He knew he'd been compromised when he went to watch those videos of Kori and Roy and activated the virus I left. I crashed everything so hard he had to rebuild from scratch. He had backups of his hard drive, but didn't discover that I found those too. That's how I've been able to monitor what he's been doing."
"That doesn't explain why you didn't tell me this before," Jason replies heatedly. "That's my
information that asshole has. What's to say he didn't do something else with it?"
"He didn't," Tim says, his composure breaking as his tone also rises. "If he'd so much as touched that file, I'd have known and shut him down again. Having your information on that computer is a good thing right now as the FBI is going to find it when they look. It'll seal the deal on whatever they arrested Lonnie for and point them towards Damian. He didn't cover his tracks as well as he thought he did, I told you that already."

Jason clenches his fists. Sometimes, Tim really pisses me the fuck off. "Yes, you told me that. Not any of this other shit. I don't appreciate being kept out of the loop like this."
"I'm sorry, but you were busy getting ready for Super Bowl, then Vicki happened, and then you had everything going on with the water heater and getting that squared away. I didn't want you to worry about it. I would have told you if he'd tried to do anything else with your information, I swear." At some point, Tim's gotten off the barstool and is standing, facing off against Jason from the other side of the countertop. He's apologetic, but isn't backing down.
"Always have to have an answer for everything, don't you?" Jason snaps but shakes his head. He scowls. Knowing he's lost sucks, but that doesn't mean he has to be an adult about it.

Tim senses the shift in mood and sits back down on the barstool. 'I've had to for most of my life." It's as close to an apology as Jason's going to get and he knows it.
"Just tell me shit like this next time, all right? I'm not a delicate little snowflake."
"I never thought you were."
Jason sighs hard and rolls his shoulders, noticing how stiff they'd gotten. Jesus Christ, I just want to throttle him when he does this. Keeping secrets and hiding shit. Yeah, he doesn't want to worry me, but this is MY life he's got in his hands. I swear, he knows more about my shit than I do his. But then again, I haven't asked...If I did, he'd tell me. I know he would.

The tension deflates as Jason pours himself a glass of water. "I think telling Bruce soon is the better option," he offers. "Make an appointment, catch him at the office, whatever. I bet Dickie's gonna flip his shit when he finds out about this too."

Tim groans and rests his head against the bar for a moment. "I don't even want to think about that. He and Damian are close, or as close as the demon gets to people."
"What are our chances of getting Barbara on our side?" Jason may have only met the woman a few times, but he likes her. She's logical and practical, much like Tim, but even he knows to watch out as she apparently has the famed Irish temper that matches her red hair.
"Very good. I'm not worried about her at all." Tim raises his head. "Cass too. The only wild card is Alfred."
"Yeah, I can see that." Alfred's not afraid to stand up to Bruce, that I know. He's not a servant in the traditional sense of the word. He's family and has just as much of a voice as the rest of them.

Tim heaves a huge sigh and takes a sip of his drink. "I'm gonna sleep on it and make a decision in the morning. I already checked with Tam to see what Bruce's schedule is like tomorrow afternoon and she can fit me in at the end of the day if needed."

Jason nods thoughtfully. "Just let me know what you decide. So I've got a much easier question for you," he says, changing the topic.
"What's that?" Tim gives him a wary look.
"What do you want to do for dinner?"
"How's that an easy question?"
*****

Still riding on the nostalgia train, Tim takes Jason for dim sum the next afternoon for lunch. It's not something Jason eats often, so he tucks in with gusto as the carts come around. But Tim picks at his dumpling, staring into his tea like the loose leaves at the bottom really do tell the future.

He's distracted.
"Still haven't decided, have you?" Jason asks after swallowing a mouthful of Chinese broccoli.

Tim glances up, a startled look on his face. "Huh?"
"About Bruce."
"Oh. Yeah, I'm weighing pros and cons right now, but even with all the cons, I know it's what I should do." Tim picks up his shredded dumpling and sticks it in his mouth.
"Damned if you do, damned if you don't?" Jason pours himself some more tea. He has this kind at home, but it always tastes better when he's in a Chinese restaurant.
"Pretty much," Tim replies after swallowing.
"Want me to come with?"
That garners him an amused look. "You'd cause a riot if I brought you to WE. Bye-bye privacy."

Jason smirks and leans back in his chair. "What can I say? I was born pretty."
Tim laughs, which is what he'd been hoping for, and finally starts eating.
*****

After lunch, Tim drops Jason off back at the bar so he can go home, change, and prepare a few things for his meeting with Bruce.
"I'll be back this evening," he says as Jason gets out of the car.
"I'm making samosas this afternoon, of course you will." He grins as Tim's eyes light up.
A couple hours later, Jason opens the bar at 3 like he usually does. He pulls out a book Stephanie recommended to him. He's not sure when she has free time to read for fun, but Midnight Riot is capturing his attention and it's been hard to put down.

He's positive there will be at least one visitor tonight and had seriously debated the merits of just staying closed for the day, even as he cooked and mixed up the filling for his samosas. The chalk menu above the bar says turnovers, but Tim had taken one bite and dubbed them samosas (which is rather funny because half his clientele calls them empanadas).

Fully engrossed in the novel as he is, he doesn't miss the front door of the bar opening up and a tall woman entering. Looking up, Jason opens his mouth to greet her and promptly snaps it shut. Holy fuck, that's the most gorgeous woman I've ever seen. Black hair pulled back into a smart looking chignon, the woman has classic features, with high cheekbones and blue eyes that Jason swears could see right through him.

As she takes a seat at the bar, she removes her overcoat and smiles at him, her full lips a subtle shade of red.
"Hi," Jason fumbles, feeling like he's an awkward teenager again. "What can I get for you?"
"I'll have water for the moment. I'm looking for Jason Todd. Are you him by any chance?"
Jason feels his stomach sink. I swear to God, anytime a hot looking woman comes in here asking for me by name these days, it never means anything good. Fuck. "Yeah, I'm Jason. And you are?"

The woman reaches into the pocket of her navy blazer and pulls out a badge, flipping it open. "I'm Diana Prince with the FBI. I believe we have a...mutual friend."

He can't help it. He grins broadly. "Yeah, I think we do. We've been wondering when someone would show up around here."

Diana's smile grows, flashing perfect teeth. 'I've known Tim for almost ten years now. I'm surprised he didn't push harder to get me here sooner. Other than that one message and a massive data dump, that's all I heard. It took me weeks to figure everything out."

Jason huffs a small laugh and shakes his head. "He said he didn't want to be pushy. Other than some stuff from the credit card companies confirming I'm not liable, that's all we've heard since I filed my police report," he explains. "Hang on a second."

He ducks under the bar and goes to the front door, locking it and turns off the lights in his windows for good measure. Returning to the bar, he then pours Diana her water and sets it down on a napkin in front of her. "I've been waiting almost three months for this conversation. I don't want to be interrupted."
"I understand," Diana nods and sips at her water. "I've got some questions for you, of course. What's going to be tricky in your case is concealing Tim's involvement. It's one thing to have an IT specialist discover what's going on, but it's a completely different one when you have someone like Tim involved."
"I was afraid of that." Jason crosses his arms and leans against the back of the bar. "I'll level with you. I'm still not sure if I want to press charges against Damian. What that's gonna do to Tim, to his family, and what those repercussions could be..." he shakes his head. "I've been thinkin' about it for awhile now and even though Tim says he's okay with it, I'm not."
"He's lucky to have someone like you in his life," Diana replies. "I read that article on the two of you and the reporter really did you justice." She reaches into a messenger bag and pulls out a slim laptop. "Let's get started."

She asks about the events leading up to the discovery of his computer being compromised, what he noticed and when. The fact that Roy had set up his network and found he'd been compromised first she found helpful. As she explains, "We could chalk it up to your friend Roy finding the initial data breach, then calling in a specialist. Tim may want to talk to his sister-in-law and have her reach out to you. She runs a network security firm."
"I've met Barb before. She's pretty cool."
"You have no idea," Diana smirks. "Moving on..."

## Pretty sure I do.

Jason tells her about what Tim found later that night, including the videos. "He deleted them all and said he left a virus or something that crashed Lonnie's system the next time he went to watch my friends."

Diana shakes her head. "Petty, but I understand why he did it. That's one of the ultimate invasions of privacy."
"Personally, I didn't mind so much. I've seen and done more things than Tim could ever dream of. I was more worried about him and what would happen if that were to surface."

They talk some more, Jason telling Diana about how Tim discovered Damian was behind the whole thing. "It's one thing to attack me personally, but I've got a responsibility to everyone who works and lives in this building. I consider myself insanely lucky that Roy found this when he did, because the damage was minimal. I had to apply for a new loan a few weeks ago when the old water heater downstairs finally crapped out. There's no way in hell I could have done that without Tim, what with the freeze on my credit and the other shit that comes with my address."

The FBI agent nods thoughtfully as she types up her notes. "As you already know, what Damian Wayne's done is a federal offense since he opened a mailbox in your name and engaged in willful fraud against you. Even if you don't press charges against him and Lonnie Machin for stealing your identity, the federal prosecutor is still going to try Damian for mail
fraud. It's a serious felony, though with his age, it could be anywhere from a few months to a couple years in prison."
"And if I do press charges?" Jason asks slowly.
"10 to 20 years, depending on the judge." Diana gives him a level look, her blue eyes serious. "You're going to have to decide what to do soon. You'll be receiving a call from someone in the US Attorney's office before the day's out. Damian's high profile, so this case is going to move faster than usual. But, it's going to be done smart considering the type of defense his father and his mother can muster up for him if he chooses to plead not guilty."

I knew this day would come eventually. Time to make that choice, Jaybird. "Do you know when Damian's going to be arrested?"

I'm gonna have to decide by then as there is no way in hell I'm not going to be receiving visits from at least Bruce and maybe Dickie that same day to try and sway my mind.

Diana's blue gaze stares right through him, like she knows exactly what Jason's thinking. She looks at her watch. "My partner should be picking him up right about now."
"Shit."

## Chapter End Notes

Any fans of the 2006 Wonder Woman series where Diana became an agent for the Department of Metahuman Affairs under Sarge Steel? It's this run that became the inspiration for making her an FBI agent in this AU.

Next week...Tim's meeting with Bruce and some new points of view. Gee, I wonder what's going to happen while Tim's at WE?

# Milestone Seventeen: Bearding the Lion 

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tim sits in a chair he dragged over to Tam's desk while he waits for Bruce's current appointment to finish. He feels oddly calm, much as he did when he when was biding his time in handing over his resignation letter. On his way up, he'd run into several familiar faces who had all been happy to see him, one person even being so bold as to ask if he was returning for good. It was nice to see he's been missed.
"I wish you'd tell me what you're up to this time," Tam says quietly, her eyes on Tim even as her fingers dance over the keyboard in front of her. "I have to deal with the fallout."
"I wish I could, Tam, but Bruce needs to hear this from me first." He pulls out his phone to check the time, but also to reread the message he'd gotten from Diana as he left his house. She'd sent him an email informing him that she was on her way to see Jason this afternoon. She may not have come out and said it, but if she's going to see him, then Damian's arrest is imminent. I couldn 't have timed this better if I'd tried.
"Just tell me you and Jason aren't engaged yet. I still have six months to go before my dates in the pool come up."

Tim huffs a small laugh and gives his friend a wry grin. "No, we're not. We're business partners now, but that's the only piece of paper we've signed together."

Tam chuckles at the news. "How did that happen?"
He welcomes the distraction and starts telling Tam the story about the water heater, glossing over the fact that he co-signed the loan because of the fraud alert on Jason's credit. No one outside the bar knows what happened. Not yet.

It's not long before the door to Bruce's office opens and Lucius and Damian walk out. The older man's face brightens as he spots Tim and promptly walks over to greet him. Tim stands and lets himself be pulled into a hug. If I could steal this man away from Bruce, I would in a heart beat. With him and Tam at my side, nothing could stop us.
"It's good to see you, Tim. What brings you by today?"
"Just need to pick Bruce's brain on a few things," Tim lies easily. "The joys of a running a start-up, you know?"
"I know," Lucius replies with a smile. "Just remember that my door is open for you too, anytime."

Tim grins back, genuinely. "I know, and I appreciate it. If Bruce finds out you're giving me advice though, he'll start pouting."
"Father does not pout," Damian finally chimes in. "It is beneath him."
Tim's been hoping Damian would have taken one look at him and ignored him as he left, but that doesn't appear to be the case. "He does too," he replies, making sure to keep the easy grin on his face even when all he wants to do is grind his teeth and smash his fist into Damian's face. "Especially with Dick around. Watch him sometime and you'll see."

Damian's mouth firms into a thin line as he glares down at Tim. He hasn't quite inherited his father's height, but he's taller than Tim, and has been trying to use the difference to intimidate him since he came back from California. If you only knew, Damian...I could have you on your knees in an instant if I wanted to. You'd never know what hit you.

Lucius steps in before the youngest Wayne can start his tirade. "Well, Tim, as much as I'd like to stay and chat, you do have an appointment to keep. Come on, Damian. Let's get you started on your new assignment."

The young man nods stiffly and all but stalks away. Lucius pats Tim on the shoulder as he walks off after him.
"Dad's been wrangling Damian around here since the New Year," Tam comments from where she's standing behind her desk. "He and Bruce come up with different assignments and projects to keep him out of their hair. They're both looking forward to when he leaves for college."

Tim stares after them a moment longer. You'll be leaving for somewhere else a lot sooner, Damian. If you would only learn that not everyone is your enemy, that you're not superior to everybody. Your pride is going to be your downfall. You crossed that line and I will protect what's mine and do what's right, even if Bruce never speaks to me again.
"Tim?" Tam asks when he's been silent for too long. "Bruce is waiting."
He takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. "Time to enter the lion's den."
Tam's brown eyes widen at Tim's words. As he enters Bruce's office, he catches her muttering, "I hope you know what you're doing."
*****

Bruce looks up from his computer, a small smile on his face. His last meeting of the day is Tim. He's not entirely certain why his son felt he needed to make an appointment to see him when he could easily do so outside of work hours, but, judging from the set of Tim's shoulders as he enters the office, it's something important.

He's wearing his game face, the one he learned from Janet. A veneer of polite affability over a core of steel. It's not quite the glacial expression Janet was capable of when she was about to rip someone to shreds; Tim only pulls that one out when he's furious about something. His fuse is long, much longer than Dick's. He burns bright and quick while Tim's a slow burn that blows up when you least expect it.

Something's going on. The last time I saw him like this was when he handed me his resignation letter. I wonder what it is now.
"Hello, Tim," Bruce greets from his desk, standing to walk around and give his son a brief hug. "I haven't seen you since the Super Bowl. How've you been?"

Tim returns the hug and relaxes enough to smile wryly. "I've been busy. You probably heard I bought some land recently."
"I did," he replies as he gestures for Tim to take a seat. Returning to his chair, Bruce sits. "Interesting location, but I can see the merits. Lucius said you dropped him a line about the Wayne Foundation buying up some of the neighboring buildings?"
"Yes. I'm concerned that once word gets out about what I'm doing, property values will jump and people won't be able to keep up with the rent."

Bruce nods, seeing the concern. "You do know you could have avoided this by building elsewhere, right?"

Tim chuckles ruefully. "I know. But the location's ideal for our needs and I can renovate everything without breaking my budget."
"I'll make sure the proposal is looked at during the next meeting," Bruce promises, nodding slightly. Now that the pleasantries are out of the way, he cuts right to the chase. "So what brings you in today? I assume it's DI related since you made an appointment." He settles back into his chair and waits.

His son's façade breaks long enough for him to catch the weariness in Tim's body language. Whatever is going on, it's been wearing on him for some time. Bruce narrows his eyes in concern, a suspicion rising in his gut. "Or is it not DI business that brings you in? Is something going on with Jason that you need to talk about?"

It's way too soon for his dates in the engagement pool. Even as romantically challenged as everyone says he is, even he can see where Tim and Jason are eventually headed. He has another, more private bet with Alfred that they're going to elope rather than walk down any aisle or go before a judge in Gotham.

Tim's blue eyes flash at his boyfriend's name and the almost glacial expression returns. He squares his shoulders.

Damn. He's upset about something, but I don't think it's with Jason. It involves him though.
"Yes, there is something going on with Jason. And it all goes back to something Damian did," Tim replies crisply, all signs of affability gone as he straightens up. Bruce can feel the shift in power as his son takes control of the conversation. For the moment, he lets him.
"Damian? What did he do this time?" He's almost hesitant to ask. It has to be bad if Tim's this riled up.
"Damian hired a hacker to break into Jason's office computer and steal all of his personal information. He then turned around and used that information to open credit cards in Jason's name." His tone is frosty, starting to match eyes that still flash with glacial fire only a Drake seems capable of. On rare occasions, Jack would pull this same expression in the boardroom or during an important meeting. It never boded well for the recipients, especially considering how easy going Jack was most of the time. Seeing it on Tim is a blunt reminder of whose son he really is.

Bruce feels his heart stop beating for a moment before it starts stuttering back into rhythm. No. No, no, no...Damian. What have you done? He takes a deep breath and lets it out, noticing as he does that his hands are clenched into tight, icy fists. Forcefully, he unclenches them, knowing the movement isn't missed by the young man sitting across from him.
"Did he use them?" he asks, his voice harsh as it rips out of his throat.
Tim nods stiffly. "Maxed them all out. He also opened a mailbox at a local post office to have everything sent to." His voice is still all crisp business.

Bruce closes his eyes as his stomach sinks into the floor beneath him. Why? Damian, how could you have done this? Jason didn't do anything to you, other than poke at your immense pride. And Tim...Oh God, he must have found whoever it was who broke into Jason's computer. He's too good with them to not have.

Opening his eyes, he asks, "How...how did you discover all this?"
"Jason noticed something going on with his ordering system right after New Year's..." Tim tells Bruce what he's sure is an abridged version of the story, but it's still enough to let him know the young man across from him has been hacking again. It's the only way he could have found all of this information on his own. He's run background checks on everyone who works for Jason, just to be certain his son is safe, and the only one even remotely capable of this is Roy Harper.

He's good, but not as good as Tim. Unless he involved Barbara somehow...
"...Jason filed a police report and we've been waiting ever since."
"Why wait until now to inform me of this, Tim?" Bruce can't help but growl. "We could have kept this private. Mediated a resolution with Jason and..."
"You mean buy him off?" Tim interrupts sharply. "Pay for his silence because Damian's a Wayne? You're missing the point, Bruce. How is Damian ever going to grow up if he doesn't learn that he has to take responsibility for his actions?"

The statement silences him momentarily as he understands what Tim's really getting at. Damian's orchestrated his own fall. It's been months since Tim caught him. He'll never admit it, but he had to have sent a tip to someone at the FBI or the NSA; I know he's got contacts there after everything he's done. If that's the case...then Damian's going to be arrested soon. This meeting is a courtesy.
"Why wait until now?" he repeats firmly.
"Because the hacker Damian hired was arrested yesterday," Tim replies, a hint of smugness in his voice. "It's simply a matter of time before the FBI finds Jason's information on his server and traces where it was sent to." He leans back in his chair, face grim. "Damian will be arrested, Bruce. There's nothing you can do to stop that. What you do have control over is what happens afterwards."

Do I throw the entirety of my legal team into Damian's defense and get him off the hook? Or do I buy Jason's silence to keep him from pressing charges? And Tim ...he's already drawn his line in the sand. He's made his choice for where he stands in this and it's not with his family. By going after Jason, someone Tim cares about immensely, Damian's earned Tim's enmity. I always thought they'd eventually work things out between them, but there's a snowball's chance in hell of that happening now.

Another realization strikes him. This is going to break us apart.
Bruce rubs at his face, feeling his age as the gravity of everything sinks in. "What's Jason going to do? Is he going to press charges?"

Tim shrugs. "To be honest, I'm not entirely sure. I know he believes that if he doesn't, then he's protecting $m e$ from the fallout. That he's protecting DI."
"The repercussions of this will hurt all of us," Bruce replies sharply. "People will lose faith in the name Wayne."
"All because of the petty and childish actions of a barely 18 year old boy?" Tim all but snaps. "Yes, I foresee short term bumps for WE until this gets squared away, as well as for DI. I've been taking pains to inform my investors from the start that I am in no way affiliated with WE. If they withdraw their support while all this goes down, then so be it. I wooed them once, I can do it again when things quiet down."
"And what about your family?" Bruce barks, standing abruptly and slamming his hands on his desk. "This is going to destroy any opportunities Damian has for his future!"

At that, Tim stands as well, fists clenched as his features finally twist into the Janet Drake wall of impenetrable ice, but his eyes burn with the force of his rage. "Don't preach to me about family, Bruce. Damian is your son. You've had the opportunity to be a father and teach him something of compassion and integrity for the last eight years, but instead, you let him run wild because you were too afraid he'd go back to his mother and you'd never see him again. Say what you will about family, but we all know blood is thicker than water."

The words hit Bruce as solidly as a blow to the chest because Tim is absolutely correct. There were so many times over the years where he could have, should have, stepped in to curb Damian's holier than thou attitude, to show him the right way, but he didn't. Instead, he let his only blood son do as he would because he was afraid that he'd lose him.

And now, he's on the brink of losing another son through his inaction. All three of you are my boys. You. Dick, and Damian. You're my sons...
"Tim, I...I'm sorry." He knows it's not enough, that it will never be enough.
"It's not me that deserves an apology, Bruce."
Jason. He's the real victim here. None of this would have happened if he and Tim hadn't crossed paths, if he'd never met any of us. He doesn't deserve this.
"I would like to speak with him," Bruce says as he looks at his son. His beautiful boy with the razor sharp mind so similar to his own. He never deserved Tim, he knew that. More so than Dick, Tim was someone else's son. He stepped into the role of parent once again for a boy in need, but Tim had been just as loved and cherished by the Drakes as Dick had been by his parents. That love had tempered him, and still drives him to this day. He wants to make his parents proud but by doing the right thing. Tim's always had a strong sense of justice. His actions in this shouldn't be such a surprise.
"I know. And he wants to speak with you," Tim replies coolly. "He..."
They're interrupted by Lucius suddenly storming into Bruce's office, doors flying wide as he rushes in. "Bruce! I need you right now. An FBI agent and some GCPD officers have arrested Damian."
*****

Damian only half listens as Lucius Fox explains the trivial project he and Father have come up with for him this week. It's something he can easily handle, but it has no meaning.

Not like the projects Drake was assigned while he was still here. Those projects...they were interesting. While he's always considered himself more intelligent than his so-called older brother, he can recognize the merit behind higher education. The real question is, where should he go? Any university in this country would be blessed to have him, but Mother has always disparaged the American education system as being backwards (which he agrees with), so perhaps it would be better if he were to look abroad.

But that takes me too far from home. I have interests here I need to keep an eye on and having an ocean between myself and them will do me no good.

Seeing Drake outside his father's office earlier has left a bitter taste in Damian's mouth. Somehow, the young man is coming out ahead in their ongoing battle to be considered the true Wayne heir. The most annoying thing is, he has no idea how he's doing it.

I thought ruining that Bowery trash bartender he's so taken with would turn his focus off his new company and would keep him distracted for awhile.

But no, that fool Machin couldn't even listen to basic instructions. I told him to edit every other supply order the bartender made, not every order. Small wonder he was found so quickly. Whoever Todd hired to get Machin out and keep him out was very good. If I only knew their name, I should have hired them instead.

That reporter failed me too. I thought outing Drake would hurt him, but he somehow turned that around to work in his favor as well. He's the media darling, the one who seems to have it all figured out.

The ball is in my court once again. We'll see who gets the last laugh, Drake. Just you wait.
Fox drones on and Damian stares impatiently at the computer screen, eager to get started so that he can be done with the whole thing.

What is he doing here today, anyhow? He hasn't set foot in this building since he quit. What game is he playing? He hadn't missed suppressed anger in Drake's eyes earlier. It had been there at the restaurant opening he last saw him at too. He can't know what I did to his little boy-toy. I covered my tracks well.

His thoughts race as he tries to work it out.
"So what do you think, Damian? Sounds a bit more challenging than the last project," Fox says.

Glaring at the old man, Damian opens his mouth to deliver a scathing retort on what he really thinks of this waste of time when there's a brisk knock on the door to the small office he's been given on the executive floor.

Without waiting for a response, the door opens, revealing a tall blonde man. He's wearing a suit that has seen better days, with the collared shirt beneath open at the neck. Behind him are two WE security guards, as well as two GCPD officers.
"Damian Wayne?" the man asks, then, without waiting for an answer, withdraws a billfold from a pocket in his jacket and flips it open. "Tom Tresser, FBI. I need you to come with me and these fine officers for a little trip downtown to answer a few questions."

For the first time in a long while, Damian feels his heart leap up into his throat.
Fox stands, almost knocking his chair to the floor as he rises. "What are you talking about? Damian's not going anywhere unless I see some additional proof of your identity. I'm sorry, but those badges are a dime a dozen online."

The FBI agent and Fox go back and forth while Damian thinks quickly, trying to figure out why the FBI would want him. The only thing he comes up with is that Machin has somehow failed him again.

## Damn him.

The blonde man finally approaches the desk and looks down at Damian. "Well, your boss is convinced I am who I said I am, so let's get going, kid."

Damian scowls as he rises. "He is not my boss. Do you have any idea who I am?" he all but hisses.
"Yeah, Damian Wayne. Son of Bruce Wayne. If you think your name is going to scare me, you got another think coming."
"And just why is my presence required?" he sneers as he pushes away the questions over why the FBI agent is here. He reminds himself of who he is. Of his excellence in everything he does. He does not make mistakes.
"I should think that's pretty obvious." He holds out a piece of paper. "Mail fraud and identity theft are pretty serious crimes. We got some questions to ask before we arrest you."
"And if I refuse to go with you?" I do not make mistakes. Machin, when this is over, I am going to hunt you down and toss you into the Sprang with weights around your neck.

The agent smirks. "Then I get to arrest you now and parade you through this building in handcuffs. Take your pick, kiddo. I'm sure dear old dad will have his attorney ready and waiting by the time we get to police headquarters." He puts the paper back in his pocket. "What's it gonna be?"

It's the final straw for Damian as reason gives way to rage. I will not be treated like this. "What I want is to wipe that smirk off your face."

So he does.
*****

For the second time in less than an hour, Bruce feels the blood rush from his face. "You knew," he says accusingly to Tim as his attention shifts back to him.

The glacial expression on his son's face hasn't wavered. "I knew it would be soon. I learned right before I arrived that Diana was on her way to see Jason today."

The name is a curve ball that throws him for a momentary loop. Diana Prince? That's who Tim reached out to? Goddammit. There had been some chemistry between the two of them when she and her partner Tresser were assigned to investigate the original Drake Industries after the FBI received a tip that not all was as it seemed to be under the new CEO Kauffman. While Tresser annoyed him, Diana captivated him. In the end, they only ever had dinner together a few times before it became apparent to Bruce that while she was interested in him too, her career meant more. He could appreciate that and they parted on good terms.
"Tim, what's going on?" Lucius asks, picking up that he's missing something vital. Bruce catches Tam peeking into the office, worry and alarm easy to see on the woman's face.
"I'm sorry, Lucius, but it looks like my time is up." Tim turns and picks up his coat, shrugging it on. "Bruce, you know where to find me tonight."

With that, he walks out, nodding slightly to Tam as he strides past her and out of sight.
"Bruce?" Lucius turns a wild gaze on his friend. "What on earth is going on? Damian..."

The troubled father takes a deep breath, closing his eyes as he tries to center himself amid the whirling chaos within. One thing at a time. I need to focus on Damian first. Opening them, he growls, "Damian really stepped in it this time. Let's go."

Bruce gestures to Lucius to follow him. As he leaves his office, Tam steps back, eyes wide as his gaze catches hers. "I need you to call my personal attorney and have her here within the hour," he orders. "And Tam...I know you and Tim are close. But right now, you still work for $m e$. I don't need to remind you of what that means."

The young woman swallows and nods bravely. "I don’t know what's going on, Mr. Wayne. Tim wouldn't tell me."
"I'm sure you'll find out soon enough."

## Chapter End Notes

So was that what everyone was hoping for? ;) And just think...there's still more to come, though I think I finally see an end in sight. Not the end, but an end. Because let's face it, this story, more than anything, is a slice of life fic and as we all know, life moves on even if the story ends.

I'm feeling maudlin this morning. It's Tuesday and I'm running on fumes, so go figure.
Next week...trouble in paradise.

# Milestone Eighteen: The Argument 

## Chapter Notes

This nightowl is home sick tonight (and is incapable of sleeping due to a horrible sinus infection), so I'm posting this a bit earlier than I normally do.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After Diana leaves, Jason closes the bar. There is no way he's staying open after what he just learned, lost revenue be damned.

He sends Tim a text about Damian's imminent arrest and to call him when he's done with Bruce.

There's nothing he can do down here, so he heads upstairs. He changes clothes and tapes his hands, preparing to go a few rounds with the punching bag when his cell rings. It's not Tim (he has his own ringtone that he installed for him, as well as tones for Roy, Kori, and Steph), but the number is local.
"Hello?"
"Hello, may I please speak with Jason Todd?" a professional sounding voice asks.
"Speaking," Jason replies.
"Good evening, Mr. Todd. My name is Harvey Dent. I'm the US District Attorney assigned to this circuit." The man continues speaking, but Jason tunes him out. Wow, Diana was fast in getting things sent to him. Has he even looked over everything?
"Mr. Todd?" Dent asks, obviously trying to get his attention.
"What? Yeah, I'm still here. Just surprised you're calling this fast. And that you're the one calling. Don't you have secretaries or assistants for this kind of thing?"

Dent chuckles at that. "Yes, I do, but it's after 5 and they all get to go home for the day. Your case certainly warrants me staying late. I just finished skimming through Agent Prince's updated notes and thought I'd give a call directly. Are you able to come downtown tomorrow morning to speak with me in person? I'd like to finalize the list of charges against Mr. Wayne and have them ready for his arraignment Friday morning."
"Yeah, what time should I be there? And where exactly do I need to go?"
Jason jogs over to the kitchen and scrawls a few notes and some directions on the notepad he keeps there. When the call is over, he stares blankly at his phone before setting it down on the
counter.
He now has about fifteen hours to figure things out. Jason closes his eyes and takes a deep breath before heading back to the punching bag.

What the hell am I going to do? His thoughts race as he methodically hits the bag. Every now and then, it turns into Damian's face.

If I press charges, Damian can kiss his life goodbye. If I don't, then in a couple years, maybe even sooner, he'll be out and can move on, maybe even grow up to be a semi-well adjusted adult with a felony record. Not like he has to work for a living but unless WE changes their hiring policies on employing ex-cons (thanks Tim for enlightening me on that one), he's not going to be working there.

No cushy executive job for Damian, not anymore.
What sucks is they're all going to realize very soon that Damian's future is in my hands. The brat especially is going to KNOW and it's going to eat him alive knowing that for once, I HOLD the power in this fucked up game he dragged me into. He won't know what the full set of charges are until the arraignment in a few days. But he'll know what they could be, daddy's lawyer will make sure of that.

Odds are pretty good I'm going to be bribed tonight. Fuck me, but I could use the money. The plumbing project is taking up more of that loan than I'd like and the contractor found mold and dry rot. Tim would kill me if I accept whatever Bruce throws at me but I got responsibilities he doesn't. He's got his own things to worry about, like losing investors when this whole shit storm hits the news. He just bought that land too, but I'll be damned if I can remember if he said it was with his own money or not. He doesn't need my shit on top of his.

The fallout with his family is going to be rough too. He's putting up a good face, but he cares about them a lot. Tim's had his ups and downs with Bruce, but man, this is gonna destroy Dickie.

I can't fucking believe everything hinges on what I decide between now and tomorrow morning.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.
He punches the bag even harder but no answers are forthcoming.
By the time he's done, he's hot, sweaty, and his hands and wrists are killing him. He hasn't worked out this hard for quite some time.

He starts peeling the tape from his hands and stops short. Tim is sitting on the back of the sofa watching him.
"How long you been there?" Jason asks levelly.
"Not too long. Looks like you've been at it a while," Tim replies in the same tone.
Jason shrugs and doesn't say anything.
"Got any extra tape?" Tim asks. "I really want to hit something right now."
Jason takes in Tim's dress shirt and tie and raises an eyebrow. "Go change first. I'll get it."
Tim attacks the bag very differently than he does. While he punches and dodges like a boxer (a brawler), Tim is all smooth, graceful movement that combines a series of furious blows and some rather powerful looking kicks that Jason decides he would not like to be on the receiving end of. He makes a mental note to see if Tim will teach him some of those.

If they survive the coming storm that is.
Jason's not sure of anything anymore.

Soon, Tim's leaning into the bag, breathing hard. A wracking cough escapes him and he hunches over trying to catch his breath.
"You dumbass," Jason scolds as he helps Tim up. "Are you sick again?"
"I just over did it," the shorter man gasps. "Gimme a minute, I'll be fine."
While Tim relearns how to breathe, Jason adds another mental note to ask Tam if his boyfriend has a history of breathing problems. He's never said but thinking back on the (numerous) other times he's seen Tim out of breath, it would explain a few things.
"Shower?" Tim finally asks, looking up hopefully through his messy bangs.
"Yeah, but after that coughing spell, you better not be planning to choke on my cock." It slips out before he can stop it. But in that moment, he wants Tim, wants to see him on his knees or sprawled out underneath him, he doesn't care which. Jason recognizes it as another form of escape, one that he's just as familiar with as fighting.
"Only to get you ready to put it somewhere else," Tim replies, still a bit out of breath but no longer coughing. "I feel...I don't know, it's like I'm buzzing. I'm nervous, Jason. I don't know what's about to happen. I'm always in control and now I'm not." He stares at Jason with wide eyes. "Is this what you meant when you said it was either fight or fuck to avoid going crazy?"
"Yeah."
With that, he slams into Tim, grasping his hair and tugging on it to get a better angle in which to devour the other man's mouth. It's rough, it's messy, and neither one of them give ground, even when Jason picks up him up and slams him against the wall, narrowly keeping Tim's head from banging against the brick.

Tim mewls as his back hits the wall, but he uses the position as leverage to wrap one leg over Jason's hip and drags himself higher. He then wraps the other one around the taller man's waist, drawing him even closer with muscles that no longer surprise Jason with their lean strength. Angling his hips, Tim rocks into him, thrusting against him through his gym shorts. Jason groans at the sensation, already hard and ready to rip those shorts off the shorter man.

Instead, he bites at Tim's neck, tasting sweat, and eliciting another noise from his boyfriend. He rocks his hips forward, and feels Tim's hands scrambling over his shoulders as he tries to find the right angle to do the same.
"I could fuck you right here," Jason whispers harshly against Tim's neck, his tongue lathing that the spot he'd just bruised.
"Do it," Tim gasps as he finally finds the right position to rock against Jason’s cock. His head hits the wall as he arches into the movement, baring his neck even more.

Jason tears himself away from Tim with a groan and runs across the loft to his nightstand to grab the lube and a condom. Need to keep these fucking things cached elsewhere too, dammit.

He takes off his shirt and stalks back across the open room to Tim. He's ditched his shorts and has a hand behind him, already teasing himself open. Jason stops a couple feet away and watches for a moment before he takes off his own shorts. Tim's eyes drop to his pierced cock, staring intently as Jason drags his hand up and down the length a few times. He rips open the condom and rolls it on, then snaps open the top on the bottle of lube.
"Let me," is all he says.
The prep is quick and messy, but Tim doesn't complain, not when Jason pushes him back up against the wall, grabs his thighs, and lifts. Tim's t-shirt drags against the brick as he wraps his legs around Jason's waist again, but neither make a move to take it off.

Both men moan as Tim sinks down and takes Jason's wrapped length into his body.
What happens next is hard and fast, with neither one giving quarter as they take what they want from each other. They collapse in a heap on the floor when they're done, gasping for air as they come down from their respective highs.
"Did that...did that just happen?" Tim gasps against Jason's shoulder.
"Yeah." He wraps an arm around Tim's waist and pulls him close. "You okay?"
"Yeah. I get to scratch another fantasy off the list."
Jason barks a laugh into Tim's hair. "Me too. This isn't one you can exactly plan for, you know?"
"No shit." Tim stretches against Jason's arm, his back arching. "Shower?"
"Shower."

Tim tells Jason what happened at WE after they clean up. They're on the sofa, both drinking cups of the jasmine green tea Tim had bought as a gift during his overseas trip last year.
"Damian was taken into custody just as we were finishing up. The look on Bruce's face, Jay... He didn't stonewall me this time. He looked betrayed, pure and simple." He sighs and stares into the mug. "Talk about perfect timing."

Jason agrees but keeps silent. He's still no closer to a decision than he was before.
"You're still on the fence over what to do, aren't you?" Tim asks shrewdly.
He nods and sips from his mug.
"Jason," Tim sets his cup down on the coffee table and rests a hand on Jason's thigh. His blue eyes are clear and oh so bright as he looks at him. "Whatever you decide, that's up to you. I'm not going to be mad if you don't press charges. I know what you think is going to happen if you do, but I'm not worried about DI, so you shouldn't be either."
"What about your family?" Jason finally breaks his silence. "They're not going to forgive you for choosing me."
"There is nothing to choose," Tim says fiercely."The only thing they have to be mad at is that I didn't say anything sooner so that Bruce could try and sweep it under the rug. That wouldn't have fixed anything. Damian fucked up on his own and he needs to see there are consequences to those actions. Why does nobody seem to get this?" He flings his hands up in obvious frustration. "First Bruce, now you."
"Excuse me if I'm trying to keep the big picture in mind here," Jason snaps. His nerves are well on their way to being just as frayed as they were before. "I'm not the one with a family to think about. Say what you will, but you do care about Bruce and Dick and Alfred. God, I'm half tempted to take whatever Bruce tries to throw at me to convince me not to press charges. At least then, the fallout won't be so bad for you."

Tim gapes at him and stands abruptly. "You're what?"
Jason replays what he just said over in his head. Fuck. "If I let Bruce bribe me, it'll let him feel like he has some semblance of control over everything."
"And what would you do with the money?" For all that Tim's a few inches shorter than him, he looms rather well. There's a hard look in his eyes.
"Depends on how much it is. I've got a couple loans I could pay off." He glares challengingly at Tim, pushing back.
"Goddammit Jason! If you'd rather not have the loans, then I can give you the money! Don't let Bruce think he can brush this under the rug by writing a fucking check! He already tried bribing you once, remember? To stay the hell away from me? He respects you because you didn't take it. What do you think that'll do to his opinion if you accept it now?"
"See, you do care." Jason gulps down the rest of his tea and stands, dropping the empty mug onto the sofa. "You care enough that you're worried about Bruce's good opinion of me doing a one-eighty if I take his fucking money. Well guess what, Tim? Not everyone's born with a silver fucking spoon in their mouths. The stakes are much higher this time. I have responsibilities, even if they don't extend beyond this damn building. I gotta do what I need to. And if that means taking Bruce's money this time and losing his good opinion, then so be it. I'm Gotham street trash anyway, so what does he care?"

Tim looks like he's just been punched in the gut but he stands tall. "Don't try and tell me what I do and don't care about," he lashes back. "I care about my family, but I also know that, in the end, they'll see that I'm right. That I've been right for years. I've lived on my own for long enough to know that I'll survive until they do. Just don't take Bruce's money, Jason. Please. I'll do a transfer right now if it'll stop you. Make your decision about Damian without that hanging over your head." His tone has changed there at the end as he pleads his case.

Jason opens his mouth but before he can say anything, there's a sharp knock on his front door. He glares at it and Tim uses the distraction to run over to the kitchen counter to his messenger bag and grab his tablet.
"I'm doing it," he says.
"Put that fucking thing down!" Jason shouts as he rushes over. "You said it's my decision, so just let it go."
"I won't! You got dragged into this mess because of me, so let me help you!" Tim jumps up and over the counter like it's nothing.

There's another knock, louder this time.
"Goddammit," Jason curses and veers off towards the door. Whoever's on the other side knows he's there. You'd have to be deaf not to hear the shouting.

He unlocks the door and yanks it open, not even bothering to check and see who's there. "Now is not a good time," he snaps, but then comes up short.

Bruce is standing there, still dressed for the office in a suit and tie and carrying an overcoat that Jason's positive would be six months rent for one of his tenants.
"Fuck," he says in exasperation, but stands aside to let the man in. "Perhaps you can stop your son from doing something stupid." He glares across the room at Tim who's busy on his tablet.
"I haven't had the best track record with that recently," Bruce replies dryly as he closes the door behind him. "I heard shouting." There's a concerned look on his face as his eyes dart over to Tim and back to Jason.
"We're having a loud discussion," Tim comments but doesn't look up from the tablet.

Jason sighs hard. "Discussion my ass. Will you put that damn thing down?"
Tim does, but there's a satisfied little smirk on his face. "Done. Consider it an investment."
"You little fucker!" Jason clenches his fists and glares. "Jesus Christ, Tim, did you even hear what you just said? Who in their right minds would ever put money into some no-name building in the fucking Bowery?"
"I would." It echoes and he's reminded that he and Tim aren't alone for this particular argument anymore. He turns to Bruce. "Stay outta this. I'll deal with you in a minute."

Tim laughs viciously at that. It's an odd sound coming from him, especially combined with the frigid expression on his face as his blue eyes snap with an inner fire Jason's never seen before. "No, by all means, let's drag Bruce in. He's here to offer you money anyway, so let's hear what he's bringing to the table."

Bruce squares his shoulders as he stares down Tim. He seems to be reading into something Jason's not picking up on. The older man then turns tired blue eyes onto the bartender. "I'm here to apologize to you," he says carefully. "What Damian did to you, it all comes back on me and my failure as his father. For that, I am truly sorry, Jason."

Jason closes his eyes and takes a deep breath at those words. They mean a lot coming from such a powerful and influential man, but they're not enough. Opening his eyes again, he replies. "Thank you, Bruce, but the one who should be apologizing to me is Damian."

## It'll be a cold day in hell before that happens.

"I know," Bruce nods in agreement. "But I felt I owed you this too."
Tim snorts, the glacial look still on his face. "Anything else you feel like owing him?"
Bruce turns a glare on his middle son. "If you're implying I'm here to bribe Jason in some way, I'm not. I'll admit to thinking I should at least try, but on the way over I realized that by doing so, I'd be sinking down to Damian's level. I need to set an example for him, even if he's not here to see it. But I'll make sure he hears about it."

## And there goes the whole fucking point of the argument Tim and I just had. Nice job, Bruce.

The billionaire turns his attention back on Jason. "Why did Tim just transfer you money?"
Jason bites his lip and hesitates. On the one hand, it's going to come out anyways. On the other hand, if Bruce really wants to know, he'll dig it up on his own. He sighs and shakes his head again. "I had to get a loan from the bank for some building repairs a couple weeks ago. With my credit freeze and the fraud alert, Tim offered to become a business partner and smooth the way with the bank so I could get what I needed. But the project's turning out to be bigger than I expected."
"What happened?" Tim asks, his eyes narrowing.
"Tom found mold and dry rot once he got through the ceiling panels in the basement."
"Why didn't you tell me?" Tim's entire demeanor shifts as the ice breaks away and a more normal expression takes its place. "When did this happen?"
"A couple days ago," Jason shrugs. "I was gonna tell you the other night, but forgot when you told me about Lonnie."
"How much extra do you need?" Bruce asks calmly. "I assume it's too soon to renegotiate the terms of your loan."
"I haven't even made the first fucking payment," Jason snaps. "Not gonna lie here, Bruce. I've been on the fence for a while about pressing charges against Damian. I've been leaning more towards not on the off chance that little shit learns something from this and figures out how to grow up. But then water heater happened and a little voice started whispering that I could get something out of this too."

Jason shakes his head in disgust, not looking at either man. He's not happy with what he's about to say, but it needs to be said. "I have to take care of this building to keep a roof over everyone's heads, including my own. I make precisely dick being the landlord but I'm not going to be the asshole who raises the rent to the point where no one can afford to live here. So I got to thinkin' that if you decided to throw money at me when the shit finally hit the fan, I might just take it."

## And now both of you should see that Damian's not too far off the mark when he calls me trash.

He turns away and stomps over to one of the tall windows that overlook the alley and the roof of the building behind his rather than face either of the two men behind him. It's dark outside, so there's nothing to see beyond the lurid haze that constantly engulfs Gotham. He stands rigidly, arms crossed tightly over his chest. Goddamn mother of fuck. If Bruce didn't think I was a loser before, he sure as hell does now. And Tim ...shit. I don't even know what the hell is going on in that head of his. That look on his face ... what was that?

It's quiet behind him, but Jason knows it won't be long before his front door opens and the most important person in his life walks out. His heart seizes at the thought. It's for the best. Tim deserves so much better than what I have to offer. I hope he sees that now.

To his surprise, footsteps approach him and stop to his right. It's Bruce. A moment later, Tim ninjas his silent way to his left and rests a hand on his shoulder.
"Jason..." Bruce says quietly. "There is no shame in asking for help when you need it, especially when you have people in your life who can and will in a heartbeat. I'm sure your mentor would agree."

The words unexpectedly strike home and Jason closes his eyes tightly at the sudden surge of emotion that courses through him. Bruce was right, more right then he knew. I'm letting my goddamned pride get in the way. Mike would ask for help. He taught me better than this. Sink or swim is how I grew up, that the only person I could rely on, hell, even trust, was me.

But Mike taught me it was okay to float too. To let others pull me along until I could stand on my own again. He taught me it was okay to swallow my pride.

Fucking hell, what a mess I've made of things.
He nods once and opens his eyes. "Christ, I need a drink."
"I know a good bar," the billionaire says blandly.
Jason looks over at the man and his wry little smile. "Yeah, so do I. And if you want to join me, you're opening a tab."
"Gladly."
$* * * * *$

Getting drunk with his son and his boyfriend had not been on Bruce's agenda for the night. He'd come to the bar to speak with Jason, but upon finding it closed when he arrived, he made his way upstairs, having seen the lights on in the top floor loft he knew the man occupied.

He heard the shouts as soon as he reached the top of the last flight of stairs. As he got closer to the door, Bruce could make out Tim's voice as well as Jason's. It was oddly refreshing to learn that theirs was not a perfect relationship, that they argued and fought like any other couple.

But as Bruce stares into his fourth scotch and watches Jason make his way through a bottle of vodka, he can't help but feel sorry for the young man.

He's done so much more than anyone would ever expect from someone with his background. All the odds were stacked against him from the start. And look at him now. Not even 30 years old and he's already the king of his small little kingdom in a part of Gotham most people don't like to admit even exists. He shouldn't be doing this, tearing himself apart because of Damian, of me, and even to a certain extent, Tim.

There's no changing the past though, no matter how much I might wish otherwise. We can only move forward. Now if I can just figure out a way to lend him the money he needs without coming across like I'm buying him off...

Tim returns to the main room of the bar with a tray full of food. It's obvious he's very comfortable with carrying it, as well as sliding it off his hand and onto the bar in one smooth movement. His middle son is the only one not drinking right now, though Bruce did catch him take a shot of whiskey earlier before he disappeared into the kitchen, with Jason muttering deprecations about not burning down the kitchen.
"I found the samosas you made earlier," Tim says as he hands out the plates. "Figured these would be easiest to reheat."

Jason shrugs and doesn't respond. He stares at the bottle of vodka like it holds the answers to all of life's mysteries in its depths.

Tim and Bruce exchange a concerned glance. This apparently isn't normal.
Bruce picks up the hot samosa he read about in Vicki's article and makes sure to put a generous dollop of chutney on it before taking a bite. This man has a true gift in the kitchen. If Tim can't convince him to go to culinary school, then he needs to spend more time with Alfred. "These are delicious," he comments.
"Thanks," Jason replies absently, his focus still on the bottle. He hasn't poured another shot yet, but has made no move to touch his food.

Tim narrows his eyes and gives Bruce another look. He walks down to the end of the bar and ducks under the countertop to make his way around. Quickly mixing his own drink, he pulls his plate closer and starts eating.

Seemingly unaware of the eyes on him, Jason pours another shot. He stares at it for a moment, then knocks it back. "Stop it," he says sharply. "You're both acting like I'm about to break. Talk about something. Anything. I know; what happened to Damian earlier?"

Bruce tips back his scotch to buy a moment to think, relishing the flavor and depth. Wherever Jason had gotten it, he knew the man had purchased it just for him on the off chance he'd stop by. He's thoughtful like this, noticing little things about a person that others would in all likelihood overlook. I'm paying for the whole bottle tonight and taking it home with me.

He's stalled enough.
"Damian decided to resist arrest and punched Agent Tresser in the face."
Tim gapes. "No way. Seriously?"
"Well, fuck." Jason's reaction is much more plain spoken. "That's not gonna look good."
"No." Bruce rubs his eyes, feeling every bit of his age and then some. "Tresser could press charges too. Assault on a Federal officer is another felony."
"Goddammit, Damian," Tim says with feeling as he shakes his head. "What was going through his head that he thought that was a good idea?"
"Hell if I know," Bruce replies and pours another scotch. Tim subtly reaches down and pours him a glass of water that he places next to his plate. "I haven't seen him yet. I had Tam call Marion and got her down to police headquarters as soon as possible. She told me on my way over here that he's being kept overnight in a single cell until he goes before a federal judge in a day or two."
"Marion Baker is the Wayne family attorney," Tim explains to Jason. "She's very good but she doesn't put up with crap or try to find her way around the law."

Jason nods and turns his teal gaze on Bruce finally. "Is he being kept in gen pop?"
"I beg pardon?" He's not familiar with the term.
"General population. There are single cells in there, but for the most part, people are crammed three or four to a cell."

Tim gives his boyfriend a level look. "Do I want to know how you know this?"
Jason grins toothily at the young man. "Spent a night there when I was 16 for petty theft. No one believed me when I told them how old I was cuz I didn't have ID."
"Jason..." Tim groans.
"I told you I have a juvie record. I swear though, nothing after I turned 18. Mike had me in hand by then."

Bruce suspects it's more along the lines of he hadn't been caught, but he keeps his mouth shut. If I remember the reports from the background checks I did, this was around the time Harper was arrested with heroin. Nothing ever indicated Jason was a dealer, not with how his mom died, but he's certainly smart enough to do other things and not get caught. "What is 'gen pop' like?" he asks instead.
"Loud. Full of assholes who are either drunk, high, or some combination thereof. Most are repeat offenders, so they know new blood when they see it." Jason shakes his head and pours another glass of vodka. "For what it's worth, I'm glad the little shit's in a single cell. He'd be eaten alive if he wasn't."

Closing his eyes, Bruce takes a deep breath and tries not to imagine what his youngest son could be going through right now. He'd tried to see him before coming here, but he wasn't allowed to, not until tomorrow morning. Only Marion could and she'd told him he's safe enough for the night. Oh my boy...I pray you're taking this time to really THINK about what you've done.

He's silent for too long and when he opens his eyes, Bruce finds both Tim and Jason staring at him in concern.

Jason reaches out and pours him another glass of scotch. "If you decide to get shitfaced and can't drive, I'll let you crash on my sofa. Gotta warn you though, the shower's a bit dicey in morning for warm water." His smirk has a bitter edge to it.
"I'll drive you home, Bruce," Tim offers. "Jason's sofa is comfortable, but you need to be on point tomorrow. Alfred would kill me if I let you out the door in yesterday's suit."

Alfred. He's reminded that he hasn't called Dick about this yet. "Alfred knows, but I still need to call Dick."
"Oh, that's going to go well," Tim says and shakes his head slowly. "He and Damian are close, or as close as he lets people get to him."
"I know." Bruce looks over at his middle son. Tim is dressed casually, very casually, with no sign at all that says he was born to wealth and privilege. This boy is a chameleon, always has been. He's comfortable anywhere, in anything, in any setting. It shouldn't come as a surprise
that he's just as happy here in a little bar as he is in the boardroom. But he's still ambitious and knows full well what he's capable of. "Why did Damian never let you in?" It slips out before he could stop it.

Tim's eyes drop momentarily before looking back up again. "I don't know, Bruce. I tried. I tried to be his brother, just like Dick did for me when I came to the Manor. But he shut me down, hard and fast and meaner than anyone I'd ever encountered before. The only thing I knew was that he saw me as competition and therefor, someone to be beaten into submission."
"That sounds like he saw you as a rival," Jason adds his nickel's worth. "At least he saw you as something. I get the distinct feeling what he did to me was meant to distract you rather than get back at me."

Tim looks horrified at those words. "That son of a bitch..."
"I'll drink to that." Bruce raises his glass. "Talia is a bitch. I'm not looking forward to calling her tomorrow either."

In the end, Bruce finishes half his bottle of scotch and Jason does the same with his vodka. They polish off all the samosas Tim had warmed up for them and both drink what feels like a gallon of water before Tim would let either of them leave. He helps Jason stagger back upstairs and gets him settled for the night before returning to the bar to lock up and escort Bruce out.

He takes the bottle with him, making sure to leave money on the counter for Jason.
The drive home is a blur. The only thing he remembers clearly is opening the car window while on the Kane Bridge and feeling the sea air biting at his face. Tim leaves him in Alfred's not so tender care (he never has any patience when he comes home drunk). As Bruce falls asleep, he remembers that Jason still hasn't said what he's going to do come morning after speaking with Harvey.

But, after everything they spoke about, he thinks he knows. That thought comforts him as he falls asleep.

## Chapter End Notes

On a positive note, go check out chapter 9 of Tuesday Nights. The wonderful Cat-Chan sent me fan art of Tim working behind the bar! *hugs to you my dear!!*

Next week...who's ready for another POV change? It's finally time to see what's going on in Damian's head as he sits behind bars.

## Milestone Nineteen: The Bottom of the Pit

## Chapter Notes

This chapter...I honestly think it's the most difficult thing I've ever written. I would not have been able to do it without the help of the wonderful and amazing Janna. Thank you, my friend, for all the help, guidance, and flat out smacks upside the proverbial head.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At the central lock-up for the Gotham City Police Department, Damian Wayne sits in a solitary cell and listens to the best of what the dregs of society has to offer as other men rant and rage, fight and he's pretty sure that someone's getting fucked way down at the end of the block between the combination of cheers and screams he's hearing. He may be in a single cell, but that doesn't mean he's by himself. No, not here. The single cell is the only thing his name affords him. The guard who locked him in here earlier made sure to tell him so as the barred door shut with a jarring clank.

Even with the seething mass of humanity around him though, Damian feels alone.
He's always thought he was above such feelings, but in here, with the patchy light from flickering and buzzing fluorescent lights, the cold air doing nothing to suppress the stench of unwashed bodies and other fluids he doesn't even want to begin to contemplate, the feeling is pronounced. In here, he's not Damian Wayne. He's one of them. One of many waiting for their chance to stand before a judge and proclaim their innocence even though they know damn well they're guilty of the crime they've been accused of.

His father's attorney stayed with him for as long as she could once he arrived at Central in handcuffs. She managed to extract a promise from the police that he'd be kept separate from the general population in lock up, but that's all she could do for the night.

She promised to return in the morning with a change of clothes for him and news from his father.

His father. Damian hasn't seen his father once since he was escorted out of Wayne Enterprises earlier. His grief stricken face haunts him, the disappointment he undoubtedly felt for him palpable.

He shivers and tries to tell himself that it's the cold air in his cell penetrating the light cotton of his collared shirt. His suit jacket had been left on the chair in his (now likely former) office after his tussle with Agent Tresser.

For the first time, he's aware of the gravity of his situation. The whole thing with Todd could
be brushed under the rug but Damian struck a federal officer in his rage and in the presence of witnesses. The WE security guards could be cowed into submission but Lucius Fox and the GCPD officers who accompanied Tresser would not be.

The charges keep piling up. His lawyer went over the ones she's aware of but Damian knows there are more that will be added come morning.

The altercation with Tresser has a chance of being dropped. The mail fraud charges are a relatively minor felony and if he plays the part right, he could get probation at most.

It's the pending identity theft charges that worry him. Right now, his fate rests in the hands of a Bowery bartender.

Jason Todd.
Father is undoubtedly with him right now, trying to find out what he'll do. Would he bribe him, I wonder, to keep his mouth shut? I heard Father tell Pennyworth though that he didn't take the first bribe he offered him, to pay his way through school and stay away from Drake. Father said he respected Todd for that. I don't understand what anyone sees in that man. He's a nobody.

Damian curses the day he stepped foot into that bar and met the bartender. There was something about him that instantly got under his skin, but it took him a while to figure out what it was. The man has no respect for authority. For respecting his betters. At the same time, he could respect Todd's work ethic and his dedication to his small piece of Gotham.

If it weren't for his relationship with Drake, he'd have been able to overlook the slights to him and the name Wayne. If it weren't for his relationship with Drake, he'd have never crossed my path.

Drake. The man is clearly infatuated with the bartender. He's been practically glued to his side since he quit WE. Damian long ago decided that anyone Drake became close to would be cannon fodder in their war to be Bruce's true heir. It would distract him, make him weak.

He had to be subtle. Nothing could be traced back to him. But in the end, he messed up.
Hiring Anarky was a mistake. He should have looked harder for someone who knew how to take instructions. He'd been in a rush to do something, anything, to hurt Todd after the events of Thanksgiving, but it was Amanda's goading the night he found out Drake was bringing Todd to the Christmas Gala. There was already enough gutter trash coming to the Manor so one more piece of trash shouldn't have mattered, but Todd was simply icing on the proverbial cake. It didn't help that the man cleaned up nicely too. What did Drake call him? A diamond in the rough?

It was a mistake he would never have made if he'd been thinking with his head instead of with his dick. He wants to blame Amanda, but he knows better. She may be a money grubbing bitch good for one thing only, but I let her influence my decisions.

Clearly, decisions made while involved with the fairer sex are to be avoided. I've read enough history to know this and now look at me, making the same mistakes as other men of importance. She's not even worth it, simply the means to a physical end.

Damian sighs and tries to ignore the riffraff around him. But it's hard and their constant catcalls are wearing on him. There's a man in the cell next to him who keeps whispering through the bars what he wants to do to him, about how he wants to see Damian's pretty mouth wrapped around his cock, that he wants to rip his pants to shreds and fuck him until he bleeds.

He sits on his cot with his back against the wall and his knees pulled tight against his chest. He wishes for his father to protect him, to shield him from all of this (his mother, as much as he wishes he could gain her approval, would only look on him with scorn for his failure).

It is my failure that's landed me in this predicament in the first place. Oh, how Todd and Drake must be laughing now.

It's a long night.
******

Damian wakes with a start the next morning, blinking quickly as he orients himself. He's still sitting up on the cot, not having dared laid down as it would put his feet or his head within arms reach of the men on either side of the narrow cell. The sound of a cell door rolling open had woken him, but to his disappointment, it's not his.

How long will I be held here? Baker said federal arraignments have to occur within 24 to 48 hours of an arrest. Please God let that be today.

It's hard to tell how much time passes, but eventually a guard comes for him after he finishes what passes for breakfast here. "Up and at'em, Wayne. Someone's here to see you," the man says. "Turn around and face the wall, hands up where I can see 'em."

He doesn't say anything, but does as he's told. I've learned my lesson about the path of least resistance.

The guard handcuffs his hands behind him and leads him out of the cell. He ignores the jeers of the men around him and tries to keep his head held high as he's escorted out of the room.

He's led to a visitor's room, one that is divided in half and the only way to speak to someone on the other side is through a telephone on the either side of clear bulletproof glass. It too is guarded. Some of the detainees are loudly or angrily arguing with their attorneys while one he passes has what's likely his whore of a girlfriend pressing her bared breasts to the glass. Damian is idly reminded of Amanda as her breasts are not much larger than the trash he sees.

Over the course of the night, he's reevaluated his opinion on what trash really means. Todd, for all his faults, including his mistake in dating Drake, is at least somewhat educated and works for a living. The choice selection of humanity he spent the night with are the ones who truly crawled out of the gutter.

The guard stops in front of a chair. "Turn around."
Damian complies and one of his wrists is uncuffed.
"Sit down and don’t move."
He does so and the empty cuff is snapped into place on a metal bar.
"Okay, phone's all yours."
The guard walks away and Damian finally notices the person sitting opposite of him is his father. His breath catches and he blinks quickly, trying to suppress the surge of emotion he feels at the sight of him. The glass isn't the cleanest, but he can still tell the man looks utterly exhausted.

He reaches out and picks up the phone. Bruce mimics the movement.
"Father," Damian says, trying not to choke as he speaks. The last thing he wants is to appear weak in front of him.
"Damian," Bruce replies evenly. "Are you all right?"
He nods stiffly. "As well as can be expected."
"Nothing happened last night?" There's a look of concern on his father's face.
"No. I'm in a single cell." Best not to tell him what was said to me, not yet. Perhaps I can play that card later. Still, the innocent victim might not be a bad act to play right now. He forces his bottom lip to tremble slightly. "When will I be able to leave, Father?"
"Marion has a meeting with the DA after lunch. Harvey's finalizing the charges now. She'll be by afterwards to discuss them with you and to let you know when you'll see the judge." Bruce hesitates and stares intently at him, like he's trying to see right through him. "Damian. Why did you do this? What did Jason ever do to you besides poke at your very considerable pride?"

He's been strategizing all night over what to say if asked about Todd. It came down to tactics and strategy, both of which he knows his father to be well versed in. But he learned these lessons from his mother, of whom he knows plays this game rather differently than Bruce. She has to, in order to survive against his grandfather. Her tactics are often lethal. It took him a long time to realize that she didn't want him to be the same as her. She wants him to be more like his father. That by being his true son, he would finally gain her approval.

Richard was no competition. He didn't care one wit about the family business. But Drake... Timothy Drake quickly showed that he had the ambition, the knowledge, and the skills that one needs to make it to the top. In any other arena, Damian would consider him a worthy adversary. But in this one, he's proven to be the bane of his very existence. His nemesis.
"Drake and I have been at odds with each other for years, Father. Does it really surprise you that I would see Todd as anything other than a distraction to be taken out of the equation?"

His words seem to stun Bruce as he reels back in his chair in visible surprise. "It's never been a contest, Damian. All three of you, Dick, Tim, and you...you're all my boys. All three of you, equally. What you did to Jason though, it would have hurt not only him but every person who lives or works in that building. Did you know he needed to get a loan a couple weeks ago because the water heater sprung a leak that couldn't be repaired so he had to buy a new one? Not only that, but he needs to renovate the entire plumbing network just to get it hooked up properly? With the freeze on his credit, the bank wouldn't even look twice at his application. Tim had to step in and essentially co-sign the loan. There are over forty people who live in that building he owns. Forty people who depend on him to keep the roof over their heads and something as basic as hot water running in those pipes. You have no concept of what it means to take responsibility for your actions. And I blame myself for that."

His father looks disgusted, but even in his self-loathing, Damian knows it's not directed at him. He's upset with himself. He believes I am the way I am because of what he's done. No... no, Father is the best thing to have ever happened to me.

It takes some time, but he finds the words. He starts haltingly, but gains strength as he goes on. "At first, I just wanted to find out more about Todd. But eventually, I realized I could use him against Drake. He's so completely and utterly besotted with him, anyone with half a brain could see it. I thought...I thought that if I hurt him, it would distract Drake and give me time to prove to you that I'm the best. That I'm the one who's worthy of your name."

Bruce slowly shakes his head. "It's never been a contest," he repeats sadly. "I always believed that the two of you were simply fighting for my attention. The middle son and the younger son striving to show each other up, but instead, I discover it's been a battle to bring the other one down. A rather one-sided battle at that."

His gaze hardens and Damian can't help but sit up straighter. "If what you've said is true, then I want you to take a closer look at your actions. Think about the timing. The FBI found evidence that Machin was in Jason's office computer around the middle of December. You already knew Tim was resigning from WE. You already knew that he was starting his own company to further research and develop technology that he came up with. This left you a clear path at WE to rise to the top. Tim was out of your way. So why go after Jason when you did?"

Damian's mind reels at the implications. Did he really set up Todd to fall for no reason? How did he overlook something so obvious? Then everything I did was simply revenge on him, for his slights against me. The slights that he doesn't even realize he's doing because in his eyes, I'm the same as everyone else. I...I overreacted. I twisted it up to turn it into part of my plan against Drake and now...now I'm the one sitting in jail.

He hangs his head low. "I messed up. I...miscalculated."
"I'll say," Bruce replies, disappointment clearly evident in his voice. "The FBI has all the evidence it needs to prove you not only hired Machin, but used the information he stole from Jason. They found the mailbox you opened in his name, as well as the credit cards you applied for. They know everything. Right now, Jason is meeting with the DA and making his decision about whether or not he's going to press charges. Do you have any idea how long you'll be in prison if he does and you're convicted? Decades, Damian. Decades. This isn't
something you can talk your way out of. This changes everything and will haunt you for the rest of your life."

Damian's mouth snaps shut as his father's words sink in. Decades...I...I didn't realize. I didn't know. His face crumbles, his entire body screaming its defeat. I've lost. Drake is Father 's true heir. How? How did he do it? Did I ever have a chance? I'm Father's flesh and blood, but it makes no difference to him. It...it makes no difference to him. How many times has Richard told me that over the years? If it were him or Drake sitting here instead of me, Father would be doing the exact same thing, looking just as haggard as he is now. Wanting to know why.

I was fighting a battle I never had to fight. I only fought because Mother said I had to. Mother...

He raises dejected eyes to meet his father's. It's going to hurt, asking this, but he has to know. "Have you spoken with Mother yet?"
"I spoke with Talia this morning before I came here. I won't tell you what she said." The words are enough.
"You don't have to." Damian blinks quickly as he tries to suppress the sadness. He refuses to cry in front of his father. He hasn't cried since his mother sent him back to Gotham. "I failed her again. She doesn't tolerate failure."
"No, she doesn't," Bruce agrees quietly and rubs at his eyes. "Your mother..." he sighs before continuing. "Once upon a time, I loved her dearly. I wish you could have seen what I saw in her. To this day though, I don't know if any of it was real or if it was all an act. But she gave me you. And for that, I'll always be grateful."
"Father...I'm sorry," Damian almost chokes on the foreign words.
"I'm sorry too, Damian," Bruce replies. "But it's not me you need to apologize to."
Todd. I only meant to use him to distract Drake. I didn't think beyond that. I didn't look close enough at my own actions to recognize what I was doing.
"I know, Father," Damian sighs and closes his eyes for a moment. He's drained, emotionally and physically. "What happens next?"
"For now, you'll go back to your cell. Marion's doing her best to push and get your arraignment to be this afternoon but she said it's more realistic to expect it tomorrow sometime."

He blanches at the words. No, not another night in this place. I can't, no... "Father, please. Is there anything you can do? Please..."

Bruce looks pained at his son's plea. "Damian, I can't do anything. You punched a federal agent in the face. In front of witnesses, all credible ones. That's almost as serious a felony as what you did to Jason."

In this place...I'm on my own. My name means precisely nothing on this side of the glass. The realization stuns him but also reminds him of what Todd had told him what feels like forever ago now.

## "What good would your name be if no one knows who you are? Or cares?"

No one cares on this side. The ones that do care about him are on the other side of the glass. His family. Father. Richard. Barbara. Cassandra. Pennyworth. Maybe even Drake, though he's likely burned the last of that bridge, fragile as it always was.

Damian closes his eyes again and nods. "I understand, Father," he replies stiffly, opening them again. "I will think about what you said. About Todd."
"That's all I can ask." Bruce holds a hand up to the glass. It takes Damian a moment to juggle the phone so he can return the gesture. For a brief second, he can almost imagine he's holding his father's hand, always so big and warm and solid during the rare times he'd let himself touch the man he idolizes.

Someone taps him on the shoulder and he drops his hand, whipping his head around to see the guard standing there. "Time's up," he says.

Damian turns back to Bruce. "Father, I have to go."
"I know," he replies, looking beyond Damian before his steely blue eyes return to his. "I don't say this nearly as much as I should, to any of you, but Damian...don't ever doubt for a second that I love you."
"Father, I..." This time, he does choke on the words and he tears up. I love you too, Father.
"Time's up," the guard repeats. Bruce nods and hangs up the phone on his side. Damian carefully does the same, reluctant to let go of the last connection he has with his father. Once again, his wrists are cuffed behind him and he's led away, back into the bowels of the building and the holding cells.

It's a long day.

## Chapter End Notes

To my fellow Americans...Happy Independence Day! Enjoy our country's birthday, but never forget all the brave people who've made it possible.

Next week...Dick. I think that says enough.

# Milestone Twenty: The Fallout 

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hangovers suck. Hangovers when you have to go downtown to the federal courthouse and see the US District attorney at 9 in the freaking morning and argue with the man for two hours are even worse. Jason thanks every deity he can think of, real or not, that Tim made him drink a couple glasses of water last night after he was done getting drunk with Bruce and set his alarm to make sure he was up in time.

They haven't spoken since last night.
The money Tim transferred is still in the checking account he keeps for the building.
There are more words to be said over that, but Jason decides as he walks out of the courthouse that he's going to suck up his pride, put on his big boy pants, and accept it. Bruce was right. Mike wasn't afraid to ask for help when he needed it, so why should I be? Though I don't think Mike ever got this kind of money thrown at him. I swear to God, this better not be Tim's idea of pocket change...

He glances behind him at the large doors he just exited. He hadn't been handed off to some flunky attorney when he arrived earlier. No, he got to see the big man himself, US District Attorney Harvey Dent, former Gotham City DA and, if Jason remembers Tim's story correctly, the one who prosecuted the last CEO of Drake Industries for industrial espionage, kidnapping, and involuntary manslaughter.

Dent may not be happy with my decision, but I don't think Bruce or Tim are going to be upset with it. Mike took me in and gave me that chance to prove myself. I'll be damned if I don't do the same with Damian. We'll see if that comes back to bite me in the ass.

He warily eyes the crowd of reporters milling around and takes a circuitous route down the steps to avoid them. Some enterprising soul had discovered Damian's arrest the night before, so it looks like all the local media and then some are camped out in front of the building waiting for something to happen. So far, his name hasn't been linked with anything. That's not supposed to change until Damian's arraignment tomorrow morning when Dent presents the formalized list of charges against him. He's of half a mind to close the bar for the afternoon but at the same time, he's closed enough because all this.

Although the media shitstorm that's about to come hurtling down on me will be nothing like I've ever experienced before. Heh, maybe I should have Roy act as a bouncer tomorrow night to keep all the reporters out so my regulars can come in.
"Jason?" a familiar voice asks from behind him.
Shit.

Turning, he sees Vicki Vale standing there. She grins at the unspoken confirmation.
"Vicki." He's not stupid and neither is she. He can see the gleam in her eyes as she takes in his suit jacket, shirt, and tie (he still wore jeans this morning; he's not wearing dress pants on his motorcycle).
"Quite the story that came out last night," she says leadingly. "Care to make a statement about it?"
"Nope," Jason replies. "Better for that to come from Bruce and you know it."
"But you do know what happened." It's another of the reporter's not-quite-a-question but it really is a question statements.
"Now I see why Tim says no comment to you all the time."
Vicki pouts at that. "Come on, Jason. I don't have to name you, you can be an unnamed source. Can you give me anything about what's going on?"

Jason gives her a level look. "I wish I could, Vicki, but I'd much rather keep the peace on the home front if you catch my drift."
"Fine," she replies with a small smile. "Can I get first dibs when you or Tim can talk about it?"
"I got no issues with that. You treated us fairly. I can't speak for Tim though." Lord knows we need to talk. Again. Fuck, last night was a disaster.
"Of course," Vicki agrees. "So what brings you down here today?"
Jason shakes his head. "Can't talk about that either."
He's pretty sure she's going to put two and two together. She's smart enough.
Vicki's eyes widen as she does. "What did Damian do to you?" she all but gasps.
Jason gives her a roguish grin. "No comment."
"Jason!" Vicki almost whines. "Come on!"
"When Bruce finally says something, you know where to find me. I gotta go, I have a delivery arriving in a little bit and I need to get back." He gives the reporter a jaunty salute and walks away.

As he drives home, Jason relishes the feel of the mild spring air as it cuts through his riding leathers. Tim would likely make a face at how he crammed his suit jacket and tie in his saddlebag but that's his problem. The drive helps clear his head, just as it did on his way downtown. It takes him a good forty-five minutes to get home.

He doesn't feel bad about lying to Vicki about when his delivery is supposed to arrive. There are still a couple hours to go and he plans on taking that time for himself.

Tim apparently has other ideas as he's sitting on the sofa when Jason opens his front door. He looks tired and worn out as he stands up, like he hadn't slept the night before. Knowing him, he probably didn't.
"You saw the DA?" he asks quietly.
"Yeah." Jason hangs up his leather jacket, takes off his boots, and strides over to his bedroom with his saddlebags. He takes out the jacket, the tie, and the load of paperwork Dent had seen fit to gift him with.
"Alfred would pitch a fit if he saw that jacket," Tim comments from behind him.
"Good thing he won't then," Jason replies. "I know a dry cleaner."
"So do I. I can take them if you want."
"Whatever." Jason leaves the clothes on his bed and fights with the buttons on his shirt before he gets free and tosses it to the side, leaving only his white undershirt and jeans on. He can finally breathe.
"Jason," Tim says hesitantly. "Can we talk? About last night?"
"I'm listening." He doesn't look at Tim as he walks across the living room to the kitchen. Fuck me but I don't want to talk about this right now. I know we gotta, but can't he leave well enough alone for the time being?

He fills up his teakettle and spots Tim laying his jacket, tie, and shirt over the back of the sofa, running a hand over the fabrics to smooth them out. They're the ones he'd bought for him for the night of their dinner outing. He'd bought the tie even though Jason hadn't worn it until today.

When he turns around from the stove, Tim is standing on the other side of the kitchen island. It no longer surprises him how fast and quiet the man moves.

Tim eyes him carefully before he starts. "Last night...I think we both made asses out of ourselves."
"No shit, Sherlock." Jason leans against the counter and crosses his arms. "But you're not the one who came across as the loser who needs to beg a cash loan from daddy dearest."
"Neither one of us thinks you're a loser."
"Yeah? Was Bruce sober enough to say that? Cuz I remember him being three sheets to the wind and cradling that scotch like it was his baby."

It was rather funny, now that he thinks back on it. He's pretty sure he laughed about it last night too.
"Are you trying to pick another fight?" Tim asks shortly. "Because I'll give you one. But I'd much rather not."

Jason runs his hands through his hair in frustration. "No. Yes. I don't fuckin' know. The last 24 hours have sucked ass and I'm just..." he trails off as he tries to find the right words. "I'm tired. I'm tired of all this shit. I'm tired of being the responsible adult. I'm tired of trying to stay a few steps ahead and getting kicked in the balls each time I think I'm catching up."

He's been shouldering the weight of so much for so long. He thought he'd been doing well but then life, as it so often does, reminds him that he doesn't deserve shit.

Looking into Tim's eyes, Jason wonders why the hell this man is even still here.
He must have said that last part out loud because Tim replies, his eyes fierce and determined. "I'm here because I choose to be. Because I want to be. I love you, Jason. That hasn't changed because of all this. If you want me to go, I will, but I'll be back because I am not giving up on us."

Jason closes his eyes and takes a few deep breaths. I know he's right. Goddammit but I know he is. I just...fuck, when the hell am I going to stop fighting? I'm not alone. Even before Tim, I had Kori and Roy. And Mike. And even Steph to an extent. No one is going to abandon me because I accepted money from Tim. Or hell, even Bruce. And isn't that a kick in the ass? I can ask Bruce fucking Wayne for money if I really needed it. I could probably still ask either of them to pay my way for a degree and they'd do it in a heartbeat. What the fuck is my life even that I can do this?

The teakettle decides to whistle, startling both of them with its shrillness.
"I don't want to give up either," Jason replies quietly and turns to deal with his tea. He needs something to help calm his nerves. For a moment, he feels the hollow echo of a nicotine craving.

Tim waits, picking up that Jason has more to say.
Tea finally steeping, he turns back to the billionaire's son. "I don't want to give up," he repeats. "But sometimes shit happens that just smacks me in the face with how fucking different we are. That money you transferred? That's more than I claimed as income last year. It's like fucking pocket change to you."

His language always deteriorates when he's stressed. Hopefully Tim should know this by now.

Tim has the grace to look abashed. "If it's any consolation, that was about a third of my available cash. Everything else is tied up investments or real estate."

Jason shakes his head incredulously. This is my life. "A third you say? Well damn, whatever will you do, rich boy?" he teases, trying to make sure there's no sting to the words. "You must be downright poor now."

Taking that as the sign to approach, Tim walks around the island and loosely wraps his arms around Jason's waist. "Eat out less," he replies with a grin. "Stop buying video games and other little gadgets. What else...oh, I could sell the Audi. My car insurance would plummet."
"No fucking way are you selling that car," Jason retorts as he pulls Tim close. "Don't even joke about that."

The shorter man laughs as he stands on tiptoe to rest his chin on Jason's shoulder. His arms move up to wrap around his neck. "Fine, I won't sell the Audi. What else could I do..." he trails off thoughtfully, but his eyes gleam wickedly as he leans his head back to look at Jason. "I know. You could hire me part time as your houseboy. I could cook and clean around here to get some extra cash."

Jason grins and plays along. He feels better now, knowing they're back on solid ground. "I could get you a frilly little apron. Make that your uniform and nothing else."

Tim shudders at that. "We okay?" he asks, gazing into Jason's eyes.
"Yeah." He closes the distance and places a chaste kiss on Tim's lips. "You gonna take back some of that money? I don't need quite that much extra for what needs to be done."
"I will," Tim agrees. "We'll talk about just how much you need later. Makeup sex now?" he asks hopefully.
"Hell yes," Jason agrees and picks up Tim to sit him on the island.
Their mouths crash together in a flurry of movement, both giving and taking what they need from the other. Tim runs his hands through Jason's hair while he runs his down Tim's back and comes back up dragging his shirt with him. They separate long enough for Tim to try and get the shirt over his head but his arms get lost in the long sleeves.

Laughing, they separate long enough for him to pull it off. "Bedroom?" Jason asks.
"Race you there," Tim replies and hops off the countertop.
In bed, Tim takes control, rightly sensing that Jason doesn't want to think, that he wants to feel. He's left a quivering mess as Tim teases him open, fingers brushing lightly at a certain spot but never quite with the pressure he wants until the fingers are replaced with something else Jason appreciates much more. He's not afraid to give up control to Tim, not now (not ever). As the younger man moves over him, inside of him, Jason feels ever so much more hopeful that one day, he'll be able to tell him those three magic words.

Afterwards, they lie there together, Jason still trying to see straight while Tim idly plays with one of the rings he's always so fascinated by. "Maybe I'll get something pierced," he muses, flicking at the red bead.
"Yeah?" Jason stretches lazily and scratches at his stomach. He's a mess and doesn't care in the slightest. "Where?"
"Dunno. Maybe my ear."
"I'm gonna get a call from Alfred for being a bad influence on you."
"You're already a bad influence," Tim agrees as he continues flicking the bead. "But you like tea almost as much as he does, so you're safe."
"Want me to come with for the first one? Hold your hand?" Jason grins and grabs Tim's wandering hand.
"You make it sound like I'm going to get more than one."
"They're like tattoos. You don't stop at just one."
Tim eyes Jason's unmarked body. "You know that how?"
"Roy."
*****

Early afternoon rolls around and Roy arrives at the bar to help with the weekly delivery. Kori accompanies him. Jason had texted them (and Stephanie, even though she has classes and can't come until later) about what happened the day before.

Tim's still there too, though Jason can't help but notice he's looking at his phone fairly often. He leaves his boyfriend and Kori together in the office to let Tim explain why there's now so much cash in the building account.

Jason relishes the easy motions of unpacking and organizing the stock that makes up the lifeblood of his bar. He and Roy work in companionable silence.

It's like everyone's waiting for the next bomb to drop.
Soon enough, Kori pokes her head into the supply room. "It's finally on," she says quietly.
The two big men leave the room to follow her into the bar where Tim's turned on one of the TVs to a live GCN broadcast from the steps of the federal courthouse in downtown Gotham.
"We are live with a breaking story that's bound to send shockwaves through not only Gotham City but the financial world as well. Yesterday afternoon, Damian Wayne, youngest son of local Gotham businessman Bruce Wayne, was arrested at Wayne Tower and taken into FBI custody. GCN has learned the youngest Wayne heir was arrested on multiple charges, including mail fraud."

Jason doesn't pay attention to the talking head, focusing instead on what's going on behind her. He sees Bruce, Dick, and an older woman walking down the steps of the courthouse, along with a few people from their security team. That must be the family lawyer. What did Tim say her name was?

The media flocks to them and the camera pans over and switches to another angle where another reporter from GCN has their microphone at hand for the best sound byte.
"Mr. Wayne! Mr. Wayne!" a chorus of voices clamor, trying to get his attention. Bruce looks tired, but that's the only sign of anything on his otherwise stoic face. Dick, on the other hand, looks mad and is visibly struggling to keep his calm.

The dark haired woman steps forward. "The Wayne family has prepared a statement."
The noise subsides.
"The Wayne's are deeply saddened and upset over the recent actions of Damian Wayne. They are working with Federal authorities and cooperating in the ongoing investigation. The family would appreciate their privacy during this difficult time." The attorney pauses and looks over her shoulder at Bruce, who nods stiffly. "I will take a few questions."

Voices shout and the woman seemingly picks one at random as Jason can't make heads or tails over the noise.
"What are the full list of pending charges against Damian?" a man asks.
"The full list of charges will be read tomorrow morning at his arraignment."
The information causes a flurry of murmurs amongst the media before more questions are flung at the lawyer. She points to another person.
"How is Damian expected to plead?" a woman asks.
"No comment at this time," the attorney replies and points to another person.
"Where is Timothy in all this?" Vicki Vale's voice chimes out. "I see Richard standing with Bruce, but not him."
"He has his own affairs to attend to," the lawyer replies and moves on.
"Oh snap, would you look at that?" Roy speaks up. "Tim, I think your big brother is about to blow a gasket."

Jason would have to agree. On TV, Dick more closely resembles a thundercloud than anything else. Bruce places a hand on his shoulder and leans in, whispering something that settles him down.

Next to him, Tim shakes his head. "He's been texting me all day asking where the hell I am."
"Have you answered?" Kori asks, turning her attention away from the TV.
"No," he replies. "He should know full well why I'm not there. I'm not sure if the charges against Damian, at least at this time, include Jason's name. But I can't see Bruce not telling him the full story."

Jason sighs and shakes his head too. "Dent has to sit down with what's her name and discuss which charges are going forward."
"Marion Baker," Tim says idly, his eyes still glued to the TV. "She's Bruce's attorney."
"So does that mean we're going to see Hurricane Dick arriving here soon?" Roy asks.
"Hurricane Vale will be hot on his heels," Jason replies. He explains what happened to him earlier in the day when he was downtown. The morning feels like forever ago now.

Tim rolls his eyes and turns off the TV, GCN having moved on to trying to analyze what was said and not said. "We should probably batten down the hatches then."
"This shit is hell on my business," Jason mumbles as he heads back to the storeroom.
"Just be thankful it's not on the weekend," Kori replies. "Most of your revenue comes then."
"We're gonna be busy this weekend," Roy agrees. "If that reporter announces to the world that it's Tim's boyfriend that was Damian's target, we're gonna be fuckin' slammed."
"They'll find that out when the charges are announced during his arraignment. We'll charge the reporters double for taking up space," Jason retorts half seriously. "I've closed enough because of this shit. I'm not gonna hide. Not anymore."

Tim nods firmly. "And I'll be here too. It'll be hilarious when these guys figure out just who's serving their beer."
*****

The expected pounding on the front door to the bar comes barely thirty minutes after Tim turns off the GCN broadcast. Jason casts a wary eye at the locked door and puts down the bucket of ice he just brought out from the kitchen. From behind the bar, Roy sets down the glass he'd been wiping with a towel. Tim and Kori are back in the office again.
"That was fast," he comments.
"No shit. He must have had his flashers on to get here from downtown so fast." Jason makes a face. "Five bucks says he takes a swing at me."
"Five says he punches Tim." Roy grins.
"Asshole."
Jason walks to the front door. Another round of angry pounding starts up. "Gee, this feels familiar," he mutters as he hears muffled shouts of "Jason, open up!" echo through the heavy door. Peering through the peephole, he sees Dick standing there.

Now or never. Let's get this over with.
He unlocks the door. As he opens it, he comments, "What did I say about knockin' on doors like this in the Bowery, Dickieboy?"

The door open wide, Jason has a clear view of Dick's fist flying towards his face. He has just enough time to move his head and take the punch in the jaw rather than in the nose. He glares at the police detective. 'Only the first one is free, Dick. You come here lookin' for a fight, you're gonna get one."
"How dare you?" Dick seethes, his face flushed red with anger. "All these months you knew what was going to happen and you didn't say a word. You could have said something, ANYTHING and this wouldn't be happening!" His fists clench again.
"Yeah?" Jason challenges right back. He's been itching for a fight and it looks like he's finally going to get his wish. "And what good would that have done, huh? He'd just move on to something else, thinking that daddy dearest's money will shut up whoever else he dicks over. How's that gonna teach the little asshole to grow the fuck up and realize he has to take responsibility for his own actions?"
"He's barely 18 !" Dick shouts. "Locking him up isn't the answer!"
"I know that! I've been there! But it's sure gonna scare the shit outta the pampered little prince when he sees just what he could be dealing with for the next few decades."

Dick's fist comes flying again, but this time Jason intercepts it. "I told you, only the first one was free."

The older man slams into Jason shoulder first, knocking him back and out of the open doorway. Again, he goes with the movement as he's shoved a few steps into the bar, but this time, he leans into it and lands a solid hit of his own in Dick's stomach. He gasps at the blow, but doesn't fold over like most men do. Instead, he comes in low and wraps his arms around Jason's torso and tries to tackle him to the floor.

There's the muscle I knew this fucker had to be packing. Jason braces himself, years of brawling coming into play as he stays upright and uses the momentum to throw Dick off him and into the bar. Stools go flying and Dick gasps again as his back slams into the countertop. Again, he charges Jason with a loud shout, swinging wildly.

Dimly, Jason hears Roy roar in the background. "TIM, GET OUT HERE!"
Fuck, this is gonna be over fast if Tim gets involved. Jason punches Dick again, this time landing a solid blow in the face that snaps his head back, blood bright red on his lips as his nose bleeds. "Don't take this out on me, asshole!" Jason shouts as Dick shakes his head. "I didn't ask to be involved this little war. But I'm sure as fuck not gonna stand here and let you take your shit out on me."

Dick swings again and Jason blocks the obvious hit only to miss the kick that comes out of nowhere and hits him square in the hip, knocking him off balance for a crucial moment. Another kick and Jason's kissing the floor. He rolls fast and grabs the foot bearing down on him. He yanks hard, pulling the former acrobat off balance. Not letting go, Jason bears down and Dick goes down too. He grabs the man's other leg and holds tight, trying to keep the man pinned and not get kicked in the process.
"Dick!" Tim shouts as he runs across the room. "Stop it!"
Jason doesn't let go of the man's legs. He can feel the cop trying to wriggle his way out of the pin. He buries his face in the man's thigh as Dick tries to hit him. The blows land on the side of his head and Jason sees stars. Blinking them away, he squeezes harder and rolls, trying to force Dick onto his stomach so he can't hit him in the head anymore.

I've got a hard head, but damn, that hurt. Fucker can hit. And kick.
There's motion around him and Jason sees Tim grab a hold of Dick's suit jacket and pull it partly off, effectively trapping his arms in the long sleeves. The man still struggles, but then Roy steps up, tapping what Jason recognizes as the baseball bat he keeps in the office against the toe of his sneakers. "Don't make me have to use this, Dick," Roy warns. "We only break this out during the good fights around here when someone needs a serious ass-kicking and Jay and I can't punch their lights out. So what's it gonna be?"

Dick goes limp.
"Smart choice."
Jason waits a moment longer before letting go of Dick's legs and rolling to his feet. He's dizzy as he stands and reaches out to grab a hold of the bar as he tries to see straight.
"Are you all right, Jaybird?" Kori asks quietly. She's on the other side of the bar, a pitcher of icy water in hand. He hopes it was intended for Dick's head and not him. The redhead has excellent aim when it comes to tossing drinks in people's faces, regardless of receptacle.
"Yeah, just gimme a minute. Fucker got me in the side of the head."
Dick's risen to his feet as well and has started yelling at Tim. "How could you? He's your brother! Your little brother! You're supposed to protect him, Tim!"

Tim has no problem dishing it right back. Jason knows he's been waiting for this chance for months. 'I've tried to be his brother, Dick! You know that! I came to you for advice God knows how many times and nothing ever worked! Things were fine while I was gone, but they only got worse when I came back. And then he drags Jason into all this. Jason, who did nothing wrong except date me! It's my fault all this happened to him in the first place. I will take the blame for that. But don't you dare try to tell me Damian didn't know what he was doing. He knew full well what he did was wrong. The little fucker just didn't think he'd get caught."
"That doesn't matter! He's your family!"
"Yeah? You're a cop, Dick. Since when does that matter when someone breaks the law? Or do you only make the exception when it's your family?" That glacial glare Jason saw last night on Tim is back in full force as he argues with his older brother.

Those words finally seem to sink in as Dick's mouth snaps shut.

Tim takes advantage and continues. "Damian broke the law. You know that. What you're more upset about is that you know what kind of time he's facing if all the charges go forward. Damian fucked up, Dick. You can't be there to catch him every time he does. Or I do. Sometimes you have to let us fall so that we can pick ourselves back up."

Dick's shoulders drop at Tim's words. Jason has a feeling there's more being said than he's picking up on as the older man's face crumbles. "Tim," he sobs. He looks rather pathetic standing there with a bloody nose and tears steaming down his face, but Tim walks right up to him and pulls him in for a hug, the icy demeanor once again disappearing in the blink of an eye.

Kori nudges Jason and hands him a towel wrapped around some ice. "For your head."
"Thanks," he mutters and sits down heavily on one of the still upright barstools. The cool dampness against his aching head feels good.

Roy ducks under the counter and hands the bat to Kori. "Thanks, babe," he says and kisses her on the cheek.
"Of course," she replies. "I like my bat."
"I like watching you swing it," Jason chimes in. "Does great things to your boobs."
"I love an appreciative audience," Kori smiles. "Do you need some ice for your jaw too? It's starting to swell."

Jason moves the towel to his jaw in response.
Tim picks up the barstools Dick had knocked over when Jason sent him flying into the bar and sits down. Dick takes a seat next to him. "Kori, would you please get me a wet towel so I can clean up this mess?" He points to his brother.

Laughter is a bad thing, Jason decides as the dizziness returns. He closes his eyes as he tries to ride it out. "What the hell did you hit me with, Dickie? A brick?"
"I thig you brode my nose," Dick replies as he accepts the damp towel from Kori. "Thags."
"No, he didn't," Tim replies as he takes the towel from his brother and starts mopping up blood and snot. "It's definitely bruised though."

Jason doesn't reply and moves the ice back to his head. Today is a shit day. And it's not even close to being over yet. What the hell else is gonna go wrong?

There's a knock on the still open door to the bar as Vicki Vale walks in. Her eyes light up at the sight of Dick, Jason, and Tim. "Well, it looks like I just missed the good part."

## Chapter End Notes

I suck at writing action scenes so I'm sorry if the fight was lame.
Next week...Dick tells Jason a story about a certain young demon.

# Milestone Twenty-One: The Story 

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jason stares into the shot glass full of tequila that Roy poured for him. He's tired. The day's barely half over for him and yet he feels like he's been going for two days straight without a stop. As tempting as it is to take the bottle of tequila and hide in his office, he knows the one shot is all he's getting. Hiding in the bottle solves nothing nor does it help with forgetting once the fog fades away.

Tim took charge of Vicki, taking her back to Jason's office to speak with her while Kori and Roy clean up the bar from the fight. Kori's been giving Dick the stink eye as she hates cleaning up blood (they all do, which is why they take turns and keep track of it so no one can weasel their way out of it).

Dick is still sitting next to him, a cold compress over his nose to help with the swelling. Jason feels proud he'd managed to clock him that one but is equally bitter that he still gets dizzy if he moves too fast. The only thing he's received to drink is water that was poured by Tim before he went off to wrangle Vicki.

Petty, but it's a reminder to the cop that his staff is in his corner, even if he does look more pathetic than Jason does.

The man won't stop with the morose sighs though and it's starting to drive him insane.
"Suck it up, Dickieboy. That mug of yours ain't gonna look so pretty for a while."
Dick rolls his eyes. "How's your head?" he asks instead of responding to Jason's baiting. He sounds almost normal now that his face has been cleaned up, but there's still some dried blood lingering at the edge of his nostrils.

## Asshole. He knows he got me good.

"Sore." Jason picks up the tequila and swirls it around. Dick eyes it longingly but takes a sip of water instead.
"For what it's worth, I'm sorry."
"Yeah, I'm sure you are. Answer me this though. If it had been Tim who opened that would you have clocked him one instead?" It's something he's been wondering about since Tim took Vicki into the office.

Dick's quiet as he mulls it over. "I would have," he nods slowly. "I just...I heard Damian had been arrested from the news. The news. Not from Bruce or Alfred or Tim. I managed to get a hold of Alfred and he told me he'd brought Bruce to the penthouse this morning so they'd be closer to the courthouse and the GCPD's central holding cells where they're keeping Damian.

I made it up from Bludhaven just in time to catch Bruce on his way to the courthouse to try and see Harvey." He pauses and takes another sip of water. "That's when he told me what Damian had done to you. And that Tim and you have known for months about it."

There's a sour taste in Jason's mouth as he hears this. "If I didn't know how hungover that man had to be this morning, I'd almost believe he set you up to go off on Tim and me."

Man, I must have barely missed these two on my way out after that meeting with Dent this morning. I got back here just before noon and that broadcast happened a couple hours later. That would have been a spectacle, if Dick had decked me on the courthouse steps in front of all those reporters.

The other man frowns at the thought. "He plays his games at the office, not at home. Or so I always believed. Bruce is...he's a lot of things, but vindictive isn't one of them. I got the bare bones story earlier and I know how much Tim and Damian don't get along. I'm the one who went off half-cocked." A pair of bright blue eyes glance over at Jason. "Bruce was hungover? He looked exhausted when I saw him, but I thought it was just because of what happened."

Jason moves the icy cold towel to his jaw as it starts throbbing again and sets down his still full shot glass. He's already tongued all the teeth on that side and nothing is loose. That's the last thing I need, a dental bill on top of everything else. I bet old Brucie'd pay for it though. "He came over here last night to apologize. Interrupted an argument Tim and I were in the middle of, and when all was said and done, we came down here and got drunk. Tim supervised."

No way in hell is Dickie getting more than that outta me. He wants to know more, he gets to talk to Tim or Bruce.
"Getting drunk sounds like a wonderful idea right now." Dick sips again at his water and adjusts the ice over his nose.
"I don't think Barbara is the type to take pity on you for coming home drunk and stinking worse than a skunk from cheap booze. Not to mention no one here is driving your ass back to Bludhaven." Jason refuses to let the man get drunk here if that's his plan, even if he pays for it.
"Babs is going to kill me," Dick mutters morosely. "I'm a cop, a detective. I know better than to make assumptions and let my temper get in the way."

Jason suddenly understands what he's getting at. "I'm not going to press charges," he says. "I doubt there's a law out there against being an idiot. If there was, I'd see a lot less of 'em."
"You and me both," Dick agrees with a wry chuckle before he turns glum again and sighs. "I just can't understand what would motivate Damian to do all this to you. No offense, but in his view of the world, you shouldn't even be a blip on his radar."
"Gee, thanks. That makes me feel better." Sarcasm has always been the best of friends with Jason.
"I didn't mean it that way," Dick tries to recover. "But it's true. The only reason you do is because of Tim."
"And he already feels like shit that this happened. Has for months, so you're not sayin' anything new." He wonders if he gives the cop the tequila if it'll make him shut up. He's still not getting drunk here but I'm tired of listening to him.
"I'm trying to figure this out for myself. I wasn't allowed to see Damian today, so I can't ask him. And Bruce shut up tighter than a clam when I asked."
"I'm sure the brat will be out on bail tomorrow. You can always play big brother then." He catches Roy's eye and raises his glass, subtly gesturing to Dick. He's not sharing.

Surprisingly, the words make the man even more downcast. "I'm a shitty big brother."
Jason sees where this is going. He's been dealing with the Wayne's and their drama for months now. It shouldn't come as a surprise that it's Dick's turn to pour his problems out over a drink. I should seriously charge these fuckers for my brand of therapy. "How so?" he asks, purposefully not looking at him.

Roy sets the tequila down in front of Dick and walks away without saying a word, though he does give Jason a pointed look indicating he's not happy about doing it.
"I wasn't there for Damian when he first came to live with us. I was in Bludhaven already, trying to find my place and get my career started. I'd come up on my days off and he was polite but distant. Tim said I had it lucky when I talked to him about it. That Damian was constantly trying to undermine him. Said he wasn't sure if D was even a real boy." He chuckles darkly at that.
"Tim said he kept trying to be his brother. That he went to you for advice," Jason offers when the pause stretches on.
"He did," Dick agrees. He hasn't made any move to drink the tequila in front of him. "And I gave him advice. But my only experience with being a big brother was with him and Tim's nothing like Damian. We at least had the connection of losing our parents and being adopted by Bruce to bring us together. Damian's situation was a lot different."

It's also something Jason's been curious about since this whole thing happened to him. Tim's never volunteered the entire story (but he hasn't pushed or asked). "I'm probably going to regret asking this, but what exactly is his story? All I know is that he's Bruce's blood son, has a mom who lives in Saudi Arabia or somewhere around there, and that she's a psycho bitch."

Dick adjusts the ice pack on his nose again. "Ask me an easy one, why don't you?" He shakes his head. "So this is how I understand things..."

The story is right out of a soap opera. Rich American billionaire travels overseas for business, falls in love with the daughter of an Arab businessman (and some kind of local nobility in top of that), but are forbidden to marry since said American won't convert
religions. They still get it on in private and all is going well in convincing Talia to run away to the US when they discover she's pregnant.
"No fucking way," Jason says incredulously.
"This is where it gets even better," Dick continues.
A few weeks after telling Bruce she's pregnant, Talia informs him that she's lost the baby. She also tells him she no longer has the desire to join him in the US, that they're too different and come from different worlds. Bruce returns home heartbroken.
"I was living with Bruce when all this went down, so I remember what he was like when he came home from that trip. I'd never seen him so defeated before. So broken. Alfred gave me the abridged version of the story and I did everything I could to cheer him up and make him smile again."
"And a few years later, Tim comes into the fold?" Jason asks. He's completely engrossed in the story.
"More than a few years." Dick pauses as he thinks back. "Tim was 13 when Bruce adopted him. I had just turned 19. That trip happened when I was $12 . "$
"None of you are really close in age, are you?"
Dick shakes his head. "No. And I bet that's part of the problem."
"So what happens next? It's pretty safe to assume Talia lied about losing the baby." Jason prods.
"No kidding," Dick sips at his water some more.
Almost nine years after Bruce's trip to the Middle East, Talia comes to the US with Damian in tow and leaves him with his father. From what Dick remembers Alfred and Tim telling him later, she and Bruce were holed up together in his study for several hours while Damian was left in Alfred's care. When she left, she spoke privately with her son, gave him a hug, and left. She hasn't been back to Gotham since.
"What did they talk about?"
Dick shrugs. "A lot of things. But the one thing that quickly became apparent to Bruce was that he'd been used the entire time by Talia while he was over there. According to her story, everything was carefully orchestrated, including her pregnancy. Her father has no male heirs and thought to use Bruce essentially as a stud horse. Somewhere over the years, Talia decides she's just as good as any male heir and sent Damian away while she did battle with her father. But the damage had already been done and the Damian we all know and love had already been instilled with that massive superiority complex of his."

Something tugs at Jason's memory. "I remember Tim saying that he went back to her once, but that she sent him back here."
"Yeah, that was...that was a nightmare." Dick rubs his eyes and picks up the shot glass finally, swirling around the contents before finally drinking it all, grimacing as it goes down and coughing afterwards. Jason has the distinct feeling Roy had poured the man the crap tequila.
"How so?" he asks, shooting an amused look down the bar at his best friend as Dick relearns how to breathe. That can't have felt good with his nose like that.

Roy gives him a thumbs up and goes back to wiping down glasses.
"Well, he ran away," Dick replies like it's the most obvious thing in the world. "Ran away to a whole other country that doesn't look all that fondly on Americans. The real kicker was, he'd sent Talia an email telling her he was on his way, so by the time he got there, she'd alerted local authorities and he was taken into custody. He was held at the airport until Bruce arrived to pick him up and fly back home with him. Poor kid never even saw his mom while he was there."

Okay. Wow. That's...that's harsh. To have a parent flat out reject you when you've flown halfway around the world to see them...I can't even imagine. "I finally feel some sympathy for the kid," Jason comments, setting down his ice pack. "I've gone through some shitty things in my life, but at least I knew my mom loved me." Dad, on the other hand...yeah, he can rot in hell and go fuck himself on a pitchfork for all I care.
"Likewise," Dick agrees. "Bruce and Damian did some family therapy together for a couple months, but Babs and I both think neither of them got much out of it. Damian's not capable of opening up like that, not with a stranger. He has feelings, I know he does. He was just taught to never show them, that opening up to anyone invites weakness. When he got back, I tried to be there more often. Brought him to Bludhaven on the weekends and did stuff with him (not that there's a lot to do in the 'Haven). But I tried. I thought things were at least okay between us. But then..." he trails off and looks into his empty shot glass. "But then Tim came home."

It was like the other shoe dropped. This part of the story Jason knew already. At least Tim's version of it. "Tim told me what that was like for him. That it was why he bought his own place and moved out. All the mind games and undermining Damian did to him at work he could get away with as the CEO's son. All that shit took a toll on him. Hell, I was there for some of it. Saw first hand what he was like when he'd come staggering in here week after week looking exhausted and so goddamned done with everything." Jason grins sharply at Dick. "Of course, I'm a bit prejudiced."

He picks up his tequila and slams it back. The burn going down is welcome, as is the rush of heat he feels flowing throughout his core.
"As well you should be. I know I was a bit of dick when we first met, but I really do think you're the best thing to have happened to Tim in a long time." Dick grins back at Jason, somehow managing to be charming and smug at the same time, even with the ice pack on his nose.
"Did you just make a dick joke?" he asks incredulously.
"It's my name, I'm allowed."
*****
Kori and Roy both insist that Jason take the night off, considering everything that's happened today.
"Besides, that bruise on your jaw is going to scare people away," Kori comments dryly. "I'll bring some makeup for you tomorrow so we can try and hide it."
"Yeah, get out of here," Roy chimes in. "We got this. Go get some sleep, you look like shit."
"I thought you were my best friend?" Jason replies as he hauls himself up from his barstool. Dick had left not long ago, with Tim walking out with him. Vicki left with them, satisfied with whatever Tim told her. He hasn't come back yet, though Jason wouldn't put it past him to have gone upstairs directly.
"Yup. And as your best friend, I reserve the right to tell you when you look like shit any time I want. Now get outta here before I go get Kori's bat and clock you another one upside the head."

It's nice to be reminded sometimes that he surrounds himself with people who are assholes just like him.
"Go upstairs, Jay," Kori prods. "Order a pizza, watch some Netflix, get laid, whatever. Just get some rest."
"I already got laid once today, so I doubt that'll be happening again." Jason grins as he gets the last word in. His head still hurts, so he grabs some more ice as he walks through the kitchen and out the back door.

## I better not have a fucking concussion. Dick.

The stairs take some time, but eventually he makes it to the top where he stops and leans against the wall for a moment waiting for the dizziness to subside and to catch his breath. Wish I had a bathtub. A shower's all well and good, but I want to sit and soak and maybe pass out. Tim has a tub. Never seen him use it either. Yeah...bathtub.

Just as Jason suspected, when he enters the loft, he finds Tim. What he didn't expect is to see him tossing clothes into a backpack. He's startled, but then realizes the clothes are his. Those jeans are way too big to belong to the shorter man.
"What are you doing?" he asks as he slowly makes his way through the living room to his bedroom area. His head really hurts now. The Tylenol is in the bathroom.
"Packing you an overnight bag," Tim replies as he goes to the dresser to pull out a pair of socks and some underwear. "I was hoping to catch you before you came upstairs to save you the trip." He gives him a level gaze, eyes darting down to the dishtowel and ice Jason's clutching. "Your head still hurts?"
"Yeah. Where are we going?" The answer should be obvious, but the stairs took a lot out of him.
"The brownstone. But..." Tim drops the clothing on the bed and approaches Jason, eyeing him closely. "Are you dizzy?"
"Yeah."
"How's your vision?"
"Right now? You're a little fuzzy."
"Shit," Tim swears and scowls fiercely. "I swear to God, I'm going kill Dick."
"Get in line. He got me good."
"Yeah. And going up those stairs probably didn’t help either. Jay, you might have a slight concussion."

Jason rolls his eyes and tries to suppress the wave of nausea that results from the normally simple action. "Tell me somethin' I don't already know. I really don't feel like goin' back down those stairs."

Tim nods in agreement. "All right. Change in plans. Go lay down on the sofa. Tonight, I'll take care of you."

Words are too much of an effort at this point, so Jason gives him what he knows is a dopey smile and heads back to the sofa. Laying down sounds fantastic right now. Almost as good as passing out in a bathtub.
*****

The next morning, Jason wakes up feeling much better. Tim had plied him with hot tea and Tylenol last night, which did wonders for his head. The shower Tim helped him take was even better and his bed felt like heaven once he finally collapsed in it. He remembers being woken up a few times and answering some questions that seemed ridiculous at the time, but now make perfect sense.

This is the first time anyone has ever been around to help him through a concussion. As nice as it is to be spoiled for once, Jason would prefer not to be clocked in the head to experience it.

The loft is quiet, but it's not until he's leaving the bathroom and stares out across the loft that he realizes that it's too quiet.

## Where's Tim?

In the kitchen, he finds a note next to his teakettle.

## Jason,

There's somewhere I need to be this morning, but I'll be back by lunchtime. I let Kori know that you have a concussion, so she's banned you from the bar again tonight. I'll cover for you as long as I manage to get some sleep this afternoon. I catnapped all night so I could check on you.

Text me what you want for lunch and I'll stop and pick it up on my way back.
-Tim
Well that explains it, though Jason wonders what's so important that Tim had to leave early. He glances at the clock on the stove to see it's just after 9. Given a choice, Tim doesn't like to even become conscious until close to 10 or 11. Which, given the odd hours Jason works, makes sense.

He's sitting on his sofa drinking some mint tea when he remembers a rather important part of the note. Tim told Kori about his head. Dammit. She'll beat my ass and chase me back up the stairs with her bat if she finds me anywhere near the bar today.

Drinking his tea, Jason runs a quick mental inventory of the kitchen. If he gets down there now, he'll be able to make the samosa filling and prep the chutney and other condiments. Friday night is a big food night and he usually makes a killing regardless of what's playing on the TVs downstairs.

Perhaps I can ban myself to the kitchen if I bring a chair back there or something and promise to sit between orders.

His phone beeps as a text comes in. It's sitting on one of the shelves in the bookcase he has framing his wall-mounted TV, plugged into the charger. That's something he knows he didn't do last night as he gets up to check it.

It's a message from Barbara. Swiping the screen, he opens the message and promptly starts laughing at the picture she sent. Dick's nose is a swollen, bruised mess. The man is obviously not amused at the picture his wife is taking of him as he glares fiercely into the camera.

Jason promptly saves it and makes it the contact picture for him. He's learned how to do this from Stephanie last month while Tim and Roy laughed at him.

Going back to the message, he replies. Thanks, I needed that. Tell Dickie we're even for the concussion he gave me.

Barbara's response is quick. I heard about that from Tim. I'm sorry he went in half-cocked like that. He deserved it, though it was a pain to try and cover up this morning.

Another text from her appears almost right away. Turn on the local news.
Jason wonders what she means by that but obeys.
GCN is having a field day as they live broadcast Bruce Wayne and his family leaving the Federal courthouse downtown. There are Dick, Barbara, and Cassandra veering off to the side to use the handicap ramp for Barbara's wheel chair but Tim is at Bruce's side as they
walk down the steps. The security detail he still evades on a regular basis is in full force around all of them.

Shit. The arraignment was this morning. How could I forget that? Oh shit...my name's out there now. My name was released when the charges were read in court. I knew this was coming, but fuck if this isn't reality kicking me in the ass. Again.

The reporters mob the two men, but stop short at the rather intimidating display from their security. Jason recognizes Sasha, the long-suffering blonde woman who'd been in charge of Tim. Meeting her a couple months ago had been a treat. She steps forward to the press, tall and imperious as she stares them down.
"Mr. Wayne is not answering any questions at this time. A statement will be released through Wayne Enterprises later today. That's all."

That doesn't stop the reporters from shouting all kinds of questions at the billionaire as he walks stone faced down the steps and towards a waiting car. Tim follows after him, but then Vicki Vale manages to worm her way through and sticks her recorder right in his face.

There are enough live microphones around to pick up her words.
"Timothy, I know this is an especially difficult time for you, considering everything your brother did to your boyfriend Jason and having to stand with your family in court while the charges were read."

There's a collective gasp from the crowd.
Vicki continues. "Do you have anything you'd like to say about what happened?"
Tim glares at Vicki, that frigid, frosty glare that still manages to burn with its intensity. The GCN camera picks it up perfectly. Jason can't help but give props to Vicki for not backing down in the face of it.
"Jason Todd is a hard working man who doesn’t deserve any of this. No one does. While he and I may not see eye to eye over the charges that were presented against my brother, I do respect his decision as I know it was not an easy one to reach. I would also like to go on the record and state he made this decision entirely on his own, with no coercion whatsoever from other members of my family."

Tim looks from Vicki directly into the GCN camera, eyes still frosty. "Jason's gone through a lot because me, because of Damian. I would very much appreciate the media respecting our privacy during this time."

With that, he nods firmly and steps back into the ring of security that closes smoothly around him. He continues down the steps and away from the cameras.

Jason turns off the TV. He's heard enough.
Sitting heavily on the sofa, he picks up his tea and stares into the mug. I knew this day would come. My name is out there now. My full name and with it, any dirt an intrepid reporter is
going to find. Thank god my juvie records are sealed, but it's going to come out that I'm the son of a heroin addict and mob muscle. I know Tim doesn't care, I KNOW he doesn't, but people are going to judge him for it and assume I'm nothing more than money grubbing trash.

Jesus Christ, I hope he's ready for the fallout. Anywhere I go with him, people are going to judge him, me, us.

He finishes his tea with a couple quick swallows and slams the mug on the coffee table.
I'm done with thinking this way. I don't have to prove shit to anyone. The media, all those reporters, everyone...I don't have to prove myself to them at all. The one person who matters believes in me. Tim ...he believes in ME.

It's about time I start fucking believing in me too.
We're going to get through this. It's gonna suck balls for a while, but we're gonna make it.
Nodding firmly, Jason stands and heads back to the bathroom to take a quick shower. He has work to do.

## Chapter End Notes

Soooo...I feel like I may get lynched for saying this, but there will be no Milestones next Tuesday as this nightowl is going on a well deserved vacation to a wonderful tropical paradise where there will be sand, sun, and, most importantly, ocean. However, I will be participating in JayTim week on Tumblr (I've got my prompts all ready to go!), so feel free to look for me there. I'll post them here on Ao3 when I'm back.

In TWO weeks...more Damian. More reflection on himself and his actions. But more importantly...who's this person the cops are bringing into his cell?

Cheers!

# Milestone Twenty-Two: Epiphanies and Arraignments 

## Chapter Notes

I'm back from vacation and so is Milestones! A huge thanks once again to Janna for looking this over and ever so nicely kicking my butt for making it too damn wordy. I mean that in the nicest possible way, hon! : $\mathrm{D}<3$ :D

Who's ready for more Damian?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Damian sits once again in his single cell, the ebb and flow of humanity outside passing him by. He has a newfound appreciation and understanding of what Richard does each and every day he walks out his door and puts on that badge.

He idly plays with the plastic water bottle he was given earlier after his shower (thankfully alone), lost in his thoughts. For the moment, he lets himself be distracted by what's going on around him as police officers move people in and out of their cells, ostensibly for hearings like the one he's scheduled for tomorrow, though from the shouts some people have made as they're being led away, it's more likely Blackgate.

That's one place Damian is glad he won't be seeing anytime soon. With his crimes being federal rather than local, he'll be spending time in a different facility.

He knows he is many things, but a liar is not one of them. Yes, he'll twist and evade the truth whenever possible but he does not lie. Going before the judge and saying he's not guilty of his crimes would be a lie. As much as he'd like to blame Machin and even Amanda to a certain extent, all this comes back on him.

It was his hand that started the ball rolling, his hand that played the cards.
I am Icarus who flew too close to the sun. My pride and my foolishness have led to this fall. I can see how Drake must be laughing at me. Him and Todd.

What is Todd going to do? Father didn't say if he'd been to see him. He must have though. he never does things by halves. He's always in control.

Is he? a sinuous voice that sounds suspiciously like Grandfather whispers in his mind. Is Bruce always in control? Look what happened when Timothy resigned. How was that part of his plans?

Damian shudders, shoving the voice away. While his mother may have been in charge of much of his early tutoring, Ra's al Ghul was never far away, always watching. Talia had warned him early on to never show fear in front of his grandfather, to never show weakness.

Something suddenly occurs to him. Mother said to never show weakness in front of others. And yet...Drake does. I've seen him do it. In front of Father, and Richard, and Pennyworth, and me to a certain extent when we first met. He ...he shows weakness in front of his family. The thought stuns him as it echoes something Richard has told him many times before.
"It's not a weakness to be yourself in front of your family. We're not going to judge you for being you."

Being myself is not a weakness. Not here. There are no reprisals for acting out, for missing a question on an exam, for not being the perfect heir. Drake...everything he has, he did by being himself.

The thought sours Damian's stomach as it cements yet another fact in his mind that Drake is superior to him. Everything his older brother has done, everything he has and is planning to do, it's all him. No one has given it to him on a silver platter. For all his hard work and dedication, traits that on any other person Damian would deem admirable, he also has friends, a lover, and the respect of his family and social group.

His thoughts are disturbed as his cell door opens. A police officer is standing there, guiding a young red haired man into the small space.

Damian glares. "I'm supposed to be kept separate from everyone else," he snaps.
The officer ignores the glare. "Overcrowding at it's best," he retorts. "This one won't bother you. If he's lucky, he'll be released in a couple hours."

The young man enters the cell without a fight or shout, he simply smiles at the officer and nods his head. Once the door closes and locks behind him, the officer has him turn around and reaches through the bars to remove his handcuffs.
"Behave yourself," he warns and walks away.
It's rather obvious who the warning is directed at.
The young man looks around in interest. Damian can't help but notice he's one of those redheads who look like they're all freckles. He's tall and skinny in that stretched out sort of way that so many men in their late teens appear after a growth spurt, a fact that's supported by the short cuffs on the light jacket the young man is wearing, as well as the frayed hems of his jeans. More interestingly, he's clean, which is saying something in this place.
"Hi," the redhead says as he takes a seat next to Damian. "I'm Colin."
Damian glares some more, not happy at all that he's being forced to share space with another person right now. "Damian," he all but spits out, hoping this will be the end of it.

It's not. "This is the first time I've ever been to a place like this," Colin says, eyes darting around as his hands tighten into fists over his knees, like he wants to grab the fabric, but can't get the right grip. 'You?'

It dawns on him that the person sitting on his right is nervous. Much the same way he'd been last night when he was brought here. "Same."
"What are you in for?" Colin asks, then backtracks quickly at the impressive glare directed at him. "Sorry! I'm just. . .nervous. I've never been arrested before."

Damian lets it rest and it's silent between them for a time. "What did you do?" he eventually finds himself asking, surprising himself at even uttering the words.

The floodgates open. "I punched a guy in the face after he stole a lady's purse. I saw him do it and he was running right at me, so I just...reacted." Colin hangs his head momentarily. "I know it's wrong to hit someone like that, but what he did was wrong too. That lady was so happy she got her purse back. She was with her kids and they were going to the museum like I was and..." he stops, realizing he's babbling. "Sorry, you probably don't want to hear all this."

Damian airily waves a hand. "Does it look like we have anything better to do?"
"No, I guess not." Colin sighs and runs a hand through his hair. It could stand a haircut. "I came downtown to go to the museum for an extra credit assignment for one of my classes at GU. My grade's good in that class, but I thought a little extra boost wouldn't hurt, especially since I'm on scholarship." His face falls even further, looking like he's about to cry. "Man, this sucks. If I get charged, I'm going to lose my scholarship."

Scholarships are not something Damian's ever had to think about before. With his grades and his money, he has the pick of any university in the world. Or rather, I did. Am I even going to graduate high school now? The thought threatens a new wave of depression before he shoves it aside to deal with later. "I thought academic scholarships are based solely on grades?" he asks instead.

Colin nods and wipes at his eyes. "They are, but mine's different. It's a Wayne Foundation scholarship. Full ride and everything. So not only do I have to keep my grades up, I also have to keep my nose clean with the law." He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. "It's going to suck if I lose it, but..." he sighs again. "I did the right thing."

While Damian is not overly involved with the Wayne Foundation, he does know that full ride academic scholarships are not handed out to the undeserving (just the underprivileged). The redhead had to have worked hard to get it. Yet another example that my previous belief of what constitutes as trash is a misplaced one. "Does doing the right thing mean anything if you say goodbye to everything you worked for?"

The young man turns and gives him an incredulous look. "Yes," he replies emphatically. "Because it's the right thing. If I'm charged, then I can take out student loans, get another job. I'm going to finish college, I've worked too hard to get there and not do it."

Damian stares back, mouth slightly agape. It's like a smack in the face because for the first time in his life, he feels like he's the piece of trash, mourning over what he's going to lose because he did the wrong thing. He's the one who broke the law (several of them) and has to
face the consequences of doing so. But Colin, he's going to lose it because he did what any good person should do. He helped someone in need.
"Damian?" Colin asks, interrupting his train of thought. "You okay?"
"I am fine," he says, still stunned by the direction his thoughts had taken.
"You don't look it. Not that I know what a normal expression is for you or anything," the redhead tries to recover at Damian's arch look.
"I am...surprised you're so accepting of your circumstances. Most of the people I've seen in here rant and rail and shout to everyone who deigns to listen that they're innocent or have been wronged."

Colin shrugs. "I know I'm guilty of punching that guy. Morally, it was the right thing to do, but the law doesn't see it that way. I broke the law, so I have to deal with the consequences. At least I won't have a guilty conscience because I didn't do anything."
"Then you are lucky in that regard," Damian sighs and turns his attention back to his empty water bottle. "I did the wrong thing for what I believed were the right reasons. But now, I've come to understand that the reasons behind my actions were entirely misplaced."

The redhead looks at him quizzically. "You don't have to say anything if you don't want to, but what happened?"

Damian shoots him a cautious look, but there doesn't appear to be any ulterior motives behind Colin's open and freckled face. "I wronged a person in a misguided attempt to get ahead in a game between myself and an older brother. It was brought to my attention earlier this morning that what I perceived as using him to attack my brother was nothing more than a personal attack because I felt he'd wronged me."
"The way you put that sounds like something out of Game of Thrones."
"It's not too far off the mark," Damian replies. He likes that show. He gets it.
"So, if I'm getting this right, this guy is someone you wouldn't have...wronged...if it wasn't for your brother."
"Correct. He also has more to lose than I believed. People depend on him."
Colin is silent as he takes it in. His face is an open book as it's obvious he's thinking things over. He suddenly grins. "Sounds like you and your brother fight a lot."

Damian is surprised by the young man's final analysis. "You have no idea."
"I don't have any brothers or sisters, but I was raised in an orphanage, so I've been in plenty of fights and arguments with the other kids. Sometimes these things just happen. But a lot of the time, it was because we were all scared. No family, no home, just the sisters at the orphanage taking care of us. Some of us would get lucky and be adopted, but the older we
got, the less likely that was gonna happen. Who wants to adopt a teenager when they could adopt a toddler?"

The words strike Damian right to the core. His hand involuntarily tightens around the plastic water bottle, crushing it in half. No family, no home ...scared. I... was scared when I came to Gotham, scared that if I didn't prove myself to Father that he'd send me away, just like Mother did. Everything I've done is to prove myself to him, to prove that I'm the one true heir, the son of his blood rather than his son by adoption. That's what Father was trying to say earlier.

I never had to prove my worth. I am his son. And for him, that's enough.
Shame washes over him and he closes his eyes. Richard had always told him he just needs to be himself. Father had told him he loves all three of them equally. And Drake...Drake had tried, in the beginning, to be his brother. To help him find his footing in the Manor, in Gotham, at school, everywhere. He'd tried and for his efforts, Damian backstabbed and belittled him at every turn.

He has a family who cares for him. He'd just never appreciated it until now.
Sitting next to him is a man who was raised without one and yet he's a better person despite it.
"I can't say," Damian finally says. "But I do know that being left with people who are complete strangers, even ones you've heard stories about all your life, is not an easy experience either."

Colin nods thoughtfully but doesn't say anything.
Which is fine with Damian as he feels he's shared more than he intended. His conversation with Colin has netted him some food for thought, a different perspective on things that he hasn't previously considered.

I got myself into this mess by not thinking clearly and not considering the repercussions of what could happen if I were caught. I know better. Mother AND Father have both taught me to think things through, that no plan ever survives its first engagement. To always have contingency plans in place and to be flexible in thought and action. Drake, damn him, knows this too.

Damian does not delude himself into thinking his actions were right or just. He knows full well (now) that his actions were wrong. The ends don't justify the means and that he put innocent people in danger without ever considering what would happen to them if he destroyed Todd financially. He only thought of how it would hurt him and, by extension, Drake.

Colin though...he acted without thinking too and stands to lose something important because of it. In this case, we are the same. Not thinking about our actions has landed us both in the same place. I feel...sympathetic...to his plight. With but a word to Father, I could help him. I
think. I'm not sure my word holds much weight anymore, but surely Father would look into it. Right?

He spares a passing thought that if Father does not, a word to Drake may suffice. He's always been more active with the Wayne Foundation than him or Richard. But why would he take my word for anything? What would he gain for helping Colin, even indirectly?

Drake stands to gain nothing but he's always been a sucker for a sob story. Look at Todd... Damian's thoughts lurch to a stop as something clicks. Drake...he doesn't always look at things in terms of how to get ahead. To win. He plans ahead but he's no less empathetic than Richard most of the time. And that...it doesn't make him weak. That's why he had almost everyone at WE wrapped around his finger. That's why he has friends and colleagues who are so unwavering in their loyalty to him.

## That's why he has someone like Todd.

Damian has often been envious of his brother in general over the years but this is the first time he's ever been envious of what he has. Those relationships, they don't make him weak, they make him stronger.

How does one...open up? I...was raised to believe I am superior to others, so there he always been a barrier between myself and my interactions with other people, even those who are my so-called-peers. Today seems to be the day for self-reflection, but these thoughts are so new and foreign it's hard for him to tell if he's on the right path.

He glances over at his cellmate. "Colin," Damian finds himself saying, as the young man's gaze falls on him. "In the orphanage, how did you and the other children resolve your fights?"

Colin looks surprised at the question. "The sisters usually broke it up before it got too bad."
"I should have said disagreements," Damian clarifies.
"Oh. Hmmm... Well, I guess it depended on what it was about. I guess we'd just yell to get it out of our systems and if that didn't fix things, the sisters would make us sit down and talk it out."

How does something so simple work?
"Like mediation?"
"Umm...not really? They'd put us in a room and wouldn't let us leave until we'd figured it out." Colin looks confused. "Why are you asking? You have a brother, haven't you guys fought before?"
"I've had an ongoing quarrel with my...brother... since I was 10 years old."
"That's a long time to be mad at someone. What did he do to you?
"He..." Damian sighs, knowing he's going to sound like an ass. "He exists. That was enough."
"Wow. You guys must be a lot alike." Colin grins at the outraged expression on Damian's face.
"Drake and I are nothing alike!"
"You sure about that? The sisters always said the ones we're the most similar to are usually the ones who get under your skin the most." The young man teases but the question makes Damian stop and think yet again.

Are we alike? As much as it galls me to admit it, that would explain a lot. There are some similarities. Some.
"I...perhaps you are right. In a few ways at least." A few rather important ways that bears further thought. Which is about the only thing he can do right now.

Time passes and eventually one of the officers stops in front of their cell.
"Wilkes, let's go."
Colin stands with trepidation and casts a weary eye on Damian. "Looks like it's time to face the music."

He holds out his hand.
Damian accepts it, shaking it firmly. "Good luck," is all he says.
The redhead nods. "You too. I hope you and your brother stop fighting."
Letting go, he walks to the front of their small cell. The officer has him turn around to place handcuffs on him and opens the door.

The door slams shut quickly enough, locking Damian in and leaving him alone again with nothing but his thoughts and a crushed water bottle for company.
*****

The next morning, Damian sits ramrod straight in a chair waiting for his name to be called to see the federal judge. The small room is not overly crowded, but each time the door opens and closes, there's a flash of light as some intrepid photographer tries to snap a picture of the inside of the room. Of him.

He's on to their game already and has chosen a seat where he's not visible from the door. Baker, his father's attorney, sits next to him, calm and poised. Damian has met the formidable woman many times over the years and knows that she commands the respect of his father. He tries hard to channel that same confidence, which is hard when he's wearing handcuffs. The lack of sleep and stress of the last two days is catching up with him too.

Last night had been slightly better than the first in the holding cells, but only because the would-be rapist was no longer in the cell next to him. Damian privately hopes he's sinking to the bottom of the Gotham River, feet weighted down with cinder blocks.

Soon enough, a bailiff walks in and announces, "Damian Wayne. The judge is ready to see you now."

Damian stands, Baker rising smoothly next to him.
"Remember, this is only the formal reading of the charges. You do not need to enter a plea at this time," she reminds him as they approach the bailiff.
"I understand," he replies with a jerky nod.

## I am not nervous. I am in control of myself, if not my situation.

They're led out of the room via a different door, away from all the vultures lurking out front of the main entrance. They pass a few other doors in the hallway, ostensibly leading to other courtrooms, before the bailiff stops in front of one.

There's no fanfare or ceremony as Damian is led into the courtroom. It's smaller than what he'd expected, the only knowledge he has coming from television dramas. It's also mercifully quiet as the crush of reporters outside are banned from being in the room while any sort of proceedings occur. A court reporter sits unobtrusively off to the side and another bailiff stands next to the bench where the judge is seated.

## I am thankful for small favors. It will be bad enough leaving here.

He'll be home soon enough. Home where he can take a shower without someone watching him, home where he can curl up in his room, on his bed, and pass out for several hours. Home where Pennyworth makes afternoon tea, and food that's not made of processed meats and slapped between two pieces of stale bread.

Damian is not deluding himself into believing it's anything other than a temporary respite. $A$ couple of weeks, perhaps less. And then ...I am not sure when I will return.

An older man sits in judge's robes at the front of the room behind the bench. He's familiar, but the name escapes him at the moment.

Also at the front of the room is Harvey Dent, former Gotham City DA and now the US District Attorney for this district. Damian knows him much better as the man is a regular in his social circle, always trying to garner favor with Bruce. He's heard many people say that Dent and his father are friends, but he's never seen it. I have never liked that man. There is something about him that is two-faced, which is saying something considering the people I regularly encounter.

As they approach the judge, Damian spares a glance to either side of the aisle to see who was allowed into the room. His heart leaps into his throat, though he does his best to hide it.

On a bench immediately behind where the defendant would sit is his family. Bruce looks even more worn and haggard than the previous day while Richard is obviously suppressing the urge to brush past the bigger man to reach out and drag Damian into a hug. There's something wrong with his face as his nose is swollen and red, even with the attempt to cover
it with makeup. Next to Richard, Barbara's sitting calmly, her gaze level on him as she keeps a hand on Richard's coat sleeve to keep him still.

Next to her is Drake. Damian is expecting the icy glare that's so often been shot in his direction over the years of their ongoing battle, but it's not there. His blue eyes are oddly flat, which disturbs him because it's a different expression than he's used to encountering.

Behind Bruce are Pennyworth and Cassandra.
There is no sign of Todd, which is surprising as Damian had been positive he'd be here to gloat. Perhaps that's why Drake is looking the way he is. Was there a falling out over Todd not being here today? For that matter, why is Drake here, if not to gloat? He's WON, damn him.
"It's never been a contest," his father's voice echoes in his mind, reminding him yet again of how much he'd screwed up over the years.

I was so focused on trying to make Mother proud of me, of trying to be the perfect heir for Father because SHE said to be, that I never realized Father's expectations of me would be different from hers. With Mother, everything is conditional, including her love. With Father... his love of his sons does not have those same strings.

He'd been rather proud of that little epiphany back in his cell yesterday afternoon. His conversations with Colin had provided him with more food for thought than the other man would ever know.
"All rise for the honorable Judge Juan Martinez," the bailiff announces. Everyone shuffles to their feet, with Barbara remaining in her seat.

The next few minutes are about what Damian expects. He forces himself to pay attention to what Judge Martinez is saying to him, about why he's here.

## I know, old man. Get on with it.

Dent then steps forward with a piece of paper and hands it to the judge. His face is neutral, but there's a glint in his eyes that sets Damian's teeth on edge.

Judge Martinez starts reading the list of charges. "One count of opening a post office box under an assumed name with the intent to commit fraud. Twelve counts of mail fraud. One count of conspiracy to commit fraud. One count of assault on a Federal official." The judge gazes sternly down at Damian. "Do you understand the charges as they are laid out before you?"
"I do, your honor."
What? Where are the identity theft charges? Fraud, yes. Assault on that jackass Tresser, yes. But where are the charges from Todd?
"You are not expected to enter a plea at this time. Your bail is set at $\$ 250,000$. If you are released on bail, then certain restrictions will be placed upon you. Due to your dual
citizenship with the UAE, your passport is being revoked as you are considered a flight risk. As such, you will also be made to wear a GPS monitor until such a time this court sees fit to remove it."
"Yes, your honor."
The judge sets the date for his next court appearance. It's two weeks to the day.
"You are dismissed."
A rock settles into Damian's stomach. Two more weeks before his life is effectively over. As he turns away from Judge Martinez, Damian catches Drake's eyes. There's more fire to them now and the faint twist on his lips indicate he's not pleased. He can hear Richard chattering to Barbara about the charges, specifically the ones that are not there.
"He didn't press charges," he's saying in a hushed but still amazed tone.
Why? Why did Todd not press charges? Did Father bribe him? No, no that's not likely, not with Drake standing watch but also Todd's own moral code. He's...proud in his own way. Satisfied with what he has and not seeking out more.

It still doesn't answer the question though.

## What is Todd's game? Whatever it is, Drake's not fully on board. He's displeased with something.

Later, much later, Damian sits next to his father in the car as Pennyworth drives them home. Bruce is quiet, and other than asking how he's doing, hasn't said a word.

Finally deciding he's had enough of waiting and staring at the Gotham skyline outside the window, Damian asks the question he's been wondering about all morning. "Why did Todd not press charges?"
"I'm not sure," Bruce replies thoughtfully. "I have my suspicions but I think this something you should ask him directly."

Damian shifts in the car seat to better face his father. "Will I have the chance before the next court date?"
"Yes, even if I have to tend bar myself to get him to come to the Manor." He chuckles lightly at the prospect.

The thought is amusing, which Damian finds surprising. Just two days ago if he heard those words from his father's mouth, he'd have bristled at the very thought.

## I suppose that's progress.

Baby steps, Damian. Baby steps. Raise your hand if you can't wait for the upcoming Jason/Damian confrontation! Oops, was that a spoiler? Nah, I don't think so, we all know it's coming.

Next week: People crawl out of the woodwork to take over the bar and Jason learns he has more friends than he thought he did.

# Milestone Twenty-Three: Support Systems 

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jason makes his way carefully downstairs and into the bar. From his office, he drags his wheeled office chair into the kitchen and strategically places it in plain sight for anyone who walks in, sees him, and starts bitching about his head.

Condiment prep is easy. He could do this in his sleep, but when he's done, he gratefully sinks down into the chair and closes his eyes for a few minutes. I swear to God, next time I see Dick, I may just swing first and apologize later. Fucking prick.

The samosa prep takes a bit longer as he has potatoes to peel. He's fine if he stands still, but if he moves too fast, a wave of dizziness washes over him. It takes a while, but he figures out a system that keeps the world from spinning around him. Once the potatoes are boiling away in his stock pots, he sits down again, leaning back in the chair.

He sets the timer on the oven in case he falls asleep.
If I'm being honest with myself, I'd say I'm at 60\%. A damn sight better than last night, but until this dizziness goes away, I'm gonna be useless down here, even if I stay back here. Goddammit, Dick...

The timer going off wakes him up from the light doze he fell into. Blinking quickly, Jason gets up to finish the rest of his work.

Another hour goes by and he's crimping the last of the samosas when he hears the back door to the kitchen open. Tim enters, still dressed in his suit and tie, but there's an air of exhaustion to him that wasn't present on TV. He's carrying a plastic bag full of something that's already teasing his nose over the scent of spiced potatoes.

Shit, I bet he's barely slept since our fight the other night. I thought he looked tired yesterday, but it's even worse now.
"What are you doing down here?" Tim asks crossly as he sets the bag down on the counter. "You should be resting."
"Food prep is easy," Jason retorts as he finishes crimping the dough and grabs his egg wash.
"You shouldn't be standing for too long."
"And I'm not. See?" He points to the office chair. "I've used it. Besides, you're the one who looks like the walking dead."
"Says the man who hates zombie shows."
"What can I say? There's just something about how they've crawled out of the ground that gives me the creeps."

Tim sighs, obviously realizing he's not going to win. "Whatever. Did you see my note?"
Jason pauses as he remembers there was something he was supposed to do. "I forgot to text you about lunch."
"And you forgot your phone upstairs. I found it on the coffee table."
"Sorry?" He's not, not really, but he does feel a bit bad that Tim had to trek all the way upstairs, and then come back down to look for him.
"No you're not," Tim smiles tiredly at him. "Lucky for you, I like you enough to go to the effort of getting your favorite food."

Eyes widening, Jason takes another sniff of the tantalizing smell that's been trying to waft its way towards him. "Did you get...?"
"Chilidogs from that street vendor you love down on $14^{\text {th }}$ and Sheldon."
His mouth starts watering instantly. "Tim. Babe. You're awesome and amazing and I think I love you right now." He abandons the egg wash and dives into the bag, immediately finding a chilidog. Unwrapping it, he shoves half of it in his mouth and closes his eyes in bliss.

## God bless the chilidog.

If there's one thing Jason will admit to having a weakness for, it's chilidogs. Tim hates them, but from the looks of it when he opens his eyes again and rummages through the bag some more, he's picked up a fajita cheesesteak for himself. Jason takes it out and tries to hand it to his boyfriend, but Tim's standing there slack jawed and looking at him in awe.
"What?" he asks around a mouthful of food.
Tim opens his mouth and snaps it shut again. He gestures to his mouth and Jason takes the hint.

He swallows and repeats the question. "What? You've seen me devour three of these in one sitting before."
"That's not it," Tim replies with a shake of his head. "Think about what you just said."
Jason replays the last minute or so back in his head. ...you're awesome and amazing and $I$ think I love you right now...

He starts to grin as the nervousness he'd expected to feel at finally being able to say those words doesn't make an appearance. If anything, there's a sense of relief and the releasing of tension he didn't even know was there.

It only took a good smack in the head to shake the words loose. Words he's been wanting to say for a while now but couldn't.
"I love you," he repeats, this time looking across the stainless steel kitchen counter at Tim, whose grin is so bright it could probably power the entirety of Gotham.
"Was that so hard to say?" Tim asks, accepting the fajita cheesesteak from him.
"You know I overthink things." Jason takes another bite of his chilidog, smaller this time. He doesn't want a production out of this. Well, I kinda do, but neither of us are up for that right now. Even with my already christened chair in here to help.
"You do," Tim agrees and sets down the cheesesteak. He quickly removes his suit jacket and tie and tosses them onto the chair. He rolls up his sleeves before picking up his food again and unwrapping the foil around it.

Jason can't blame him, those things are messy.
"I'd give you a kiss, but you have hot dog breath," Tim comments and takes a bite. Cheese and grilled onions start dripping out the end and onto the foil he'd spread out over the counter.
"And you have onion breath," Jason retorts with a smirk. "Aren't we just the pair?"
Tim flips him off and swallows. "So romantic."
*****

It's not until they're back upstairs and cuddled together in bed that Tim tells him what happened at the courthouse earlier. He was right to guess he was exhausted.
"It went as well as could be expected," Tim yawns and explains the charges that went forward against Damian.
"Oh shit," Jason breathes. "The FBI agent pressed charges?"
"Turns out he didn't have to. It's automatic. There's resisting arrest and then there's actual assault on a federal agent." Tim sighs and drapes an arm over his eyes. It's usually a sign he has a headache.
"And the difference is?"
"According to Marion, could be up to eight years in prison."
Jason gapes. I don't know what the hell Dent was arguing with me for then, about why I decided not to press charges. He already knew this was coming. "So what now?"
"Damian's been released on bail," Tim replies flatly. "The arraignment today was just reading of the charges against him and setting bail. A post indictment arraignment is scheduled for two weeks from now where he has to enter his plea."
"Two weeks?" Jason can't help the groan that escapes him. "The media is going to eat me alive."

Tim twists around and drops his arm, blue eyes tired, but still clear. "I'm already taking steps to help with that. Babs said she told you to turn on the news earlier. Did you?"
"Yeah, what was that with Vicki? You looked like you were going to crucify her."
"All planned," Tim replies with a vicious smirk. "It's part of what we talked about yesterday."
"You sneaky son of a bitch," Jason glares. "She dropped my name on purpose?"
"Yes. It'll turn the media focus back on me, at least in part. I also talked with Sasha and some other people on Bruce's security team. They'll be here this weekend to help keep the undesirables away." Tim looks like he's going to say more, but let's out a massive yawn, even bigger than before.
"Go to sleep. I doubt you've gotten more than a handful of hours over the last two days." Jason kisses the top of Tim's head, his hair washed clean of all the styling product he'd put in it from the quick shower he'd taken as soon as they made it back upstairs.
"Only if you do. Did you set an alarm?"
"Yeah."
Tim's asleep in a matter of minutes, his breath evening out as he falls into exhausted slumber. Jason watches him sleep for a time. He's tired too, but he's still feeling the rush of having finally said those three little words.

I did it. I fucking did it and I didn't even think about it or plan it or anything. Is this how easy it's supposed to be with the right person?
"I love you, Tim Drake," Jason whispers into Tim's hair, relishing the feel of the words as they fall off his tongue.

It's not long before he too falls into a deep slumber, wrapped around the man he loves.

The bar is a madhouse when Jason and Tim make their way downstairs several hours later. Stephanie is in the kitchen when they arrive, working the fryer like a pro as she balances a baking sheet full of samosas fresh from the oven.
"Need a hand?" Jason offers as he takes in the sight.
"Yes, please!" she replies emphatically and gestures to the fryer. He washes his hands quickly and gets to work.

Tim sneaks a peek out front. "Holy crap. I haven't seen it this busy since Super Bowl."
"Shit," Jason swears. He wants to rush out and help his friends, but Stephanie smacks his arm before he has a chance to do so.
"Don’t even think about it," she says sharply. "It's not as bad as it looks."
"Really?" Tim asks dubiously.
"Yes," the young blonde woman replies. "Almost everyone out there are regulars. They're here to show their support for Jason."
"What the hell?" Jason looks at her in amazement.
"People watch the news," Stephanie explains as she grabs a spatula to remove samosas from the baking sheet. She's grabbed another one out of the oven while he wasn't looking. "The people around here know your name. They may not know Tim as well, but they saw him on the news too and heard what he said." She winks at Tim. "That was pretty hot by the way."

## "Thanks."

"Anyways, from what Kori's told me, almost everyone out there are regulars, trying to take up space to keep everyone else out."
"And the few that aren't?" Tim asks, having caught her earlier phrasing.
"Are building residents." Steph grins in response. "We're all local in here tonight and everyone's bound and determined to keep it that way."

Jason stares at her in shock. Everyone is here for me? What did I ever do for them?
Tim nods thoughtfully. "I'll go see if Roy wants a break." He disappears through the door.
The sound of clapping echoes through a moment later. Stephanie grins harder while Jason shakes his head, still trying to process everything. "I can't believe it," he says weakly. He collapses in his office chair and rubs a hand over his face.
"You better believe it, Jay." Steph returns to the abandoned fryer and takes out a batch of fried pickles, dumping the basket so that the pickles drain before she seasons them. "We're all here to support you. I didn't want to say this with Tim in here, but there are some out there who think he dragged you into something by association."
"It's kinda true," Jason replies. "Damian would never have been gunning for me if I hadn't opened my fat mouth."
"Yeah, but we all know you're a loose cannon sometimes. A lot of good has come from your relationship with Tim too, so don't lose sight of that."

He snorts and ignores the brief flash of pain that ripples through his head. Tim had made him take more Tylenol and drink a full glass of water before letting him come downstairs. "Since when did you get to be so wise?"
"Since always." Steph flashes him a saucy smirk. "You just never listened."
"My bad."
Kori strides into the kitchen before they have a chance to continue. She glares balefully at Jason, even sitting as he is in the office chair. He's pretty sure she'd be shooting lasers from her eyes if she could.
"I thought I told Tim to inform you that you're banned from the bar tonight," she says flatly, flipping her long red hair over her shoulder.
"He did," Jason replies, grinning like the jerk they all know he can be. "But how else do you expect to be able to serve shit tonight if I don't make it ahead of time?"
"Jason..." Kori warns.
He holds his hands up in defense. "I slept most of last night and part of this morning, then slept again after I got all this shit done. I took my meds like a good boy and I'm hydrated. I won't go out there unless you let me, but I'm sure as hell going to stay right here. This is $m y$ bar."
"And we all work here," she replies heatedly. "We're also your friends and often know better than you do when you need to take a break and let us help you."

Jason stands carefully and walks over to Kori, enveloping her in his arms. "I know, and you have no idea how much I appreciate it. I trust all of you," he whispers in her fiery hair. "But I need to be down here tonight. I won't overdo it. I promise. You can smack me into next week if I do."
"I might just smack you anyways," Kori replies as she returns the embrace.
"Just do it somewhere other than my head. I don't think it can take anymore."
*****

Jason sticks to his promise and remains in the kitchen for the next several hours, spelling Stephanie so that she can take a break or relieve Kori out front so she can take one of her own. They already agreed earlier they'd be splitting tips this weekend. Tim and Roy go back and forth occasionally for a snack and to chat with him, keeping him abreast of what's going on.

Roy's leaning against a counter doing just that right now, making sure he's out of the way so he doesn't get run over by anyone going in and out of the kitchen. "When Kori and I got here this afternoon, she was about ready to march upstairs and punch you for all the prep work you did earlier."
"Yeah, I'd believe it. She's already yelled at me." Jason tosses some chicken strips in the fryer for his best friend.
"Good." Roy gives him a thoughtful look before he continues. "Did you know some of Bruce Wayne's personal security guards are stationed around the entrances into the building?"

Jason raises an eyebrow. "Tim mentioned he'd asked a few to watch the bar entrance..."
"Not just the front door. They're at the residential door and one's out on the loading dock making sure no one sneaks in the back hallway."
"No shit? Wow. Wonder what that's costing Tim?" It has to be a small fortune, even if it's just three of them.
"Daddy Bruce is footing the bill." Roy grins like a loon. "One of them is a pretty hot looking blonde chick. She kicks ass and takes names later."
"Must be Sasha," Jason replies. "What does Kori think of her?"
"They're getting along like a house on fire."
That doesn't surprise him in the slightest. He'd liked Sasha the moment she stalked into the bar one evening and introduced herself. Changing the subject, he asks, "Are you and Kori going to head out soon? It's almost 10 ." Kori usually stays until midnight on Fridays, but it's been a long and crazy day for everyone.
"We might," Roy replies. "It's still packed, but people are sitting and nursing their beers rather than running us ragged. Tim can easily handle it and you'll shut down the kitchen soon enough. I won't tell Kori if you sneak out there after we leave."
"Tim's hanging in there?" Jason checks as he pulls the chicken out of the fryer.
"Like a pro."
"And Steph?"
"You know how she is. She'll work her ass off. She's already asked Kori if she should call off from her other job tomorrow night and Sunday night if she's needed here."
"She'd do that?" It shouldn't surprise him, but it still does. He's not used to people helping him. Supporting him.
"Dumbass." Roy stalks over and slaps Jason across his back. "You know she would. All jokes aside though, we may want to see if we can get some help tomorrow. It's gonna be worse."
"I'll see what I can do."
$* * * * *$

The next morning, Jason finds himself back in the kitchen getting ready for what they all believe will be the day from hell. Tim had called Kon last night to see if he'd come to give them a hand this weekend; the promise of a story and the use of Tim's brownstone got him on the first train this morning from Metropolis to Gotham. He should be arriving soon.

Tam was also called, but as Bruce's personal assistant right now, she had no idea what would be needed of her today, so she's down as a maybe. That had bummed Steph out slightly when Tim told her but no one was surprised. Hell, Jason still isn't even sure what's going on there exactly. When he asked Tim, he'd just shrugged too and said they're both interested, just busy.

Which, yeah, that's pretty easy to see between Tam's job, Steph's course load, and her weekend jobs.

There were no leftovers from yesterday, so Jason's back to making everything from scratch. He's feeling much better this morning, but Tim warned him before they went to bed last night not to over do it.

Need to make more than my usual Saturday allotment. Wish I'd known this was going to happen when I placed my order for this week as I'm going to be out of a few things by Monday at the rate I'm going. Perhaps Tim will let me borrow his car so I can run to Costco...

Tim's still sleeping upstairs and he has no plans to waken him early. It can wait.
He'd managed to sneak out of the kitchen last night around 11 (after Stephanie left as she was just as likely to yell at him as Kori) to speak with the people who'd come to the bar to support him. Other than a few major sporting events, he'd never seen the bar that crowded on a Friday night. He's busy, yes, but not like that.

He too got a round of applause when people noticed he'd emerged from the back.
It was like a fucking movie. Dammit, I know I'm staying open this weekend just to show the world I'm not hiding, but that doesn't mean I have to stay open on Monday. If this weekend goes like we think it will, I'll be too exhausted to even think about it.

Jason's roused from his thoughts by a knock on the kitchen door. He whips his head around to cautiously look at it, too fast as a ripple of vertigo hits him and he has to grab the countertop. Tim had said the security guards were going to be there 24 hours a day for the next several days to ensure no one sneaks in, so the knock is surprising.

He walks around the refrigerator and peers through the peephole. All the doors have them.
It's Cassandra.
How on earth did she get here? She lives in Bludhaven and I know for a fact she doesn't drive.

Unlocking the door, Jason opens it and steps aside for her to enter. "What are you doin' here?" It's not the most polite greeting, but he's tired.

The short Asian woman smiles up at him. "I help." The short statement is followed by a gesture encompassing the kitchen.

Jason's eyes widen. "You cook?"

Cass makes a chopping motion.
"Oh, you can use the knife. Alfred teach you?" Jason leads her over to his prep station where he'd been about to peel massive amounts of potatoes. Cass sets down a backpack on his chair and follows him, nodding as she approaches. She eyes his chef's knife, giving it an appraising look, but not touching it.

He remembers what Tim had told him about her, about how her speech is essentially stunted due to the way she was raised, but that she reads body language like he can read a book.

Jason wishes he knew sign language. It would come in handy right about now.
"How are you with a potato peeler?" He holds it up. Why the hell not? If she came all this way to peel potatoes, more power to her. I'm not gonna say no, not today.

The young woman makes a face, but accepts it.
"Yeah, I know, peeling potatoes sucks, but it has to be done. I'll show you how I like these sliced when we're done. Now go wash your hands."

They work in companionable silence. Jason shows her the chop he likes when they're done and leaves her to it while he works on other things and goes through his fridge to see what else he needs more of. It's nice to have another set of hands helping out. Not to mention that gal is wicked with a knife. I wouldn't want to get on her bad side.

Cass is watching him crimp the dough for the samosas when the kitchen door opens again and Stephanie breezes in. "Hey there, Jason!" she greets him brightly. She then notices the short woman with him and looks quizzically at her.
"Hey, Blondie. This is Cassandra. She's..." Jason gives Cass a look. "Are you still Barbara's ward? I know you live with her and Dickie."
"I am," she says slowly. "State says I am...in-com-pe-tent." She sounds it out slowly, but she obviously knows the word and what it means as the look on her face is anything but happy.

Without even thinking, Jason reaches out and ruffles her hair. "Don't worry, I know you're not. You just see things differently than the rest of us."

He's blinded by the bright grin Cass gives him in return. Whatever he did, it was the right thing.

Steph walks around him and holds out her hand, witnessing the entire exchange and obviously not caring that the other woman is a bit different. "Hello, I'm Stephanie."
"Cass," the dark haired woman replies, taking the hand and giving it a firm shake. "Tim talked about you."

The blonde grins. "Only good things I hope." She lets go and turns her attention to Jason. "So what needs to be done? Anyone else here yet?"

Before he can get started, there's another knock at the kitchen door. It's a quick series of taps as though the person on the other side is knocking as a mere formality and knows Jason is there.
"The fuck?" He goes to the door again and peers out.
It's Alfred.
Jason opens the door, holding it wide. "Okay, you are just about the last person I expected to see today."

Alfred smiles politely as he nods his head in greeting. "Good morning, Mister Todd. Considering the recent state of events, I thought you may be need of some assistance in your kitchen today."

Stepping back to let the old man in, Jason reels inwardly as he closes and locks the door behind him. Alfred's on my side. Or Tim's side. Fuck it, whatever. He's HERE when he could be (should be) with Bruce.
"Yeah," he stammers out. "Gearing up for a madhouse to rival Arkham this weekend and I'm still not at a $100 \%$."
"Yes, I heard about your...discussion...with Master Dick." There's the eyebrow Jason heard so much about from Tim being directed at him. "Though I must say you did hold your own if the accounts I've heard are to be believed."
"I'd trade his nose for my concussion any day."
"I would too," Alfred agrees. His face lights up as he spots Cassandra at the counter. Stephanie had taken over showing her how to crimp the samosas. "Miss Cassandra, I see you made it. Mistress Barbara sent a message stating you'd be here as well."

Cass looks up from her work and smiles, obviously pleased to see the old man. "I am helping. Learning too."
"And you must be Miss Brown," Alfred says with a polite smile to Stephanie.
"I am, but just call me Steph." She holds out her hand. Jason cringes as it's covered in flour from the puff pastry dough and bits of potato. She seems to realize it at the last moment and pulls back, ruefully shaking her head. "Uh, sorry about that."
"In a few minutes, I doubt it will matter much." Alfred takes off his coat. "Where should I hang this?"

Jason is shaken out of his stupor by the direct question. "Uh, my office is fine. Here, this way. Steph, want me to take your stuff too?"
"Thanks, bossman!"

Alfred follows Jason into his small office. He idly looks around while Jason hangs up the coats and places Steph's purse in the safe.

I hope he doesn't realize just how many times people have had sex in this room. On this desk. Having him in here is almost as bad as him walking in and interrupting. He's like the grandpa you don't want to disappoint.
"I know you're busy preparing for the day, Mister Todd, but I'd like a few words before we rejoin the ladies." Alfred stands tall and gazes levelly up at Jason.

Here it comes. I'm in for it now. "Shoot." Jason resists the urge to cross his arms defensively.
"I am sorry, Jason, for everything that Master Damian has done to you. Words are not enough to express my deep sorrow." There's a slight hitch in the old man's voice, but he continues. "I raised Master Bruce to the best of my abilities when his parents died. Luckily for me, he had a good foundation already laid. When Master Damian arrived into our household, it immediately became clear what role I would play in his mind and there was no changing it. I informed Master Bruce that he would be the one to raise his son. Master Dick and Master Tim were already fine young men, so I had reason to believe this behavior would change. To my regret and chagrin, it did not. But I still stood by and did nothing to correct the behavior myself."

Jason thought he understood the whole stiff upper lip expression before now, but in the face of this still very British butler, he's gaining a new appreciation for it. It's all in the eyes. His face is almost expressionless, but his eyes ...he looks like he's holding back tears by sheer force of will.
"Alfred," he tries to interrupt, but the old butler holds up a hand.
"Please, let me finish."
Jason nods and listens.
"I fully understand why you kept this affair with Master Damian under wraps so as to allow the law a chance to bring justice. This is most certainly the wake up call Master Damian, as well as Master Bruce and the rest of us, needed. I wish circumstances were different, that we all could have come together and welcomed you into our fold without all this needless drama." Alfred stops and waits while Jason mulls over what he said.
"You can't change the past, no matter how much you want to," he finally says. "I learned a long time ago to roll with whatever life decides to throw my way and I've had to deal with some pretty horrible shit. I got through it, but each time, it's left a mark on me, visible or not. Damian's just another notch in my belt. Another mark. You don't gotta apologize for nothin'. Those words...I want to hear from him. I want him to mean it."

Jason hasn't allowed himself much time to think about his life after Damian's arrest and how it impacts him. He's been so focused on Tim and how the arrest would affect him and his relationship with his family. But in this moment, Jason wants to see Damian. To see him and listen to his fucked up side of things.

Alfred nods stiffly, accepting the rebuke for what it is. "You may be surprised to see the change in Master Damian after just a couple days in lockup. He's more...subdued.
Thoughtful in a way I have rarely seen him."
"Jail does that the first time around. Scares people straight." It scared him, but Jason was also desperate and it just made him smarter about not getting caught.
"I suspect it was also a humbling one."
Jason can't help the derisive snort that escapes him. "Damian? Humble? Not in this lifetime."

## Chapter End Notes

Next week: The confrontation we've all been waiting for...

# Milestone Twenty-Four: The Meeting 

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jason stares at the main entrance of Wayne Manor as he drives up the long driveway on his motorcycle. The wide double doors are set back from a broad front terrace and the shallow stone steps leading up to them are imposing, just as they're no doubt designed to be. He's been here three times now and not once has he used this entrance, each time going in through the family entrance via the garage and the kitchen. He's perfectly happy with that (and ignores what the familiarity granted to him really means).

The sight of this place doesn't get any easier to take in the more I see it. This is so far beyond my idea of normal. I'll stick with the side entrance. If anything, the sight of Bruce's car collection should help calm me down some (ha, like that's normal either). I still can't believe I'm here to see Damian. Whatever that little shit has to say, it better be worth it after everything he's done to me.

When the carefully worded request arrived in Jason's mail a couple days ago, he'd taken one look at it and almost burned it out of spite. The last several days have been busier than hell, between being run ragged at the bar, dealing with a few building issues (the teenage son of one of his tenants thought dropping a cherry bomb in the toilet would be funny; he learned rather quickly that his parents and Jason were not amused), and making the decision to go ahead with a mold inspection both he and Tom thought was warranted after the dry rot discovery. Running his ass off all weekend long, even with the welcome (and very much appreciated) assistance of Alfred, Cassandra, and Kon, did not help speed up his recovery from the concussion Dick had given him, so when he finally got around to picking up his mail Tuesday evening, he's still got a headache.

Though the dizzy spells finally seemed to have dissipated, so that was something.
He'd gone upstairs and was sitting with a cup of tea sorting through his mail when the return address on one of the envelopes caught his eye. He knew that address, although he didn't recognize the handwriting of whoever wrote it. They'd only written the address for Wayne Manor in the upper left corner, no name.

Jason carefully opened the envelope and unfolded a rather stiff piece of cardstock. His eyes widened and he set his tea down hard on the table, splashing a little over the sides of the mug.

The letter was from Damian, dated just two days before.

## Todd,

Considering the circumstances of our few encounters, I have very little reason to expect that you'll even read beyond these few lines. But I still would like to make an attempt to explain myself and tell my side of the story and the events leading up to my current predicament. Pennyworth has informed me you will be closing the bar for a few days of rest after this last
weekend (and that you're still recovering from a concussion given to you by Richard; that explains his nose and the bruising on his face). I would like to extend an invitation for you to come to Wayne Manor so that we may speak face to face.

I await your earliest convenience.

## Damian Wayne

He held the letter in one hand and stared blankly at it before a maelstrom of emotions whirled to the surface. The stiff paper crumpled in his grip as he groped around in his pocket for a lighter he no longer carried.

The little shit. What the ever loving fuck does he think he's doing?
Jason dropped the letter and started pacing around the loft to try and calm down. The pounding in his head was worse the more agitated he is, so he started on some breathing exercises to try and calm down.

What's his game? Why did he WRITE to me? Who even does that anymore? Why should I listen to a word that brat even says?

Because he needs someone to listen to him. Mike's voice said in the back of his mind. If you don't listen to him, then who will?

He stopped abruptly as he remembered that long ago conversation with Mike. They'd been talking about Roy and all the shit he was going through. Jason has been friends with Roy for almost ten years now but back in the beginning, he'd almost washed his hands of the heroin addicted young man completely.

If you don't listen to him, then who will?
Jason glared at the crumpled letter on the table.
Dickieboy will listen. Right? Or Bruce. They're his family. But... what if they're not the one Damian needs to listen to him? What if it's someone else...shit.

He has a sneaking suspicion he knew who the kid really needed to talk to and it's not him. He's the stepping stone. The bridge.

Tim's gonna love this.
The next morning, Jason called Alfred, figuring he was the safest bet to help make this first meeting happen.

He was right.
So here he is now, speeding up the long winding road cum driveway to Wayne Manor on a dreary Thursday afternoon a week after Damian's arrest. It's not raining yet, but it will be soon. I coulda borrowed Tim's car, but that would involve telling him why I need it. Not going
there yet. Nope, not until I find out what the gremlin wants. If there's one thing Tim's taught me, it's that knowledge is power. Nice to see it's not just an adage.

The garage door is open for him. Jason slows down and comes to a stop just outside. Pulling off his helmet, he spots Bruce standing off to the side waiting for him.
"That's a nice bike," the billionaire comments as he steps out into the weak sunshine. "It's custom?"
"Yeah. Roy and I built it pretty much from the ground up." Jason casts a fond eye on his motorcycle. It had been quite the project too. Roy calls it his sobering experience.
"Do you still tinker at all?" Bruce gestures for Jason to follow him into the garage.
"Not as often as I'd like. Don't got the time anymore."
Yet another joy of being a small business owner.
"But Roy still works part time at a shop, right?"
Jason snorts but plays along. Like he doesn't know already. "Yeah. Does that in the mornings at the beginning of the week. Does the bar at the end of the week and the weekend. Somewhere in there he finds time for his computer business."

He'd hire Roy full time if he could afford to pay for health insurance. At least once he and Kori get married, he'll be on her health plan. Whenever that'll be; the last date he heard was July.

Bruce hums thoughtfully but doesn't reply right away. He's making small talk and they both know it. Jason parks his bike in the same area he did last time (has it really been four months since he was here for tea with Alfred?) and follows the billionaire into the house.

Before he opens the door, Bruce stops abruptly and casts a somber eye on Jason. "Thank you for coming to see Damian. I know this isn't easy, but it means a lot to me."
"I'm not doin' it for you," Jason can't help but bite back, on edge as he is. "Hell, I'm not sure exactly why I'm doin' it at all." He shakes his head. "Fuck, I take that back. I do, but it's not somethin' I feel like explainin'."

Because it's what Mike would want me to do. To listen. To talk.
"It's not all about you anymore, Jay. You got friends, people who care. So stop with the dumb shit and drop the tough guy act."

Mike would be pissed as hell it took this long for that lesson to sink in. Better late than never.
Bruce nods in understanding. "I get it. If it helps, he's nervous about seeing you. He wants to though, which...before his arrest I didn't think this would ever be happening."
"Amazing the perspective some jail time brings. Some people just keep goin' back for more."
"I think there's more to it than that," Bruce says as he opens the door leading into the house. "Damian is subdued, there's no mistaking that, but he's also acting more...thoughtful is the best way I can explain it. Alfred's commented on it a few times already."
"Thoughtful? I didn't think the kid knew how."
"Neither did I, though it's something Dick's been trying to teach him for years."
In the kitchen, Alfred's puttering away at the counter, preparing a tea tray, complete with scones and some little finger sandwiches. He looks up as the two large men enter. "Welcome, Mister Todd. It is good to see you. Did you have a restful week?"

The bar's been closed since Monday. Jason decided he'd proven his point by staying open all weekend. He'd accepted his supply order earlier today, but isn't planning to open again until tomorrow afternoon. It was supposed to be a restful week, but that never seems to happen.
"Not really. There's plenty to keep me busy around the building right now." He tells them about the cherry bomb.

Both men laugh and shake their heads. "The kid must be grounded for awhile," Bruce comments as he tries to steal one of the sandwiches.

Alfred smacks his hand away. "We'll have our own tea together soon. Patience."
This man must be the only butler in the world who can get away with doing that to his boss. Alfred really is the best.
"Yeah, but I also get some free labor for the next few weekends to cover costs of the new toilet I had to install. His parents insisted."
"Dishwashing builds character," Alfred nods sagely. "You're welcome to leave your jacket and gloves on that chair, Mister Todd. Once you've washed your hands, you may assist me with bringing this small repast to the library. Master Damian is waiting."

No more stalling.
Jason's still not entirely sure what he's going to say to Damian, what he's going to do. He's spent the last couple days thinking it over, but hasn't come to any solid plan of action. He'd told Tim about the letter when he called him about it, but his boyfriend said to ignore it (not a big surprise there, nope). The chasm that is the non-relationship between the younger Wayne brothers is at its widest point. He's pretty sure only an act of God would bring those two together now.

Bruce holds open the door for them as they leave the kitchen. "Good luck," he intones solemnly.
"I make my own luck," Jason retorts with a crooked grin. "But I'll take all the good wishes I
can get"" can get."

He follows Alfred down a semi-familiar hallway, retracing the route they'd taken the last time Jason had been here for afternoon tea.
"I thought the library would be a safe zone for you both," Alfred comments quietly. "Master Damian has almost as great an appreciation for books as we do, although his tastes run more to non-fiction."
"I think hell just frosted over a bit." Jason rolls his eyes. "Never thought I'd have something in common with Damian."
"The more I get to know you, Mister Todd, the more I find you're similar to all of my boys in some way or another."

Jason doesn't know what to say to that, so he wisely keeps his mouth shut.
Soon enough, he's holding open the door to the library for Alfred, his silver tray easily balanced in one hand.

The library is dim even with all the curtains open wide to let in the weak light from outside. A few lamps are on to cast away the gloom but they have little effect in a room so vast. As they cross the room, Jason's eyes start to adjust. In front of the bay windows looking out over the garden, Damian is seated. There's a pensive cast to his face, but it clears as Jason and Alfred approach. He stands and waits.

Alfred sets down the teapot carefully in the center of the table, a little tea cozy already waiting for it. He then makes quick work of the various plates, cups, and snacks from the tray Jason carried. Taking the tray from him, Alfred casts one of those gimlet eyes on them both. "I shall be in the kitchen with Master Bruce if you need anything."

Nodding, the old butler walks away, leaving Jason alone with Damian.
Neither man moves to sit right away. Jason can't help but notice Damian looks tired. There are bags under his eyes that wouldn't look out of place on Tim. The pensive look is back as Damian stands tall and waits. For the first time, Jason realizes the kid is almost as tall as he is. They've never stood this close to each other before.

There's a chance he'll be as tall as his father, but nowhere near as broad. Not with those shoulders. He's lean muscle like Dickie. Bet that has to bug him.
"Well, I'm not sure about you, but I'm not gonna let Alfred's tea go to waste." Jason sits down in the still too small chair with a wry quirk of his lips.

Damian also resumes his seat. "It is not something to be missed," he agrees and picks up the pot to pour for them both. From the scent and color, it's Earl Grey. "How do you take your tea?"

He'd enjoyed the way Alfred served it the last time so... "Squeeze of lemon and half a teaspoon of sugar."
"The Pennyworth tradition," Damian comments as he deftly finishes preparing the tea. Jason can't help but notice he takes his tea the same way.
"If it ain't broke, don't fix it."
Damian hands over the teacup and saucer, an assessing look on his face. "Why do you do that?" he asks.
"Do what?"
"Speak like that. I know you've received some education and that you have a love of classical literature. Surely you've picked up the finer points of speech at this point." Damian takes a sip of tea.

Jason wants to laugh, so he does, low and sharp. "I speak the way I want to. Sure, I can clean it up if I have to, but what's the point? I'm Gotham born and bred. The streets were my teacher." He shifts in his chair, trying to find that angle where his long legs don't feel cramped. "I doubt you asked me here to discuss the finer points of my dictation though."

The young man across from him nods, blue eyes identical to his father's looking down into his cup before back up at Jason. "I...I wanted a chance to explain myself. While I was awaiting my arraignment, a few important things were brought to my attention about my actions. Or rather, about what drove my actions towards you."

Jason waits and takes a sip of his tea as Damian collects his thoughts. He's got all the time in the world right now.

## Probably better to let him speak first. I still have no idea what I want to say.

Damian starts slow. "When I first discovered Drake was spending time in a dilapidated little bar in the Bowery, the only thing that mattered was to find out why. It wasn't out of concern over him suddenly developing a drinking problem; it was to see how this new low could be used against him. This was when I learned about you and the apparent friendship between the two of you. I'll admit, I didn't foresee the relationship between you and was just as surprised as Richard at Thanksgiving, though it did not color my actions as it did his."

Jason had narrowed his eyes at dilapidated little bar and knows he's visibly scowling at this point. "You're not helping your case here."
"I'm getting to the point." Damian takes another sip of his tea and continues. "For almost a decade, I have seen myself as locked in battle between myself and Drake. A battle where the winner will be seen as the true Wayne heir and the loser will slink away in defeat. When Drake announced his resignation from WE last year, I thought I was on the cusp of victory. I could feel it. Taste it. It was the happiest day of my life."

He pauses and takes another sip of tea. "But that night, Father came home. He was supposed to be in Washington for a rather important meeting, but he skipped it. Skipped it to go a bar in the Bowery to speak with you. I will admit I eavesdropped as Father told Pennyworth what you had spoken of. About how you told him off and rejected his offer flat out to stay away
from Drake. About how you cut right to the heart of the matter and called him out for being unable to say that he's proud of Drake."

Damian's hands start clenching, his knuckles almost white with how tight they are. "I have never once heard Father say he's proud of me. Never. To hear him say it to Pennyworth, that he's proud of Drake and what he's setting out to do... All the joy I had taken from the events earlier in the day vanished. Now more than ever, Drake needed to go. It wasn't until Thanksgiving that I found the means distract him and send him off his path. It never mattered before who warmed his bed, but you...you were the fuel for the fire." He takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly.
"And here I thought I just opened my mouth and inserted my foot." Jason takes another sip of tea. The story is fascinating, but it's nothing he and Tim haven't speculated about before.
"You did. But my goal has always been to be the true Wayne heir in my father's eyes. A Bowery bartender didn't matter in the slightest, but you were important to Drake. As such, you became a target to hurt him. I proceeded to make a series of what are now utterly stupid choices, all the while convinced that I needed to hurt you in order to hurt Drake. So focused was I on this path that I completely missed the obvious."
"What was that?" Jason asks dryly.
"That I didn't need to do anything at all. Drake was already resigning and wandering off to start his own business. This left the path to the top of WE wide open for me. I didn't need to do anything other than go to university somewhere and get a degree or two like he did. I could have proven my worth any number of ways. I could have had any number of opportunities to hear my father say that he's proud of me. I miscalculated and now... now I am about to pay for my folly."

The young man across from him drops his eyes and sighs again.
Now there's a level of self-realization I didn't think this brat was capable of. It's not an apology, but it's an explanation that makes sense considering who he is.
"So you're not going to fight the charges?" Jason asks slowly. It's something he's been curious about. Damian's a rich kid with all the firepower his dad's money can buy.

Damian looks up again. "No." His mouth twists into a distasteful grimace. "To do so would be a lie. I did all of those things and I will own up to them. I am already a disgrace to the name Wayne, I don't need to drag it through a lengthy court battle that would only delay the inevitable. But there is one thing I want to know. Why did you not press the identity theft charges? You of all people had every right to do so. So why?"

It's the first time some kind of fire comes back into the kid. Jason takes a long sip of tea, savoring the rich flavor that only Alfred somehow manages to get, before he sets his cup down.

He knows what he's going to say now.
"Once upon a time, there was a smartass punk trying to make his way on the streets of Gotham. He'd gotten lucky somehow, managing to actually get enough to eat at the right times in his life to not be stunted by malnourishment. He was tall and it helped make him look older than he really was. Also had a mean right hook, which got the attention of some of the wrong kinds of people. But the money was good, so why the hell not? One day, he's forced to make a life changing choice. Does he rough up the pregnant wife of a man who's in over his head with some gambling debts or not, which puts his own neck on the line. He chooses the latter and takes the money he was supposed to earn and gives it to the woman, telling her to run for it and not come back."

The memories of that night are still vivid in Jason's mind. The beating he received at the hands of the mob enforcers almost killed him. He'd somehow managed to stagger out of the warehouse that night, bruised, broken, and bleeding. He needed a place to hide, knew chances were pretty good that someone could be sent back to finish him off completely. He made his way through the maze of alleys and side streets of the Bowery, somehow trying to get to Crime Alley and the Free Clinic where Doc Thompson could patch him up.

He didn't make it that far.
Jason was leaning against a dumpster, trying to focus, trying to gather enough energy to keep going when he heard a door rattle open across from him. An older, grizzled looking man stepped out onto the loading dock with a bag of trash in one hand and a cigarette in another. He spotted Jason almost immediately, but in his defense, he wasn't trying to hide.
"If you're drunk, try to get sick in the dumpster and not on my dock. It's a pain in the ass to get rid of," the man said in a rough voice, worn down by years of smoking.
"...Not drunk," Jason gasped out. He coughed wetly and spat what he hoped was just spit and blood onto the ground. "Just tryin' to get to the doc."
"Doc? As in Thompkins?" The man took a couple steps closer to Jason, squinting into the darkness trying to see him better.
"Yeah. She can...fix...me..." It was getting harder to talk and Jason coughed some more. His chest hurt.
"You sick?" the man asked cautiously.
"Crow...bar." His knees decided now would be a good time to give out on him and Jason collapsed against the dumpster, crying out weakly as his bruised (broken) ribs were jostled.
"Shit." The man lurched forward, stumbling on a bad knee as he knelt beside Jason. "Hang in there, kid. I'll get you to Leslie."

The next week was a blur for Jason as Doctor Thompkins kept him in a medically induced coma. One of his broken ribs had punctured a lung and he'd been choking on the fluid and blood that was slowing filling it. Of course, he didn't find out any of this until he woke up several days later with the good doctor herself glaring down at him. Jason had known Leslie Thompkins for years, so it wasn't the first time he'd been on the receiving end of said glare.
"Don't you dare scare me again like that, Jason Todd." She smacked her clipboard lightly on his head.
"No promises, Doc."
"You have a guardian angel. He's upset at you too for bleeding all over his car."
"Huh?"
That's how Jason learned about Mike Callahan. The man he vaguely remembered talking to before he passed out.

The man who helped save his life.
"Mike didn't have to save me," Jason explains to Damian. "He chose to. And when I was well enough for Doc Thompkins to let me go, she told me where I could find him. I had a debt to pay off and I knew it. He put me to work, showed me the ropes around the bar. When he believed I wasn't gonna steal anything, he let me help out around the building. I was good with my hands and quick on my feet, literally and mentally. He took a chance on $m e$ when no one else ever did."

He takes another sip of tea and makes a face when he realizes it's the last one. He reaches for the teapot, but Damian holds out his hand for the cup. "Allow me."

Jason continues while Damian prepares another cup for him. "Mike saved my life in more ways than one. He straightened me out and taught me what being a real man was about. To be responsible. To take pride in a job well done. To look out for others and take care of them when they need it. All kinds of shit I never woulda learned even from my old man, not that he was around to do it. He gave me a chance."

He accepts the fresh cup from the young man across from him. "So that's why I didn't press charges against you for fucking up my life. Somewhere in there," Jason reaches easily across the table and pokes Damian in the forehead. "Is a good kid. He just needs to learn the right way."

Having said his piece, Jason sits back in the chair and waits, sipping his tea.

## I haven't even told Tim that story. Goddamn, but it felt right. I hope the brat listened.

Damian is quiet for a time, absorbing and obviously thinking about what he's learned. He picks up his tea and finishes it, then pours another cup. His eyes meet Jason's. "Unless WE's bylaws change drastically in the next several years, I won't have that chance. I can't be the CEO of Wayne Enterprises with a felony record that includes mail fraud."

Jason shrugs. "Perhaps not, but you're still gonna be Damian Wayne when you get out of jail. Do you even know who he is without Daddy's name associated with him?"
"I thought I did. But obviously, I still have a lot more to learn."
"It's called life. Let me tell ya, it's one hell of a ride."

Damian laughs weakly. "I am sorry, Todd...Jason...for what I did to you. You did not deserve that."

Finally. The kid had it in him after all.
"Thanks. To be honest, I didn't think I'd ever hear those words outta your mouth." Jason reaches for one of the tea sandwiches. He's suddenly starving.
"I didn't think I had anything to apologize for until Father pointed a few things out to me. I was wrong. So very very wrong and about so many things." He picks up a scone and starts picking at it, the first nervous tell he's revealed. "My next hearing is in eight days. I will plead guilty to all charges. And my life as I know it will be over."
"Now you're being dramatic. You obviously get that from Dickie." Jason flicks a crumb at the young man, who makes an appalled face at the action. "Yeah, life as you know it will be over. Time to pick up and figure out what the new one is gonna be like. But guess what, you little shit?"
"What?" Damian asks warily.
Jason smirks. "You're not gonna be alone. You're still going to have your family when you get out."
"I highly doubt Drake will be amongst that number." He sounds bitter at the thought, which is surprising.
"You want to talk to him, don't you?" Jason asks with a flash of insight.
"I...yes. I do." Damian hides behind his teacup for a moment. "There are things I wish to say to him and things I wish to know." He sighs and looks his age for once, the confusion clear as day on his face.
"I'll talk to him. I can't promise anything, but I can talk to him."
"Thank you. And thank you for the story. It was more insightful than you realize."
Jason laughs again, but he can't help the bitter edge to it. "At least you didn't have to get smacked with a crowbar a few times to get your head on straight."
"No but the emotional whiplash from all this sure feels like what I imagine it to be like."
The kid just admitted he has emotions. Damn, but I can see now what Dickie sees in him. He's been shown the right path and just needs to be shoved down it, even though these first steps are gonna be the worst ones. And if he needs to talk to Tim first, then I will make that happen even if I have to drag him up here myself. Time to make that miracle happen.

## Chapter End Notes

One more chapter and an epilogue to go. I never expected this story to go on for as long as it did! Thanks for hanging in there with me!

Next week: It takes a miracle.

# Milestone Twenty-Five: Sticks and Stones 

## Chapter Notes

I said it would take a miracle. Well, the miracle wears plaid flannel. For those that haven't yet, I'd check out the Super Bowl Special to see how this particular character made his first appearance in the Tuesday Night's universe. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes
"No."
"Tim, come on."
"I said no. Do you need me to spell it for you?" Tim glares crossly at Jason over his dining table. His boyfriend came over with a couple bags full of groceries to make dinner. He'd been looking forward to a nice quiet evening for a change and now...this.
"Fuck, Tim. You're acting like a spoiled brat." Jason turns back to the steaks he's grilling on a cast iron griddle Tim didn't know he owned until now. There are a number of things in his kitchen like the griddle, things that scream of Alfred's presence.
"So sue me. Jason, after everything Damian's done to me, to you, how can you expect me to sit here and believe he's not doing this to get one more jab in before he's off to jail?"

## The kid is a master manipulator. He learned from the best. How does Jason not SEE this?

When Tim learned about the letter from Damian, he'd been wary. Jason only mentioned it though, he didn't ask for advice or give any indication he was going to go and see the bane of his (let's face it, their) existence. So he put it out of his mind and focused instead on keeping the media at bay and distracted from Jason. The security detail around the bar reported a number of attempts by paparazzi and other not so scrupulous reporters trying to gain entry to the building, even with the bar being closed for the week.

Tim's counterattacks are some carefully staged outings with Kon, who at a distance looks enough like Jason to fool most cameras. His best friend ate it up, especially since he got an up close and personal interview with them over what happened. Vicki was there too, having been promised the same thing. Neither one of them pulled their punches when it came to their questions, but Tim was proud of how Jason handled them.

Yet another media victory for them, especially since they decided to release a photo of the two of them together. Kori had taken a rather cute shot of the two of them on her phone a couple months ago that Tim decided would be perfect. They're both smiling at her, easy and relaxed, nothing forced or staged.

The public loved it. Media commentators finally started speaking about Jason in a more positive light and speculation turned again onto Damian and why he attacked this man the way he did. Everything is back under Tim's control, just the way he likes it.

But this? Jason went to Wayne Manor for afternoon tea with Damian earlier today and this is the first he's hearing about it? I am not a control freak. Jason is an ADULT and can make his own decisions, dumb that they may be sometimes.
"I'm sorry, but I just don't buy it." Tim leans back in his chair and fiddles with his beer. Jason had brought a six-pack of a dark craft beer they both enjoyed (and one Jason would love to get on tap at his place). The wrapper is going to be in shreds soon if he doesn't stop picking at it.
"I'm not askin' you to buy it. I'm just askin' that you go and listen." Jason glares over his shoulder and tosses the contents of his saucepan expertly. Mushrooms and onions sautéing together for the steaks, it smells heavenly.

Tim knows a bribe when he sees it.

Food bribes from Jason he never turns down. It's rare the man has the time to cook something other than breakfast for him with the hours he keeps. There's enough for Kon too, but he wisely took his beer and retreated upstairs to play a video game when Jason mentioned he needed to talk to Tim privately for a bit. He's staying through this weekend to help them out when Jason reopens the bar tomorrow.
"There are no words Damian can say that will make me forgive him for years of verbal abuse."
"I didn't say I forgave him for what he did to me. I said I accepted his apology. Those are two different things and you know it."
"But that story you told him..." Tim can't help the hurt in his voice over that. Jason didn't open up about his past very much so to hear that he did with Damian hurt. It was like Jason didn't trust him with that part of himself.

Like he's trusted me with other parts. Memories of last Christmas and how he almost destroyed their still fledgling relationship come to mind. Though I can see why he may not want to...

Jason turns from the stove, picking up his bottle and takes an easy swig. Everything he does in the kitchen always looks so effortless. "I told him that story to prove a point. To drive it home. You already knew Mike pretty much saved my life, you just didn't know how literal that was."
"Well, yeah. You've always said he took a chance on you. That he saw you as someone other than a punk kid."
"Exactly. I didn't have to come lookin' for him after the doc let me go. I coulda gone right
back onto the streets and played hide and seek with those mob assholes. But no, I went lookin' for him because I had a debt to pay. Because if there's one thing I hate, it's being indebted to someone."

Don't I know it? Tim sighs and shakes his head. "You gave Damian a chance because Mike gave you one. Fine. I can respect that. It doesn't mean I have to."
"You're being stubborn. Just go see him. It doesn't have to be tomorrow or even this weekend. But do it before his next hearing."

## "And if I don't?"

Jason levels an even gaze at him with those oddly teal eyes of his. "Then I think you're doin' yourself a disservice by livin' too much in the past." With that parting shot, he turns back to the stove.

The words strike a nerve, just as Jason had to know they would. Tim prides himself on living in the present and looking towards the future. He hasn't forgotten his past but he doesn't let it define him. I am who I am through my own choices. I'm not Bruce who's still so emotionally inept that he can't hold down a solid relationship to save his life. And Dick...Dick who has this constant urge to save and take care of people whether they want it or not.

For Jason to say he's stuck in the past...
"I'll think about it," he finally (begrudgingly) says.
Jason turns enough to smile crookedly at him. The same smile that still makes Tim weak in the knees. "Thanks. Now go ask Kon how he likes his steak burned. If it's well done, he gets to ruin it himself."
*****

After dinner, Jason heads upstairs to relax while Tim and Kon start the dishes. It's only fair considering all the work Jason put into preparing the excellent dinner.

Kon gives him an odd look when Tim fills the sink with hot soapy water. "Something wrong with your dishwasher, man?"
"Habit," Tim replies with a wry shake of his head. "Jason doesn't have a dishwasher in his loft, so I always do them by hand."
"Everything okay? You seemed kinda tense during dinner." Kon accepts the clean plate Tim hands him to dry.

Tim makes a face as he scrubs another plate. "Jason went to see Damian today."
"Whoa," Kon breathes, his eyes wide in surprise. "I did not see that coming."
"Neither did I, but I should have." He can't help but sound bitter over it. I've had to be three steps ahead of Damian for almost two years now. Why should his arrest stop that?
"Dude, he's going to jail soon. What the hell can he do from there? Cause an international incident?"

Tim hands him another plate. "I wouldn't put it past him."
Kon knows full well all of Tim's grievances with his younger brother. He's been listening to him bitch about him since their days at Stanford. The Nerd and the Jock. What a mismatched pair we were but whoever put us together in that dorm room deserves a raise.
"Okay, so all jokes aside, then why are you mad at Jason? So he went to see the demon. What'd he do? Rip him a new one for almost destroying him financially?"

Tim huffs in frustration as he tackles the last plate. "No. He... He empathized with the little shit. Empathized! And it didn't even start today. It started back when the arrest came down. Jason didn't press charges because it's something he didn't think his mentor would have done. That he should give Damian a second chance to do the right thing."

He drops the plate back in the sink and clutches the edge of the counter, knuckles white under the force of his grip. "He could have destroyed Damian but didn't because of some dead guy."

Tim's been trying hard to understand Jason's decision not to press charges. On one level, he gets it. He can respect it. But on another level, he wants to see Damian reap what he's sown. He wants him to pay for all the shit he's put him through over the years. If this attack had been on him, Tim has no doubt in his mind that he'd have pressed those charges and done so with a smile, to hell with what it would have done to his relationship with the rest of his family.

Payback's a bitch.
"Tim...you know I'm on your side. Best bros forever, not to mention the bro-code, but do you have any idea how much of an elitist douche you sound like right now?" Kon leans against the counter and crosses his arms over his chest, staring down at him.
"What?" He looks up in surprise.
"Yeah. Listen to yourself. Jason's doing what's called being the bigger person. Damian fucked him up and he's got absolutely no reason to forgive him. From what it sounds like though, Jason's seeing something of himself at that age in Damian and that's why he didn't press the charges. He got the chance to get his shit together and become something, so he's just paying it forward. You, however, are projecting your shit onto him and are pissed that he's not doing what you'd do."

It's like a punch in the gut and Tim closes his eyes as he takes it. "Fuck," he whispers hoarsely. "I keep telling myself I'm not doing that. That I get why he didn't. But..." he growls
in frustration and opens his eyes again, turning an imploring gaze on his best friend. "Jason wants me to go see Damian. To talk to him. I can't."
"Why?" Kon asks, confusion evident in his voice. "Damian's a viper without any teeth left, dude. What can he do to you now?"

Plenty is the first thought that comes to mind. But if Tim's being honest with himself, he's jealous. Jealous that Jason got approached by Damian as an equal.

I'm jealous Damian used his first name. That little bit of information Jason dropped earlier when he told him about the meeting. It hurt, hurt in a way Tim hadn't expected it would.
"It's Damian. I'm sure he'll find a way." Tim turns back to the dishes and hands Kon the abandoned plate to dry.
"Does that mean you're going?" he asks as he accepts it.
"Yes," Tim all but bites out the word. "I hope you know you're an even bigger asshole than Jason sometimes."
"I'm your best friend. Calling you out on your bullshit is part of the job description."
They share a chuckle over that, because, yeah, it's the truth.
*****

Later on that night, Tim wraps himself around Jason in bed. It's not often they get the chance to sleep in his bed together and he relishes each opportunity. Not that he has a problem with Jason's bed, it's just that he likes his better.

Perhaps one day he'll be allowed to buy a new mattress for him. Probably around the time I'm allowed to have a real coffeemaker in his kitchen.

He loves Jason, he really does, but sometimes the man drives him insane.
"I had a talk with Kon when we were doing the dishes," Tim says quietly into Jason's damp hair. He sleeps on it wet most of the time and it somehow always seems to work for him.
"Oh?" the other man replies as he pulls Tim's arm over his waist. He's on his side, facing away from Tim. It's his normal position as he drifts off to sleep. At some point, he'll roll onto his stomach and bury himself in his pillows (also normal; Tim's watched him sleep enough to know).
"He told me I was being an elitist douche and called me out on my bullshit."
Jason snorts in laughter. "I seriously like that guy, even if he does wear plaid flannel all the time."
"I wear plaid flannel all the time."
"You're a nerd, it's part of your dress code. Kon's a jockstrap farm boy from Kansas, so I suppose he really doesn't know any better."

Tim tightens his grip as he starts laughing. He wasn't worried that Jason was mad at him about earlier, but it's nice to have some confirmation that he was right not to be. Things have been rocky recently. Too much stress, not enough time to talk.

Jason shifts to lay on his back so he can see Tim. "So why did he call you a douche?"
"Because I'm projecting all my shit onto your shit and apparently I'm creating a bigger shitstorm because of it."
"That sounds about right. Funny to hear it put that way. Thought Kon's a journalist? Isn't he supposed to have a way with words?"

Tim smacks his shoulder. "I'm simplifying."
"Oh, then by all means continue." Jason grins roguishly. It never fails to send a thrill through his body. "Shitstorm of epic proportions and projecting."
"What I'm trying to say is that you're right. I should talk to Damian. If he's willing to have a real conversation with me, then I should be willing to listen."

It's hard to say it but he knows it's the right thing. And if I'm proven wrong yet again, then I reserve the right to say I told you so.
"Hallelujah." Jason leans in and kisses him lightly.
Tim blinks at him in confusion. "Huh?"
"I was thinkin' earlier it would take an act of God to get you to go see him. But apparently all it took was a hick from Kansas."

That's a completely fair statement but Jason doesn't need to know that. Tim smirks. "Shut up and kiss me better than that. I'm going to need all the persuasion I can get to do this tomorrow."

There's that grin he loves so much again. A large hand reaches up to pull his head down towards Jason's. "As you wish."
*****

Tim taps the steering wheel of his Audi pensively as he drives up the long driveway to Wayne Manor. He'd dropped Kon off at the bar to help Jason get ready for opening, then headed up to Bristol.

The drive didn't give him enough time to put his thoughts together. Even the gray day and the light rain that's been falling since he woke up wrapped around Jason hasn't been enough of a deterrent to slow traffic down. It's Gotham, it rains all the time.

Better rain than the sleet we had over the weekend. April weather is screwy. Kon was not happy about having to constantly mop the floor at the bar either with all the crap that was being tracked in. Not that it deterred the crowd at all.

It still amazes him the perfect set of circumstances that brought him into that bar that night last year. But he doesn't have time to ponder them again. He pulls off towards the side entrance and hits the garage door button he still has for the family garage.

He drives in and parks in what still appears to be his spot, hitting the button again to close the door. Damn. What the hell am I doing here? It's not going to be any different than the other times I tried talking to him.

Tim gets out of the car before he can talk himself out of it.
Damian won't change. Jason doesn't know him like I do. He bought into whatever act the demon's trying to sell now. I don't hold it against him, and if this is what I have to do to keep peace at home, then I'll do it.

In the kitchen, Tim finds Alfred just walking into the room through the dining room doors.
"My word, Master Tim!" he exclaims. "What a pleasant surprise."
"Hello, Alfred. Don't worry, I'm not here to raid the fridge." Tim chuckles as this was something he used to routinely do when he first moved out. While he may have avoided most of the Manor during those visits, the kitchen was (and is) a safe haven as it's almost always a Damian-free zone.
"I am glad to hear it, though I do keep it fully stocked. I've been under the impression your Mister Todd has been keeping you well fed these days." It's one of Alfred's questions within a question. The man has subtle probing down to an art form. Small wonder where Bruce picked it up from.
"He does, when I'm around to let him. It's not like I live with him full time."
Alfred gives him one of those inscrutable looks that can mean absolutely anything. "I see. I was under the impression your nights are spent with him more often than not."

If that's not a dig, Tim doesn't know what is. "Usually just Friday nights and the weekend. I've got DI work during the week and my internet is better than his." Which is not a lie. He pays good money for high speed and connectivity.
"Hmmm...those are his slower nights, correct?" Alfred goes to one of the stoves and picks up his teakettle. "Do you have time for tea while you're here?"
"Yes," Tim instantly replies. Anything, even Alfred's hinting that he should spend more time with Jason, is better than facing the demon. "And yes, those are his slower nights. Sometimes we go out if he closes early, but Jason's a homebody at heart. He likes to curl up and read all night when he can."

He's never asked why but he suspects it's because Jason never had much of a home growing up. Now he has a place all his own. If we get to the point where one of us moves in, chances are good it'll be me moving in with him. I can't see him leaving the loft and while my brownstone is comfortable and it's my space, it's not really home.

Alfred nods sagely as they wait for the kettle he filled to boil. "Sounds like another young man I know, even though his tastes run more to electronic forms of entertainment."

Tim leans back against one of the spotless countertops and crosses his arms easily. "If you're hinting that we should move in together, we haven't even discussed it. But once the DI renovations start here soon, I'll probably ask if it's okay if I stay over more often as Jason's loft is a hell of a lot closer to the site than the brownstone is."

They chat about DI and where Tim's at in getting the warehouse renovations started. He'd been impressed with Jason's plumber Tom and the crew he brought in for the massive overhaul in the basement to the point where he's set up an appointment with the man to have him give his opinion on a few things. Things may have gotten better for Gotham after all the work he, Babs, and Cass did, but some things don't change and knowing who to go to and not get screwed over is one of them.

Rather than take tea in the family parlor or living room, they sit at the small dining nook tucked away in the corner of the kitchen. It looks out over the side lawn and part of the small herb garden Alfred keeps up. The light rain hasn't let up; if anything, it's coming down harder.
"So what really brings you here today, Master Tim?" Alfred finally asks. "As much as I might wish otherwise, I doubt it's for the pleasure of my company."

Tim makes a face and holds the warm teacup in both hands. He stares into the amber liquid (he's not a tea snob like Jason is, he just drinks whatever's placed in front of him) before lifting his gaze to meet the old man who may as well be his grandfather. "Jason asked me to come see Damian. Said he wants to see me."
"My goodness." Alfred sets his cup down firmly in his surprise. "I knew their discussion yesterday went well, at least in terms that there was no bruising or bloodied noses to clean up, but I certainly did not expect this."
"Neither did I." Tim raises the cup to take a sip. There's a citrus flavor to the tea he didn't expect but it's the perfect bright counterpoint to the other flavor he can't pick out. "Jason told me about their talk last night while he made dinner. That Damian asked to see me when they were done. I just...I just don't know what to do, Alfred. Damian's been the bane of my existence for almost ten years. Does he really think I'm going to believe anything that comes out of his mouth at this point?" he finishes bitterly.
"No, but I hope that you'll listen to my words rather than have them go in one ear and out the other."

Tim jerks around to see Damian standing hesitantly in the doorway from the dining room. He'd missed his approach, tucked away in the corner as he was with Alfred. Tensing, he watches closely like a caged animal.
"Well," the old butler says as he stands, picking up his teacup and saucer as he does. "If that's not my cue to exit stage right, then I don't know what is. May I get you anything, Master Damian? Master Tim and I were sharing a pot of green tea with some lovely orange zest to brighten it up."

## That was green tea? I thought it was supposed to be, well, green?

"I'll have a cup, thank you." Damian doesn't move from the doorway as he watches Tim closely.
"You're most welcome, Master Damian."

It doesn't escape Tim's notice that Damian thanked Alfred for something. In his time at home, he doesn't remember hearing it once.

If anything, it makes him more wary of the teenager finally approaching the table, fresh cup in hand as he takes the seat Alfred had been in across from Tim. The butler leaves the kitchen unobtrusively but there's no doubt he's remaining close enough in the event he hears shouting.

And so it begins. Jason owes me big time for this. He starts to pull his inscrutable cocoon around himself to calm down. It's served him well so many times over the years, both with Damian and in the boardroom. People often believe he's enraged about something and is trying to keep from showing it. Sometimes he is, but normally, it gives him an emotional distance that allows him to think clearly and objectively. Not that it always works, the complete fuck-up of his argument with Jason over money the previous week being evidence for that.
"You can relax, Drake. There's no need for your infamous ice king impersonation." Damian carefully pours a cup of tea from the delicate porcelain teapot.

Tim doesn't take the suggestion. Relaxing is dangerous around Damian, especially when others are not around to supervise.

The teenager takes a small sip of the hot tea and makes a pleased sound. "I'll admit, I did not expect to see you here soon," he comments as he sets the cup down.
"It's like pulling off a bandage. Best to get it done quickly."
"I suppose I deserve that." Damian looks downcast for a moment before he hides behind the teacup.
"You deserve a lot of things," Tim challenges. "Especially more jail time than you're going to get." He deserves so much more than he's going to get. It angers him immensely that Damian is essentially getting away with what he did to Jason. But Jason's not him. Jason has more capacity for forgiveness than he expected.

## "I didn't say I forgave him for what he did to me. I said I accepted his apology. "

Or not. He's overanalyzing things again. It's easier to say that Jason never ceases to surprise me. Just when I think I have him pegged, he turns the tables on me.
"You want Dent to push for the maximum possible sentences? He may not like me, but he's Father's sycophant, even if he refuses to acknowledge him."

Tim lets a small smirk grace his lips. This is the Damian he expected. Nice to see his supposed change in behavior is only skin deep.
"What I want is for you to pay for what you did to Jason. This has always been our little war. There's never been a need to drag others into it."

Damian sets down the cup, a fire lighting in his eyes as he does. "I will be paying for that mistake for the rest of my life. Do you even comprehend what's been taken from me?"

Tim lashes right back. "No cushy CEO chair for you. Did you even think for a moment you'd be caught?" It makes perfect sense for him to think not being CEO when Bruce steps aside is the worse punishment. I will do everything in my power to make sure those company bylaws aren't changed, even if I have to become CEO of WE myself.

He ignores the implications of that thought for now.
"Machin sold me the belief that his skills were second to none. I should have realized there's always a bigger fish in the sea. Not that I expected Todd...Jason...to have an even better hacker in his pocket." Damian's eyes narrow. "I did thorough background checks on everyone at that dingy little place. The only one remotely competent with computers is Roy Harper. Machin assured me he didn't have the skill to keep him out, not after he was in, so someone else must have done so."

The brat's fishing, but Tim is very much the bigger shark in this proverbial sea and isn't going to be caught by his net. Even so, he's momentarily thrown off by the use of Jason's first name again. Dammit. I'm not going to let that bother me. "What are you trying to say, Damian? You're the one who wants an open conversation with me, so stop hiding."

Damian's nostrils flare in annoyance at Tim's refusal to play. "It didn't occur to me until I arrived home just who would be capable of crushing Machin like the bug he is. He whined and moaned over how he lost total control of his network and servers, that whoever did it tracked him down and took him out like it was child's play. The only active job he had going on at the time was that place. And the only person I can think of who has an interest in
protecting it is you." He steeples his fingers together and glares hard. "So tell me, Timothy, does Father know about your extracurricular activities?"

Hearing his name from Damian's mouth rocks Tim more than he thought it would. It's recognition that he finally considers me to be in the same league as him. He still makes it sound like a curse, like it's being ripped from him. Oh, Damian...when will you realize you're not even close to being in my league? You're just a thorn in my side.

Tim's little smirk morphs into an innocent smile. "What extracurricular activities would you be referring to? Yes, I mess around with computers when I have time, I won't deny that. But what makes you think I'm some master hacker?"

The young man glares even harder. "Now who's playing games? Before I even arrived in Gotham, Mother had me read a complete dossier on everyone who lives in this house or is involved with this family. Your file, as well as Barbara's, were most interesting."

There's a sudden lurch in Tim's stomach as the words sink in and he struggles to keep his mask from crumbling. No. No, he's still fishing. If he KNEW, he'd have used that information years ago. It's too big a prize for him not to have held it over my head before now. "So I worked for Babs in high school at her security firm. That's no secret."
"It's also no secret that she has ties to the FBI and NSA through her work. Ties I don't doubt for a second that you at least have access to."

Ah, there it is. I can work with this. "The only FBI agents I know are Diana Prince and Tom Tresser. They worked my parents' murder investigation. I may have kept in touch with Diana over the years, but that's only because she and Babs have been friends for a long time. If anything, Dick knows her better." All true. Tim picks up his almost forgotten teacup and takes a sip. He really does need to see if he can get some of this from Alfred to take home to Jason.
"Richard can barely remember his email password," Damian snaps. "Don't try to sell me the idea he's some idiot savant."
"He's an idiot sometimes, I'll agree with you on that one." He takes another sip.
"Fine. Deny it all you like. I know there's more to you than meets the eye, but there's no point in forcing a confession from you." Damian all but pouts as he gives in. He takes another sip of his own tea and glares sullenly.

Tim takes it as a victory. A hollow one, but a victory nonetheless. "Was there anything else you wanted to discuss with me?" he asks lightly, knowing it'll piss off the young man even more. "I was led to believe this conversation would be worth my time."

I was right to question coming here. He hasn't said or done anything to convince me of the changes Jason mentioned. That Alfred was hinting at. So he's saying "thank you" now when he never did before. Big deal.
"There is one thing..." Damian trails off hesitantly. He looks uncertain before his expression firms as he makes his decision about whether to continue or not. "Are you still involved with the Wayne Foundation? You always were more so than Father or Richard."

This isn't a tact Tim expects him to take. "Yes, but not to the extent I was while still at WE." He's cut back a lot actually. Time is the main factor, busy as he is with DI and running media interference on his and Jason's relationship. It's something he wishes he could do more of.
"How much do you know about the scholarship program? The one for the full-rides to Gotham University?"

Tim's not sure where Damian is going with this at all. "Quite a bit. I was on the approval committee last year for all the applicants going into the fall semester."

His involvement was no secret, although it just about killed him inside with some of the applicants they had to deny. Family income is a lousy way to deny someone a chance for an education they may not otherwise get.

Damian hums in approval and nods thoughtfully. "Then you know about the process to revoke one of those scholarships."
"Yes."
"When I was awaiting my arraignment, I...met someone in the holding cells. Someone who does not deserve to have his scholarship taken away from him."

Tim feels his mask tremble as his world is shaken. What the hell? Is he ...he's thinking about someone other than himself. "What happened?" he finds himself asking, albeit involuntarily.
"He was arrested for physically assaulting a man. But the man in question had just stolen a lady's purse and he was trying to stop him from getting away with it." Damian explains slowly, as though he's thinking about each word before saying it to ensure it's the right one. "His only fault was helping someone."

Tim lets out the breath he didn't even realize he was holding. "It's rare, but sometimes extenuating circumstances are taken into consideration."
"Can you...would you...please talk to the committee and see if these circumstances are mitigating enough?" Damian pleads. "Wilkes is a good man. He does not deserve to be punished for something he worked so hard for by doing something any morally upstanding person should have done."
"And what do you know about being a morally upstanding citizen?" Tim can't help but retort. It's too ingrained in him to push back against anything Damian asks for.

From the expression on the younger man's face, he may as well have punched him. "So you won't...?"

Tim glowers, knowing all too well what it looks like when he's hiding behind his mask of outer calm. 'Of course I will, you asshole. But I'll look into it myself first. You'll have to
excuse me if I don't take everything you say at face value."
Damian nods firmly. "Fair enough. I'm not entirely certain what ended up happening to him, but I'd like to be sure. His first name is Colin. I believe he may be a couple years older than I am, but again, I don't know."

At this point, Tim can't take anymore and abruptly stands. "Damian...I'm looking into this because it's the right thing to do. Don't mistake it as me doing something for you. As far as I'm concerned, you deserve everything that's happening to you. Not once have you shown me a hint of remorse over your actions. You may have apologized to Jason, but I still don't buy it."

Damian picks up his teacup and takes a sip before replying. "Believe what you like. I've accomplished my goal in getting you over here to ask about Wilkes. Everything else was secondary."

Tim shakes his head in disgust. "Thank you for proving yet again that I'm right about you. This will be a wonderful conversation to have with Jason." One I am NOT looking forward to having.
"Jason and I had our words," Damian replies, heat in his voice, but he doesn't rise to the bait. "I am satisfied with that. I wanted to speak with you for an entirely different reason and I have done so." He sets the cup down and slowly stands, unfolding his larger body from Alfred's chair.

It still irks Tim immensely that Damian is taller than him. He always knew he would be, but the blatant reminder is annoying.
"So that's it then." They both know Tim's not asking a question.
"That is all." Damian nods and starts walking away. Before he leaves through the dining room doors though, he pauses, blue eyes flickering back to Tim. "Perhaps, over the course of your inquiries about Wilkes, you will find it in yourself to think a bit more kindly about my capacity to think about others."

With that parting shot, he leaves the room.
Tim glares icily after him, peeved at Damian's last words to him. That did not go as I expected. Who is this Colin Wilkes and why does Damian have such an...obsession with him? This is either some new plot of his or there's some grain of truth behind his words. I'll find out which soon enough.

He quickly finishes his tea and heads towards the door leading out to the garage. His fingers are barely brushing the knob when it's pulled open from the other side, bringing Tim face to face with Bruce. Both men take a step back in surprise.
"Tim!" Bruce reaches out cautiously, but pulls back when he takes in Tim's still stony expression. "I saw your car parked in its spot...what's going on?" he asks carefully.
"Plenty," Tim tries not to snap, but it comes out that way anyhow. "Tell me, Bruce...how did you manage to raise three sons to all be complete and utter assholes sometimes?"

Bruce starts chuckling and this time doesn't abort the clasp on Tim's shoulder as he reels him in for a brief hug. "You're all smart boys. You learned from the best."
"And you?"
"You know the answer to that already." Bruce enters the kitchen as Tim steps aside to let him pass. "So what brings you out here today?"
"Originally to talk to Alfred."
"I see." The billionaire takes in the distinct lack of his butler in the large kitchen. "So why are you leaving?"
"Damian," Tim replies flatly.
"Ah." Bruce nods. "He spoke to you about Colin Wilkes then?"
Tim looks at him in surprise. "Yes. But if you know about him, then why did he ask me to look into his situation?"

A small smile twitches at the corners of Bruce's lips, a sure sign he's highly amused by something and is waiting for the other person to understand the joke. "Because he wants you to do it."
"That's not an answer and you know it."
"You'll have to see for yourself." Bruce pats Tim on the shoulder. "Damian and I have spent quite a bit of time speaking with each other these last several days, something I should have done years ago with him instead of talking at him. It's been enlightening, much like the discussion we had after your resignation from WE."

Tim waits for the other shoe to drop. Bruce is in lecture mode, so it's bound to happen soon.
"I'm sure the two of you had quite a bit to say to each other, but before you leave, I want to make sure you listened to what he said," he says pointedly. "When Damian speaks up about something he's absolutely passionate about, it's just as important to hear what he's not saying as well."
"So this college kid is important to him? How? They met in jail." Tim shakes his head disbelievingly.
"And you met the love of your life at a dive bar in the Bowery." Bruce raises an eyebrow, the meaning of which should be obvious to anyone who's ever been on the receiving end of one. "Appearances can be deceiving."

Tim snaps his mouth shut, biting back the retort he'd been about to deliver about how it wasn't the same. That his and Jason's relationship is different.

But it's not. Not to others looking in from the outside. We're from two completely different worlds and I've been spending the better part of the last two months keeping our names out of the news. Jason has no idea how much of my time I spent doing that until last week. Now, it's all about making sure there's plenty of positive things about us to help offset all the shit the pundits are spewing.

I'm protecting him. I'm taking care of him in an arena he has no experience in.
And now Damian is trying to do the same for someone else. Someone he cares about.
Tim runs a frustrated hand through his hair. "I feel like an asshole."
"Takes one to know one."

## Chapter End Notes

Whew. Loooonnnnggggg chapter, but Tim needed his air time. And, obviously, I didn't quite manage to wrap things up the way I wanted to in this chapter, so there's going to be one more chapter after this (the one that this chapter was supposed to be before Tim went nuh-uh and took over), then the epilogue. I don't think I'm going to hear any complaints...

# Milestone Twenty-Six: The Meaning of Family 

## Chapter Notes

Holy crap...it's the last chapter. *looks around in amazement*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jason can't help but notice Tim is rather subdued when he finally makes it to the bar just after lunchtime. He wanders into the kitchen to let them know he's back, then ducks out and heads upstairs, to do what, no one is sure.

Kon picks up on it too and they both watch in concern as the door shuts behind the young millionaire. "I don't know how fluent you are in Tim-speak, but that is the look of a defeated man."
"Nah, I've seen that one," Jason comments over their shared workspace. His prep work is almost done. Kon may not be as handy with a knife as Cass or Tim, but he knows his way around a kitchen better than they do. He'd been telling stories about helping his aunt out in the kitchen back in Kansas.
"I dunno..."
Jason wipes his hands on a clean towel. "He came here the night Damian got the plug pulled on his big project."
"Oh." Kon nods slowly. "I heard about that. It's also the night he got inspired to start DI back up again. No thanks to a certain bartender he'd been waxing poetic over." He winks at Jason.
"Whatever, farm-boy. Think you can handle things down here while I check on Mr. Grouchypants?"
"I'll be fine and your chili will be too." Kon waves him off. "I'll keep Roy out of it."
"Thanks." With that, Jason hangs up his apron and heads out the backdoor. He takes the stairs carefully, though after a full week, the side effects of his concussion have mostly disappeared. The stairs are the only thing that give him any issues.

## What happened, Timmers? I knew speaking with Damian wouldn't go well for you, but I

 didn't think it would be this bad.He finds the loft quiet and dark, even with the blinds open to let in the weak, watery light. It's been a non-stop drizzle of a rain since he woke up this morning, wrapped around Tim in his large bed at the brownstone. He loves that bed, he really does, and wouldn't quibble in the
slightest (okay, much) if the other man decides to replace his mattress here someday with the same type he has.
"Tim?" Jason calls out as he locks the door behind him and takes off his shoes.
No response, but then he hears the toilet flush in the bathroom, followed by the sound of running water as the shower turns on.
"Well that answers that," he mutters and heads to the kitchen to start his kettle. Tea for him, coffee for Tim. By now, he knows all too well how Tim makes his coffee in the little French press he'd snuck in months ago.

Perhaps I should let him have a coffeemaker here. He does enough shit for me and I'm repaying that by being a stubborn ass.

By the time the shower turns off, the warm drinks are ready and waiting on the coffee table in front of the sofa. Tim emerges from the bathroom toweling off his hair. He stops when he sees Jason sitting on the sofa.
"You didn't need to come up."
Jason shrugs, eyeing his boyfriend's lean form. Too lean. He's lost weight again. "It was either me or the jockstrap. Figured you'd prefer me."
"I don't want to talk about it." Tim turns and heads to the dresser where he takes out some clean clothes.
"Figured as much. I made you some coffee. Thought maybe we could sit here and enjoy some peace and quiet before the insanity falls upon us again." He's just as capable of manipulating his boyfriend when the mood strikes. If I can get him to unwind a bit, he 'll spill. Maybe.

Tim puts on his boxers, a pair of black sweat pants, and what Jason's pretty sure is his missing red henley. The shorter man all but swims in the large shirt, but Jason can't help the little pitter-patter his heart makes at the sight as Tim wanders over to the sofa to curl up on the far end of it. He smirks at Jason like he knows what it does to him when he wears his clothes and leans over to pick up his coffee mug.
"You're getting better at it," he comments after taking a small sip.
"You're getting better at it," Jason repeats mockingly. "Coming from the coffee snob, that's high praise."
"I am to coffee as you are to tea. Speaking of which, I had tea with Alfred before the shit hit the fan earlier. I meant to get some for you but left before I saw him again." Tim looks around for his phone and spots it on the end table where he must have left it when he came in. His wallet and keys are there too. He picks it up and starts texting.

Jason waits, letting Tim have his space. Sipping slowly on his tea, he notices which car keys are sitting on the table. He knew Tim drove his Audi to the Manor when he dropped Kon off
at the bar on his way there but these were the keys to the Honda. "You've been home already."
"Yes." He doesn't look up from his phone.
"Did you eat lunch?" Jason asks carefully.
"Nope. Not hungry."
Sighing, Jason picks up his tea and stands. He heads back to the kitchen to make them a late lunch. On a day like this, soup sounds like the way to go.

## Give him his space. He'll come to me eventually.

He soon loses himself in the easy rhythm of the kitchen, chopping onions, celery, and carrots and tossing them into the saute pan to cook down a bit. A frozen container of homemade chicken stock is dumped into a larger pot to start melting down. Garlic is added to the mirepoix, as well as some fresh ginger for a different kick. Finely chopped potatoes are added to the melting broth and Jason adds the vegetable mixture to the pot before adding some salt and pepper, as well as a generous dash of a spice blend he enjoys.

## I think I've got some orzo around here somewhere.

Rummaging around his cabinets, he finds the sealed Tupperware with the small pasta. He adds half a cup and then adds some water to the pot. That shit soaks up liquid like nothing else.

When he finally turns from the stovetop, there's Tim perched on one of the countertops, his empty coffee cup beside him.

## Called it.

"It'll be ready in about 45 minutes." He eyes the coffee cup. "Want me to heat more water for you?"
"I'm fine," Tim replies quietly. "You didn't have to do that."
"I get hungry too. Besides, Roy and Kon got it covered downstairs and Steph will be here soon enough." In other words, plenty of time for Tim to talk about what happened.

Jason washes his hands at the sink and dries them off. Tim seems to be in duckling mode, so he heads back to the sofa and lays down against the cushioned arm, leaving enough space for Tim to sit at the other end.

He waits.
After a minute or so, the shorter man hops down off the counter and pads quietly over to the sofa to join him, curling up against the other end. Jason buries his socked feet under the man's thigh for warmth. He'd turned off the space heaters earlier when he headed downstairs.
"You're really good at this," Tim finally says, breaking the silence.
"Good at what?"
"Waiting a person out."
Jason shrugs. "I'm a bartender. It kinda comes with the job."
"You could be so much more than that." Tim sounds almost wistful.
"Maybe one day I will be." He shrugs again. "But right now, I'm happy with where I am and what I've got." He pointedly smirks at Tim at the last part.

Tim sighs heavily, his blue eyes locked on Jason. "What did I do to deserve you?"
"I ask myself that same question every day." He reaches out. "Come here."
The smaller man crawls over the length of Jason's body and lays against his chest, the top of his head tucked under Jason's chin. He wraps his arms around Tim and holds him close.
"I'm not going to be mad if your conversation with the demon turned out different than mine. I didn't expect you to come home all sunshine and roses. You guys have years of some serious shit to work through. That can't be resolved after just one meeting."
"You've really missed your true calling," Tim muses. "I've been to therapy before. You'd be good at it."

Jason snorts, trying to contain his laughter. "Tim, no one wants my brand of therapy."
"Why not?"
"Because no one wants to be told that if they truly want to change something, then they've got to start with themselves. I told you before, I'll listen and give advice the first time around, but if I hear the same sob story a second time, I'll laugh in your face."

Tim chuckles and shifts so that his chin is digging into Jason's chest, his eyes locking on his again. "How often have you taken your own advice?"
"More often than I'd like to admit."
"Change isn't easy."
"Nope." It never is. But it's a part of life and you can't escape from that.
"I saw something at the Manor today," Tim starts slowly. "Something I didn't expect to see." Jason shifts so that he's more comfortable with Tim's weight on him. Finally. "What was that?"
"I saw that on the inside, I'm just as ugly as Damian."

This is not what he was expecting Tim to say at all. Eyes widening, he replies, "Come again?"

Tim sighs and drops his gaze. "I went there with a preconceived notion of what to expect. For the most part, I was right. But he threw me a curve ball out of nowhere and it blindsided me."
"So how does this make you ugly?"
"I...I'm so used to how things are between us. It's never been anything but a battle with him. But when he reached out for something I could help with, something for someone else, my first reaction was...not nice. I questioned what he knew about being a morally upstanding person." Tim pauses, lost in the memory. "Jason, it was like I hit him. What I said...it's something he would have said. I've always thought I held the higher ground between us, but...now I'm not so sure." He hides his face against Jason's white $t$-shirt.

Jason holds him tighter, resting his chin on top of Tim's black hair. "Hate to break it to you, but you're not perfect, Tim. You're as human as the rest of us. We make mistakes."

The man in his arms shudders. "You don't get it. I've had to be perfect for so long," he chokes out.
"And now that you're on your own, you can finally be you." Jason plants a kiss on Tim's head. "I'll let you in on a little secret. I never liked Tim Wayne all that much. I much prefer Tim Drake. He can be an asshole sometimes, but hey, I'm one too, so I guess that's why we work so well."

The choke turns into a sob, but that's a grin on Tim's face as he looks up again, his eyes watery. "How do you always seem to say what I need to hear?"
"I dunno." Jason runs a hand over the side of Tim's face, tracing the high cheekbone and his straight nose. "I read a lot."
"I know." Tim moves his head to kiss the palm of Jason's hand. "It's one of the things I love about you."

Jason smiles gently and starts running his free hand up and down Tim's back, fingers catching in the soft fabric of his shirt. "I love you even when you haven't slept for two days and have rancid coffee breath."
"Tam says I need a keeper."
"She's not entirely wrong."
Tim toys with the v-neck collar on Jason's shirt. "The warehouse renovations start next month. I'm going to be spending a lot of time on this side of town because of them..." He looks up uncertainly.
"If you're askin' if you can stay here more often, then that's fine. Just don't expect me to be up at the asscrack of dawn to go inspect a building with you." Jason sighs as something else occurs to him. "I suppose that means I'll have to make some space for you in the kitchen."
"Hmm? What for?" His brows narrow slightly in confusion.
"You'll need a coffeemaker."
Tim sits up abruptly, straddling Jason's waist. "Really?" he asks in excitement.
"Yes, really." Jason raises his arms above his head and stretches. Tim may not look it, but he's heavier than he looks. "Just don't get one of those massive ones."
"I've got one packed away that's only two cups." Tim grins, obviously more pleased by this than Jason thought he would be.

I guess it's one of those big steps. A milestone you might say. Never thought I'd see this happen.
"Whatever. As long as it doesn't take over my counter, it's fine. Just make sure there's none of that burnt coffee smell in here or I'll have to kick your ass."

Tim leans forward, a playful look on his face as his hands rest on Jason's shoulders. "You mean you'll try to kick my ass. I'll have you flat on your back in no time."

Jason makes a face at that, because, yeah, it's true. "Doesn't mean I won't put up a fight."
"Brains versus brawn. Bring it on anytime." His boyfriend's smile is growing downright wicked as his hands move up Jason's still outstretched arms, bringing their faces closer together.
"You've already got me on my back," he teases as Tim's hands lock around his wrists in a firm grip. "So what're you gonna do now?"
"This." Tim closes the distance between them, his lips finally meeting Jason's as his body falls flush against his once again.
*****

It's not until Monday that Tim has a chance to start looking into Colin Wilkes. The bar was busy the entire weekend and each person working there, regularly or otherwise, were run ragged. Even with Jason back up to speed and Cass coming up from Bludhaven again to help out in the kitchen, plus the dishwashing services of the kid from upstairs who blew up his toilet, it was simply non-stop.

Jason decides to close on Monday just to catch his breath, but is already planning to open back up Tuesday evening. Tim sends word to Bruce about it as it seems the media is still intent on trying to get in, so as to keep the security detail in place. They both agree it'll probably be like this until after Damian's plea hearing on Friday, most likely through the next weekend.

Tim leaves the loft after lunch Monday afternoon, ostensibly to go home and get some DI work done. In reality, he needs his home computer to break into the GCPD files and start his
search. He could do it with his tablet, but he wants some privacy for this as he hasn't told Jason everything that happened between him and Damian.

Nor do I intend to. Not yet, at least.
He makes a pot of coffee (the sight of his coffeepot makes him stupidly happy as there's going to be one in Jason's kitchen as soon as he can find the box with the one he used in college) and brings the warm mug upstairs to his little nest. Tam always called his setup the nerd cave, but Jason dubbed it his nest after seeing all the blankets and pillows Tim keeps laying around. It's a more apt description.

Breaking into the GCPD isn't difficult and he soon finds the file he's looking for. Tim saves it and makes his way out of the network, making sure there's no trace he was ever there in the first place.

It's a small file. Tim can't help but chuckle when he sees the mugshot of Colin Wilkes. The freckled redhead is smiling like someone would for their school picture.

Let's see what we've got here. Colin Marcus Wilkes, age 20. Arrested for assault and battery... He reads through the case notes and finds the story Damian told him holds up. The arresting officer even made a statement to the effect that she only arrested Wilkes because she had to as the thief wanted to press assault charges. The woman whose purse had been stolen in turn pressed theft charges because she was indignant that the nice man who helped get her purse back was getting the shaft too. The notes and official statements went on in a similar vein.

In the end, the thief, who'd already had multiple arrests on his record, was sent to Blackgate for breaking his parole and adding another arrest to his record. Wilkes was charged with simple assault, which the judge downgraded to a petty disorderly persons offense after both the arresting officer and the theft victim spoke up in his defense at his hearing. As Wilkes had no previous offenses, he was sentenced to 30 days in jail. There's a note about the sentence being delayed for 45 days so that Wilkes can finish his semester at GU on the condition he checks in every day with a parole officer.

Nice to see the legal system is giving him that bit of lenience. They must not consider him a flight risk. It wouldn't surprise me in the slightest, prison overcrowding being what it is, if his sentence is commuted to an even shorter time frame or changed to community service and a fine.

Tim sighs and chews on the end of the pen he keeps for just this purpose at his desk. The ink has long since been removed, a lesson he learned after that one incident he made Kon and Bart swear on their lives to never reveal.

Still, he was charged, which is enough for the committee to reconsider the status of his scholarship.

Breaking into the Wayne Foundation system is a bit more of a challenge since Barbara's the one who built the security network. He'd had a hand in it too, back in the day when he was
still working for her, so he's familiar enough with it to enjoy the changes he finds along the way.

He's downloaded Wilkes' file and is on his way back out when a message box appears on his screen. Tim smiles and shakes his head. Should have known I couldn't escape Babs' eye completely.

Oracle: What are you doing?
Redbird: Homework.
Oracle: Pretty sure you could just waltz into WF and ask for that file considering your last name.

Redbird: Now where's the fun in that?
Oracle: So who's Colin Wilkes to you?
Redbird: More like who is he to Damian. They shared a jail cell for a few hours.
Tim debates for a moment about if he wants to share Damian's request with Barbara.
Knowing her, she's already made her way into the GCPD network to search for Colin Wilkes after what he just wrote. In for a penny...

Redbird: I had a little chat with Damian last week. He asked me to help this guy...He goes on to explain the request.

Oracle: $O \_o \quad$ Ok, coming from him, that's impressive.
Redbird: I know. The rest of our conversation went along normal lines, insult after veiled insult. That request was his parting shot.

Oracle: I heard he spoke with Jason last week too?
Redbird: Yeah. They had a much better conversation than I did. I didn't expect much, so I wasn't disappointed, but I keep hearing how the brat's had some sort of epiphany and is starting to be nicer to people. That sure wasn't the case for me.

Oracle: I've been hearing the same thing from Dick, Bruce, and Alfred. If it helps, I don't think Damian knows how to be anything other than what he is around you. For the two of you, it needs to come from both sides.

Redbird: ***grumble grumble ${ }^{* * *}$
Redbird: ...I know. It's so hard to even want to though. He's never been anything but out to get me from the moment he arrived. I tried in the beginning, you know I did.

Oracle: I know, hon. And I get it, I really do. But perhaps it's finally time to let go of that and see what the future will bring.

Redbird: You sound like Dick. Or a Hallmark Channel movie...
Oracle: I've had to fall asleep listening to those way too many times...The things we put up with for the ones we love. Of course, they put up with our idiosyncrasies too.

Redbird: Isn't that the truth? Jason's finally letting me have a coffeemaker in his loft.
Oracle: Considering the two of you, that's almost as big a step as putting a ring on it.
Redbird: I know, it shocked me too.
Oracle: So when are you planning to put a ring on it? You two dorks are meant to be, you know that right?

Redbird: How are you so sure it's going to be me asking?
Oracle: Because we've talked about Jason's self-worth issues before. You two will be old and gray before he steps up to the plate.

Redbird: True, but I'm not telling you. I know about the betting pool...
Oracle: So you ARE planning to ask him!!!
Tim smiles and shakes his head in wry amusement. Barbara is one of his best friends, his mentor, but even she's not going to get a leg up over everyone else.

Redbird: Not saying a word. La de da de da...
Oracle: Fine. Be that way. :P
Redbird: I will. Besides, you know you're having way too much fun running the statistical analysis of when it'll happen.

Oracle: True.

They chat for a bit longer before signing off.
Tim doesn't look at the file right away, thinking instead about the conversation he'd just had with Barbara.

It needs to come from both sides, huh? Is this whole thing with Wilkes his way of reaching out? I thought he just wants me to do it because he knows I wouldn't say no to someone it's within my power to help.

He opens the file and is very pleased by what he finds.
This won't be as odious a chore as I thought.
Wilkes's academic achievements speak for themselves, but what impresses Tim more is the community service and volunteer hours he regularly logs in. Scholarship recipients are highly encouraged to work part time or volunteer if their studies permit, but it's not a requirement.

Damian's newfound friend (Tim uses the term loosely as Damian doesn't have friends) spends a lot of time at St. Aden's orphanage, as well as at a food pantry that appears to be run by the same church. He also works part-time.

In reviewing his more personal records, Tim finds he was in fact from said orphanage, having been placed there when he was 10 . His early psych evaluations revealed he's claustrophobic and suffered from abandonment issues, which, considering he's an orphan, isn't much of a surprise. He responded well to the love and affection from the sisters running the orphanage and though he was never adopted, he still maintained a positive attitude about life.

His scholarship application included a paper, the topic for that year on how one overcomes difficulties in order to achieve success. There's no doubt in Tim's mind as he reads it that the young man is writing from experience.
"I wake up each day choosing to do more, to become more. I could just as easily roll over and do nothing, but that means giving up. I almost gave up a long time ago, but someone showed me the right way. Yes, it's hard and sometimes I want to give up, but I know that in the end, it'll all be worth it."

The closing statements resonate with Tim and he can't help but think of Jason.
Such similar backgrounds. If only Jason had stayed in the system, there's no doubt in my mind he'd have gotten one of these scholarships. He'd be doing great things. God, there's that elitist douche in me again. He's already doing great things. He doesn't need another piece of paper saying otherwise.

Jason's associate's degree is framed and hanging proudly in his office. Mike had framed it.
Tim shakes his head and focuses back on the task at hand. There's nothing in any of the files indicating that Colin Wilkes is anything other than what he is. A young, hardworking college student who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Or perhaps the wrong place at the right time. He caught the purse snatcher when he could easily have done nothing and let the man run past him.

I'll speak with the committee. I doubt he'll keep his full ride scholarship, but there's academic ones he more than qualifies for. As long as his grades stay the way they are and he keeps his nose clean, that'll have to do. Considering his work ethic, it shouldn't be an issue.

Case closed, Tim puts the matter out of his mind for now and focuses next on a problem that's been stewing in the back of his mind all weekend.

Damian.
Deep down, he wants things to change between them. He'd always wanted a younger sibling and he remembers how excited he was by Damian's arrival after the initial shock wore off. Excitement that quickly changed to survival of the fittest almost overnight. Not once in all the years since has Damian given any indication he was willing to change things.

Until Friday afternoon.
"Perhaps, over the course of your inquiries about Wilkes, you will find it in yourself to think a bit more kindly about my capacity to think about others."

Tim scowls as Damian's words circle around in his mind once again. They've been haunting him all weekend, but until this moment, he hasn't believed them. I swear, if there's one thing I know for certain in my life, it's that change is a constant. The past is over and gone. Take the lessons learned there and move forward.

He sighs and runs a hand through his freshly trimmed hair. Stephanie had done it for him yesterday afternoon in Jason's bathroom. "You can't even see anymore, Tim!" she'd admonished him with a wave of her scissors.

I do see. I see all too clearly what I need to do. Dammit, but it's the hardest step to take.
*****
"You sure I should be here?" Jason asks uncertainly, tugging nervously at his collar. Wearing a full suit and tie isn't usually his style, but even he has to admit the dark red shirt against the charcoal pinstripe suit Tim bought for him months ago looks awesome.

If I have to wear a monkey suit, at least I make it look good.
"Yes, now stop fidgeting," Tim replies as he readjusts Jason's tie. He's wearing his favorite dark blue pinstripe suit, the one Jason is rather intimately acquainted with and hasn't seen in forever. "You're the one who said yes to Damian's request. Too late to change your mind now." He sounds a bit waspish, like he has a lot on his mind.

Which, to be fair, he does. Jason originally wasn't going to attend Damian's plea hearing. Now that he is, extra security had to be called in to accommodate his and Tim's separate arrival.

So here he is, sitting in the passenger seat of Tim's Audi waiting for their security detail to create a perimeter so they could get out and enter the courthouse. The media is out in full force, already snapping pictures from the random flashes Jason sees outside.
"I'm not changing my mind. I'm just wondering if it's going to be like this," he gestures outside the car, "every time we go out for fucking groceries."
"It'll die down eventually," Tim replies as he puts on a pair of sunglasses. The sun is shining for the first time in almost a week, but Jason suspects he'd still be wearing them even if it was raining cats and dogs. "Something else will come along to capture everyone's attention soon enough."
"Fucking joy," he mutters as he puts on his own sunglasses. They were a gift from Kori, so they actually look pretty good. Steph said they made him look like a badass and Roy said he looked like a douche, so he took that as a positive.
"Just follow my lead." Tim unlocks the car doors and gets out.

Jason opens his door and as he unfolds his body from the front seat, he hears shouts coming from the reporters that get louder when they realize who else is getting out of the vehicle. It's hard to focus on any one question, but he hears his name several times.

It's a struggle to not dive back into the tinted protection of the car and hide.
Tim comes around the front of the car to stand next to him, looking picture perfect as he does. "You can do this," he says quietly, because no way was a whisper going to carry over this noise. "Just ignore them. They're not going to get a statement from anyone until it's over and they know it."

Taking a deep breath, Jason closes the door behind him. "Fucking vultures."
"Yes, they are," Tim agrees. "Let's go."
Together, they start walking forward towards the courthouse. The ring of security moves with them, led by Sasha. She always grumbles about working with Tim, but she's got a soft spot for Jason.

I feed her and the others who keep these jackasses outta my building. I don't give her bullshit and I don't play games. She'd better like me.

Once inside, it quiets down immensely as there's only so many reporters allowed into the building at a given time. They're still flocked as they move through security, but once they enter the courtroom, it's almost complete silence.

At the front of the room, Jason spots Harvey Dent talking with a woman he recognizes as Marion Baker, Bruce's attorney. In one of the front benches, the rest of the Wayne's are clustered around Damian. Or rather, Bruce and Dick are as Barbara is already seated and Alfred and Cassandra are sitting in the row behind her. Once again following Tim's lead, Jason finally takes off his sunglasses and places them in one of the inner pockets of his suitcoat, fumbling a bit as he tries to find it.

## Tim makes this look so fucking easy.

They're spotted right away by Dick, facing as he is towards the door. "Jason! I didn't think you were coming." If there's any trace of the bruise left from Jason's punch, it's well hidden by makeup.

Everyone turns to face him at Dick's words, including the two attorneys at the front of the room.

Jason scowls. "Say it a little louder, Dickhead. I don't think they heard you in the next room over."

Cass quietly snickers and Damian rolls his eyes. "I asked him to come, Richard," he explains as he leaves the relative safety of his father and oldest brother's sides to walk towards him and Tim.

The young man ignores Tim as he holds out his hand to Jason. "Thank you for coming, Jason. I know it is asking much of you to be here."
"To be honest kid, if you hadn't asked, I wasn't plannin' on bein' here at all. This media shit is a pain in the ass," he replies as he shakes Damian's hand firmly.
"Welcome to our world," Damian replies with a sardonic smirk that wouldn't look out of place on Tim's face. He turns his attention to Tim, his expression growing more cautious. Jason can't help but notice he doesn't offer his hand to his brother. "And you too, Timothy. Have you had a moment to look into the matter I spoke of?"
"I did," Tim replies in voice that could temper steel. The slight apparently isn't missed by him either.

## What matter? What did Damian ask Tim to do?

"And?"
"It'll be taken care of. There's no need for you to be concerned anymore."
There are layers of subtext Jason can sense beneath the surface, but damned if he can figure it out.

Damian nods firmly, accepting Tim's words. "Thank you, Timothy." He spins on his heel and walks back to the front bench to his father and oldest brother.

As such, he misses the look of astonishment on Tim's face. Jason's pretty sure he's wearing a matching one. The kid just THANKED Tim in front of everyone. Shit, the little grinch's heart must be growing after all.
"Pinch me," Tim says in a low tone, just barely loud enough for Jason to hear it.
"Why?"
"To make sure I'm awake."
"We're both awake. But I'm pretty sure we just entered the Twilight Zone."
With that, they approach the rest of the family. Jason's not certain where he's supposed to sit, but he's firmly of the opinion it's not in the front row. Before anyone can stop him, he slips into the second row and takes a seat next to Cassandra. She leans in to bump his shoulder in greeting while Alfred simply nods. The old man looks like he's keeping it together by sheer force of will.

This is his family just as much as it is Bruce's, no matter what his relationship with Damian's been like over the years.

Tim glares at him as he makes his way into the front row and around his brothers to sit on the far side of Barbara. Bruce looks amused at Jason's choice of seat as he holds out his hand. "Thank you for coming, Jason."
"The only thing I'm missing right now is sleep," he returns as he shakes Bruce's hand. Out of all of the Wayne's he's got the firmest grip.
"I don't think any of us slept well last night." He glances at Damian, who's planted firmly next to Dick. The older man has his arm draped easily over the younger's shoulders, but Jason can't help but notice his knuckles are white.

Barbara takes this as her opportunity to chime in as she twists slightly to face the two big men. "And I doubt we will tonight either."

## Yeah, I sincerely doubt that happening too.

"You should all go to Jason's bar when this is over," Damian speaks up. "No one will judge you for drinking the day away."

Dick snorts as he tries to muffle a surprised laugh. "D, you could still be coming home this afternoon. Knock it off."
"Richard, be realistic. Baker and Dent have been hashing out my plea deal for the last week. Judge Martinez simply has to approve it and that will be all." It's plain for all to see that even though Damian's words are spoken calmly, he's leaning into his brother even more.

Bruce clasps Damian's free shoulder, effectively boxing him in so that he's surrounded by family. "Whatever happens will happen. It's out of our hands right now. Considering the circumstances, I think Marion got the best deal possible."

Jason keeps his mouth shut as he remembers what Tim had told him a couple days before.
After Damian informed Baker that he was going to plead guilty to all charges, she and Dent had gone to town to hash out a plea deal that was acceptable to both parties, with the youngest Wayne heir serving a total of four years for his crimes. One part of said deal is that Damian will testify in court against Lonnie Machin as the hacker once known as Anarky has already plead not guilty just a few days before. In return, the sentence for the assault charge was dropped to the minimum.

His sentences would also be served concurrently, so Damian could be out of prison in as soon as two years if he behaves himself behind bars. He'd be on probation for the rest of his negotiated sentence.

Jason had expected Tim to blow a gasket as he relayed the news, but he'd been oddly subdued, a state he's been in since his meeting with Damian the previous week. He hasn't spoken much about it, but given the exchange he witnessed between them when they entered the courtroom, that has to be part of it.

I don't know what's going on there and I'm not sure I want to. But if Tim decides he wants to talk about it, I'll be there to listen.

A bailiff enters the room and says something quietly to Baker and Dent. They nod in return and the Wayne attorney approaches the family. "Bruce, Damian, it's time."

Dick's face crumbles and he hugs Damian tight.
"Keep it together, Richard," Damian admonishes. "You're a Wayne. Act like it for once." His own voice trembles a little.
"Nope. You're my little brother, I'll behave how I want."
They hug a moment longer and Dick finally lets go. Damian is promptly pulled into an embrace by Bruce. There's no sign of the normally stoic businessman's façade. His face is lined by grief, exhaustion, stress, and a myriad of other emotions Jason can't begin to place. The one thing that strikes him most though is that Bruce looks like a father. A father concerned and scared for his son.

Did my old man ever look at me like that? Jason viciously squashes down the thought.
When they let go, Barbara reaches out to clasp Damian's hand, giving it a firm squeeze. He leans down to hug her as well. It's more formal than the others, but it's apparently a big gesture if Dick's expression is any indication.

Standing again, Damian looks over Barbara's head to Alfred, Cassandra, and Jason. He nods to them all before he turns his attention to Tim, who's still seated firmly next to Barbara. The young man nods to him as well, but as he turns to slide past Dick and his father, Tim abruptly stands. "Damian."

He stops and, to the astonishment of everyone there, Tim reaches out to give Damian an awkward hug. Damian's eyes widen in shock at the touch. "Timothy..." His voice wavers.
"You're a little shit and I haven't forgiven you for what you did, but you are still my brother." Tim lets go and quickly resumes his seat, purposefully not looking at anyone. Jason can see that the tops of his ears are red.

## Holy shit. I know I'm not the only one who just saw that pig fly.

He can't help but feel proud of Tim though. Everything that's happened over the last several months, it was all aimed at him just as much as it was Jason. There are two victims here and while neither one have forgiven Damian, it looks like Tim is finally willing to start putting the past behind him.

What was that I read about healing? Something about in order to move on, one must stop looking back? Oh Jesus Christ, maybe Tim's right about the whole therapist thing...Fuck.

Damian takes his place next to Baker as the bailiff enters the room again.
"All rise for the honorable Judge Juan Martinez. This court is now in session."
As Jason stands with the rest of the Wayne's, his gaze lands on each one. None of them are anything like what he'd imagined them to be before he met Tim. They're all unique in their own ways, but they're also a family, dysfunctional as it is. His life has changed so much because of them, for better and for worse, but mostly for the better. His eyes land on the back of Tim's head, his overly long hair freshly trimmed.

I decided long ago I didn't need a family to get by in life. Mike showed me otherwise and I've been building my own ever since. And now, thanks to Tim, I've been adopted into his.
Underneath it all, they're just as crazy as mine.
I think I can live with that.

## Chapter End Notes

There's an epilogue all set and ready to go. Just one more Tuesday to look forward to.
Next week: Piercings. More than one. And... Jason hires someone new at the bar.

# Milestone Twenty-Seven: Epilogue 

## Chapter Notes

*blinks* It's the end. *wipes eyes* I'm not tearing up. I'm not, I swear.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

## Several weeks later...

Tim grips the arms of the chair he's seated in tightly, his eyes wide and his pupils obviously dilated as he takes a few deep breaths. "I'm not sure I can do this."
"Yes, you can," Jason says reassuringly from where he's standing next to him. "Two quick pricks and you're done. It's not like you're gettin' anything else."
"Yeah, anything with a gage takes a bit more time. Not much, but still," Roy agrees. He's leaning against the glass counter watching and grinning like an asshole. Next to him, Tam is very much doing the same, just much better dressed. His COO is rocking those heels. Bitch heels, she called them.

## They could probably take someone's eye out if used properly.

"If you can't handle this, then what makes you think you can handle getting anything else done?" She gives Tim a pointed look, one that has Jason perking up in interest.

Shut up. Shut up. Shut up.
"What's she talkin' about?" he asks, his teal gaze dropping back down to him.
"Nothing," Tim all but snaps, but he feels tips of his ears grow red in embarrassment. Not yet. Gotta see how this goes first. Baby steps. If I can do this, then perhaps one day I can do THAT. He takes a final breath. "Okay, I'm ready."
"It's usually easier without the peanut gallery," the tattooed man with spiky red and black hair comments as he raises the little gun to Tim's ear. "Gotta admit though, it's funny as hell."
"My pain is everyone's amusement." Tim closes his eyes and waits. He winces at the bright flash of pain, but it's nowhere near as bad as he thought it would be. Having a bullet dug out of my shoulder with a pair of tweezers was much worse.
"There, see? It wasn't so bad." Jason runs a soothing hand through his hair.
"How many times have you done this?" Tim turns his head slightly for the man, waiting as he cleans the piercing gun and readies the next small silver stud.
"In my ears? Ummm...at least five or six times per."
Tim knows without even looking that Jason has only two studs going up each ear and industrial in his right ear. "You let some of the others close up?"

Roy lets out another laugh. "You shoulda seen Jaybird a few years ago, Tim. Studs and rings going up and down his entire ear; both of them. When he had to become respectable, most of them came out, but he got the industrial a few months before he met you as a giant fuck you to the world."
"Was that after my last big run-in with the bank?" Jason asks as he tries to remember.
"Yeah. Kori came with you and walked out with her clit pierced."
"Oh, yeah." Jason's grin is almost lecherous. "Kinda forgot my own pain watching that get done. I think she almost broke my hand."

Tim senses an opportunity here he doesn't want to miss, but the spiky haired guy (he thinks his name is Terry, but he was distracted by the tattoo designs when they were introduced) grabs his chin and turns his head to the side.
"I did that one," he says as he pierces Tim's other ear without giving him a chance to tense up. "Hard to forget a gorgeous woman like her." He starts to clean the little gun again as Tim winces again at the quick stab of pain.

Roy laughs some more. "You did a good job, man. It's hard to say who likes it more."
Tim opens his mouth, but Tam beats him to it, thankfully asking the question he wants to ask. "So how long does it take to heal from something like that?" She looks curious.
"About six weeks," Roy replies, grinning wide. "Shower time was fun time."
Tim cocks his head to the side slightly. "You could still have sex?" he asks innocently. He knows the answer to this, he's researched it in preparation for something else he may consider getting pierced in the future. But he wants to see if the redhead will slip up and admit to something he's been dying to hear from Jason's mouth.

He's well aware his boyfriend has a rather sordid sexual past. It's been alluded to before, but not once has Jason admitted to sleeping with Roy and Kori. So if he can't get Jason to admit it on his own... well, Roy will do just fine to get the ball rolling instead.
"You know we're all about the gift wrapping," Roy laughs. "But yeah, we could. And did. But once that sucker was healed, oh man. Hell, even Jaybird here had some fun with that."

## Jackpot.

Next to Tim, Jason stiffens and sucks in a deep breath. "Roy," he says warningly.
"What?" the man replies innocently. "It's not like it's a secret that we used to invite you over. Thursday Night Threesomes, remember?"
"Roy," Jason growls.
Tam's dark eyes are wide in surprise and alarm as her gaze darts back and forth between Jason and Roy.

Glancing up, Tim can see why. Jason is a quivering ball of rage, fists clenched tight, and looking he's one step from a throwdown with his best friend. Time to step in. This isn't quite as much fun as he thought it would be.
"I already knew," he says quietly, still looking up at his boyfriend.
Jason blinks quickly, obviously caught off guard by the simple statement. "What?" he asks, staring down at Tim. "How? When?"

Okay, perhaps this'll be fun after all.
"That's easy. Kori told me not long after we officially started dating," Tim explains. "She said you'd likely never get around to telling me because you didn't want me to think you were cheating on me if something slipped. She also said you hadn't slept with either of them since you met me."

Which I appreciate, but oh man, the thought of Jason together with Kori and Roy? I almost wish I could forget the glimpse from that recording of the two of them in Jason's office. It's too easy to imagine Jason sitting where I was and watching, then joining in.

Jason gapes like a fish out of water. "You son of a bitch," he finally stutters out, his words gaining more force as he continues. "I've been freakin' out for fuckin' ever tryin' to figure out how ta tell ya and you already knew?" There goes what little bit of control Jason keeps over his accent. He tries, but as soon as he gets too riled up, he's dropping consonants left and right, especially his r's and g's.

Tim loves it.

A sound similar to that of a braying donkey interrupts the escalating argument. Tim's gaze whips around to see Roy collapsed on the floor, he's laughing and wheezing so hard. Tam is snickering, but doing a better job of hiding it, professional that she is. Her eyes are dancing in amusement.
"You guys are a fuckin' riot," Terry chimes in as he hands Tim a piece of paper. "Here are your instructions for how to take care of those new studs. I'm sure Jason will help; he's practically a pro at it."

He takes that as his signal to hop out of the chair. "Thanks, man!"
Terry laughs again at his boyish eagerness to be out of the hot seat. "Anyone else while I've got the gun out?"

Tam gives the man a contemplative look. "Hey Tim."
"Yeah?"
"You get around to writing DI's policy on piercings yet?"
"Nope. Knock yourself out."
This would never fly at the executive level at WE. But we're DI. We're young. We can get away with crap like this. The thought makes him smirk.

Tam takes a seat in the chair and points to the top of her right ear with a finely manicured nail. Tim can't help but notice they're a deep shade of purple right now and wonders if Steph has seen them yet. "I've been wanting a stud or a hoop up here since forever."

While Tam and Terry talk logistics of her piercing, Jason draws Tim off to the side to speak quietly. "I was gonna tell you, Tim. So many times, but I just wasn't sure how." His entire expression is downcast, like he's afraid Tim's going to snap at him.
"Jay, do I look like I'm mad?" he asks. "No, I'm not. I wish you would have told me, but, to be honest, even if Kori hadn't said anything, I'd have figured it out. You guys have a history and it's easy to see."
"You're really not mad?" Jason confirms, a hopeful expression replacing the frown.
"The only way I'd be mad is if you slept with them now and didn't tell me."
And didn't invite me to watch.
"Hmmm..." Jason gives him a speculative look, one that has Tim quivering slightly in anticipation and making him believe yet again his boyfriend is able to read his mind in some capacity. It usually means something different and fun will be happening in bed. "I haven't cheated on you. And I won't. But I think we've put off that kink talk for long enough. I've got some questions that need answers."

About damn time. He's wanted this for a while, but hasn't been sure how to bring it up. He has absolutely zero complaints about his sex life right now, but he knows Jason's experienced more than he has.

Tim nods in agreement. "Not here. But, if one of those questions is how do I feel about watching, then the answer is yes."

The pleased smirk that appears on Jason's face bodes very well for his near future.
*****

Jason hates doing interviews. It's a pain in his ass and thankfully he hasn't had to do one since Steph came along a few years ago. The blonde was a breath of fresh air in a place still reeling from Mike's death. But now, with him going back to community college in the fall (fuck you very much, Tim, but GCC is cheaper and the classes are the same as GU for now), he needs someone to cover the afternoons or nights he's got class. Because like hell is he going to take a morning class, not with his line of work.

He makes a show of reading the resume in front of him, then glances up at the red-haired and seriously freckled young man in front of him. What is it with this place and attracting redheads?

The resume isn't impressive, but the kid in front of him is young, for all that he needs to be 21 in order to even work here and serve alcohol. But he's been working part-time rather steadily for the last five years, all places Jason knows from around the area. Colin Wilkes even has some college under his belt, with the end date blank, which leads him to believe he's still in school. Not just any college, but Gotham University rather than Gotham Community College. All in all, he's a much better applicant than most of the people Jason's been seeing walk through his door.

Lord knows I've seen some doozies. Not exactly what I want around here either when I'm not around to supervise.

His only concern is the kid checked the box on the employment application that he's been convicted of something. It's not a total deal breaker, but it depends on what it is.
"So, what makes you want to try your hand at bartending, Colin?" he asks, leaning back in his office chair and settling a level gaze on the kid.

Colin straightens up even more from his spot on the other side of the desk and rubs his hands nervously over his khaki pants. He'd gained points too for showing up in a clean pair of khakis and a collared shirt, though in this neighborhood, it was even odds he'd borrowed them rather than actually owning them. "To be honest, sir, it's the hours. I'm completely free for the rest of this summer, so I can work anytime, but you advertised evenings and weekends, which would be great when I start classes again in the fall."
"Yeah? What kind of classes you takin'?"
"Marketing. I've got an academic scholarship to GU through the Wayne Foundation. It covers my classes, but I just had to move off campus and need to find something else to make rent."

Colin gives him more of an answer than he asked for, but it was telling information, if it were true. And Jason knew how to find out for certain, and quickly to boot.

Wayne Foundation scholarships were sought after prizes for the academically inclined in the poorer parts of Gotham. If Jason stayed in the system and showed promise at school, chances were good he'd have gotten one. As it is, I've got a different kind of scholarship altogether. I oughta start calling Tim my sugar-daddy just to see what he does.
"I can certainly relate to that," Jason agrees. He asks a few more questions of Colin and is pleased by what he hears in response. The kid just turned 21 last week, so that took care of the age concern. Assuming his references check out and that bit about the scholarship, he's pretty certain he's found his replacement.

Now for the unpleasant part. Jason picks up the application and lays in out in front of him and points to a specific part.

Colin opens and closes his mouth again a few times before he sighs, looking even more nervous before he finally speaks up. "A lot of the places I've applied at ask about felony history. I noticed yours doesn't, but it asks about recent convictions..."
"This is the Bowery, kid. Those without a criminal record around here are in the minority. Felony convictions don't bother me so much unless it's drug related or you got anger management issues. So what'd you do?"

Jason needs to know. Certain things he can put up. If it's dealing drugs, he's marching right out that door. I can't have him around here, not with Roy.
"Simple assault," Colin breathes. "Back in April. I was sentenced to 30 days in jail, but the judge gave permission to delay it so I could finish my semester at GU. When I showed up in May after my finals were over, it ended up being commuted entirely to community service and a fine. But it's still on my record and a lot of places haven't looked all that nicely at it, especially since it was so recent."

It's barely June, so yeah, Jason gets it. "You any good in a fight?" he asks instead.
Colin looks up in surprise, not expecting the question. "Y-yeah. I mean, I know how to hit someone."
"Good. This is a bar, sometimes people get stupid and the only way to knock some sense into them is to clock them one and kick their ass out. So who'd you hit?" He tacks it on quickly at the end, hoping to surprise an answer out of the young man.
"A thief. I saw him steal a lady's purse and I hit him to keep him from running off with it."
Jason can't help it, he bursts out laughing. "Jesus Christ, really? That's what you were arrested for?"
"Yes?" Colin asks tremulously.
"Kid, if that's all, then you've got nothin' to worry about from me."
The look of relief on the redhead's face makes him laugh harder.
"Any questions for me?" Jason asks as he sits back and crosses his legs under his desk, trying to stretch without being obvious about it. He'd been in here all afternoon doing interviews and now that he's pretty sure he's found his replacement, he wants to get up and move. Sitting on his ass isn't his style.

Colin nods and surprises him yet again. "What do you look for in an ideal applicant?"
It's not the question about pay or hours that Jason usually hears when he does the rare interview and he grins again, knowing this is the kid's business education coming through. "Someone who can put up my shit and dish it right back. My employees are my family, so we all treat each other as such."

The young man smiles shyly. "I'm actually an orphan, so the thought of having a family is pretty appealing."

They wrap things up and Jason tells him he'll be in touch soon. He escorts Colin out of the office and back into the bar. Roy's there wiping down some glasses for water spots, as well as Tim, sitting in his usual spot and typing like a madman on his laptop with his tablet propped up beside him. His long hair is pulled back, but half of it is still escaping the ponytail like usual, hiding his newly pierced ears.

Jason is still stupidly happy that his boyfriend crossed over to the dark side, even though Alfred is not speaking with either of them after the family dinner they went to last week where he saw them. Bruce had just shaken his head and asked about how the healing process was going while Dick laughed. Barbara obviously didn't care one way or another, but Cassandra showed up the next day at Jason's front door and pointed at his ears, then hers.

Another blank canvas.
Tim glances up and gives Jason a smile. "Hey," he starts to say but stops when Colin all but rushes up to him and holds out his hand.
"Oh my God, you're Tim Drake-Wayne!" Colin says excitedly. "I had no idea this was your bar! Wait, I mean Jason's bar," he tries to recover looking back over at his soon to be boss. "This is the bar in the news stories that I read about." His ears and cheeks are flushed red in embarrassment. "But I've also read about you in Business Week. What you're doing with your new company is incredible!" The kid's gushing, Jason decides.

Professional that he is, Tim accepts the younger man's hand and gives it a firm shake before letting go. "Thank you," he replies and gives Jason a questioning look as Colin babbles another question.

Because he's not always an asshole, he decides to step in. "Tim, this is Colin. If he plays his cards right, he's going to be my replacement when I start classes this fall."

Colin seems to realize what's going on finally and his face flushes even more. "Oh, crap. I'm sorry, um, sorry! It's just...I wrote a paper about you for my entrepreneurship class last semester and..."

At this point, Jason and Roy can't keep straight faces anymore and both men burst out laughing. Tim gives them a dirty look, but looks more closely at Colin, appearing more interested than he had before. A small smile appears at the corner of his mouth, one Jason knows to mean Tim knows something and may or may not share it.

I wonder what it is...
"That so? You're in business school then?" Tim asks politely.
"Marketing is my major and business is my minor," Colin says proudly. "I'm on a Wayne Foundation scholarship to GU."

Tim takes his tablet and starts typing a few things, but doesn't break his gaze from the freckled man. "Congratulations," he replies. "Tell me more about your paper."

Colin takes a seat next to Tim and speaks animatedly, the businessman nodding along here and there and interjecting at one point to clarify something he was misquoted on in the article Colin used as his main reference. Jason remembers it as he'd ripped Kon a new one for that little mistake.

Ducking behind the bar, Jason joins Roy and they go down to the other end to give the two men a bit of privacy. Roy starts laughing quietly. 'I like that kid. He's got some balls to go right up to Tim like that."
"No shit. I liked him almost from the start and this just cemented it. Kinda curious to see what Tim thinks of him though. Considering how much time he spends here, they're gonna need to get along."
"Pretty sure that's not going to be an issue. If he didn't want to talk to him, he'd have shut him down fast."
"So true."
Roy's phone buzzes as he gets an incoming text. He pulls it out to look at it, then hands the phone to Jason. "It's for you," he says with a grin. "Left your phone in the office again, didn't you?"
"Shut up." Jason accepts the phone and reads the text from Tim.
Tim: WF scholarship checks out. He's the real deal. Smart as hell too. I like him.
He sends a reply back.
Jason: That's what I wanted to know. He's got a misdemeanor on his record though. It doesn't sound too bad, but can you check it out? Cheaper if you do it...

And faster. Figuring it would take Tim at least a little bit of time to check out Colin's records, he's not expecting the quick reply with a summary of the details that match up to the story he heard back in his office.

It doesn't get any easier than this, though Jason is curious about how fast Tim sent the information. It's like he knew already.

Jason: Think we should keep him?
Roy's reading over Jason's shoulder and gives him an appraising look before glancing back down the bar at Colin. "Wayne scholarships are dependent on grades, right? Gotta keep a certain GPA or something like that?"
"Yeah. Which means he knows how work hard and organize his time to juggle things. His record isn't one I'm worried about."
"If you're not worried about it, then I'm not," Roy nods decisively. "It'll be nice to have another brain around here. I wonder how he is with his hands. I thought I saw oil stains under his nails when he got here." Trust Roy to find another kindred spirit in the tinkering department.
"Yeah, me too." The phone goes off again and Jason looks down.
Tim: He's not bothering me if that's what concerns you.
Jason smirks. "Looks like we have a new bartender."
Roy grins again. "Let's go give him the bad news."

## THE END

## Chapter End Notes

The biggest and most massive of thanks to the wonderful GoAwayOlivia for all her hard work in beta reading this monstrosity and listening to me whine and complain when I'd write myself into a corner and take weeks to figure out how to get out it. Also, to Janna for all her help with Damian. You're both amazing!!!

Want more Tuesday Nights? Check out my Twitter @chibinightowl for more information!

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[^0]:    "I'm not that sick," Tim grouses as he slowly starts up the stairs with Jason following behind. "I haven't passed out yet."

