

Probation

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Probation

by [BadBlond099](#)

Summary

This story is loosely based in the DC animated cinematic universe with some elements from the New 52-Rebirth universe, focusing mostly on Jason Todd's experience.

Notes

Jason Todd's bitterness after his failed attempt at revenge drove him out of Gotham. He continued to act as a vigilante everywhere he went, but his mind was a mess. Eventually, one thing leads to an exploding submarine and Jason found himself rescued by Koriand'r, otherwise known as Starfire, who had recently left the Teen Titans to get some solitude after a disagreement with Dick. Jason and Kori, feeling sympathy for one another, wound up screwing out their frustrations for a while. This twisted relationship helped them to move on with their lives and, upon learning of a fellow ex-sidekick in danger, Jason convinced Kori to help him rescue Roy Harper. Thus, the trio became a band of rejects or "Outlaws."

Jason became a little less bitter thanks to the company of his new friends. In time they even wound up helping Batman out, giving him and his father figure the opportunity to finally reconcile.

Of course, it's not long after that that the Joker put his ultimate scheme into motion, kidnapping the whole Bat family. They made it out alive and shaken only for one final attack to break through; Jason was poisoned and left comatose at the Wayne Manor. Starfire went to visit him and was forced to confront Dick. After some nasty words were thrown, the two eventually made up and chose to reignite their relationship (much to Roy's disappointment).

Upon recovery, Jason allowed himself to be babied by Alfred and grew once again accustomed to the cushy life that Bruce had to offer. But the vigilante lifestyle beckoned, and Jason felt drawn to its call. He did, however, come to an agreement with Bruce to go straight. Which he really does, but he toes the line more than Bruce would like by going along with Roy's "heroes-for-hire" plan. They do manage to accomplish some good, but they ultimately disband after Jason got fed up with Roy's recklessness with their funds and inability to accept Jason's more extreme measures of handling things.

Seeking another way to prove himself to Bruce, Dick came up with an alternative plan for Jason...

Hence the Teen Titans were slated to get a new "probationary mentor." That's where this story begins.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Meet the Team

Jason stepped out of the elevator and grimaced. The training room was mostly hologram based with a few weights lying around and a couple treadmills. For such a ridiculously gaudy tower, he found it a little hard to believe that the “undisclosed source of finances” (usually Justice League speak for “Bruce did it”) couldn’t provide better recreational gear.

His grimace changed to an outright scowl when he noticed who was sparring.

“Todd?” Damian, distracted only for a moment, took a solid punch to the chin, knocking him clean off his feet.

Jason whistled and clapped mockingly as he approached. “Hit him again, please! Don’t stop on my account.”

The person Damian was sparring with had an unusual blue super suit that made his hand morph into a cannon as Jason got closer. “Stupid bug! Don’t you see the bat symbol?”

Jason shrugged, completely unfazed by the weapon in his face. “To be fair, most people have this kind of reaction to me.”

Damian got to his feet and tried to make himself look as big as possible. “Todd! Explain yourself! What are you doing here?”

“Don’t get huffy with me, twerp. You have Dick to thank for this. I would have been just fine playing as Bat’s partner, but Dick-wad thinks I need a ‘probationary period’,” he said, emphasizing his own dislike for the term with air quotes. “So, is this the new daycare program Batman’s got you in?”

Damian fumed, but it was the other boy who spoke up. “This isn’t some camp. We’re the Teen Titans.”

“Ouch. I guess Little League’s already a thing, huh?” Jason remarked.

“Dude, who is this jerk?” the boy in blue asked Damian, still keeping his cannon hand trained on Jason.

Damian sighed. “Reyes, this is Jason Todd. Todd, Jaime Reyes.”

“So much for secret identities,” Jaime whined, his super suit retracting into a small pack on his back. “I’m Blue Beetle.”

Fascinated with the retractable suit, Jason gave up his own title. “Red Hood. Give us a few more colors and we’ll make a rainbow out of this team yet.”

As if on cue, a door across the room opened and a girl in a blue cape stepped in with a green parrot on her shoulder.

“Holy crap!” the bird exclaimed, flying over to the others. It rapidly morphed into a green boy next to Damian. “This is the Red Hood? For real? Oh man! Dick used to talk about you all the time! Little baby Robin, trying to be all tough and cool like Batman!”

Jason’s scowl returned. “And what’re you supposed to be? Animal Man’s forgotten sidekick?”

“Huh? Who the hell’s Animal Man? Lame name, bro. I am the bonafide Beast Boy! And that lovely chica is Raven,” he added, motioning towards the caped girl who showed infinitely less enthusiasm than he did. “Okay! Introductions aside, you’ve got to spill the beans, man! What was it like to...you know?”

Jason’s eyes narrowed and Beast Boy shuddered, taking a nervous step back.

“Whoa. Uhh, I mean, never mind,” Beast Boy said meekly.

Jason rolled his eyes and went back toward the elevator, already done with Dick’s stupid plan.

“Hey,” Jaime whispered to Beast Boy while Jason’s back was turned. “What was that about? You cowered like a scolded puppy!”

“Animal instinct,” Damian answered for Beast Boy. “Todd has been known to give off a sort of feral aura. And this idiot just went and stabbed at an old wound.”

Beast Boy turned into a green version of a golden retriever and whined. “Me and my big mouth. I can’t help it. That’s the second Robin. Can you blame me for feeling a little star-struck?”

“Second Robin?” Raven wondered, finally saying something.

“Sure. Grayson was the first Robin. All others are forgettable except for me,” Damian proclaimed.

“Dick, Jason, Tim, and then Damian,” Beast Boy blurted out.

“Why do you know that?” Raven asked, a dubious eyebrow raised.

“Cuz I’m an original Titan, girl! I was part of this team when Dick was leading it!”

The three of them all stared at Beast Boy in silence for a moment before asking in unison, “How old are you?”

Just then, the elevator door opened to reveal Starfire wearing nothing but a towel. She and Jason stared at each other, momentarily stunned by the other’s unexpected presence.

“Jason!” she all but tackled him and he spun her around in a very excited hug. “What are you doing here? I have not heard from you in such a long time! Please, you must tell me everything!”

Jason laughed and pressed his forehead to hers. “Dick didn’t say anything about you being a perk to this probation thing! Damn, this gig just got a whole lot better!”

“Gig? Probation? Jason, are you in some sort of trouble again? I was made to believe you were making the amends with Batman.”

“Still am, Kor, I swear. I’ve been following his rules...for the most part. I got a little mixed up in merc work with Roy, but that’s behind me now. I’m on the straight and narrow, whatever that means.”

Starfire smiled so brightly that the rest of the Titans all felt a little humbled.

“It is so good to see you again!”

And then the elevator door opened again with Dick and Victor both standing in it. Victor’s jaw may as well have hit the floor, while Dick had a much more verbal reaction.

“What the hell, Jason?”

Starfire let Jason go and adjusted her towel. “Dick! You did not tell me that Jason would be coming! I am very much underprepared!”

“Maybe a little underdressed?” Victor mumbled, making sure not to look directly at her.

“Jay!”

Jason put an arm up on Starfire’s shoulder and smiled coyly. “Oh, this is just too good to pass up.” He cocked his head to the side and Dick’s hands balled tightly into fists. “Does Kori not talk about me? Big surprise.”

“Jay, no one’s laughing. What the hell is going on here?”

Jason took his arm off Starfire as if letting an angry dog off the leash. “What exactly do you mean, Dick?” she said icily. “Jason is here. Am I not supposed to be happy to see my old friend?”

Jason smirked.

“N-no! That’s not what...you know him? What the hell?”

“Jason and I have what you call history. We were very close.”

Damian cleared his throat. “Star, I don’t think you know what you’re saying. It sounds like you and Todd had a sexual relationship. That’s what’s worrying Grayson.”

Starfire whipped her hair to the side and pursed her lips. “I am not misunderstanding. I do not understand why Dick is being so hostile.”

Jason stopped laughing in order to help clear the air. “Kori, much fun as this is for me, I think he’d be a little more comfortable if you were having this argument with something more than

a towel on.”

Starfire huffed. “Fine then.” She held an open hand out to Jason. “Your jacket.”

She didn’t have to tell him twice. He removed his Kevlar-line leather jacket and held it up for her to put on. She slid it on before taking the towel off. Damian and Jaime turned away out of habit while Raven covered Beast Boy’s eyes. She repurposed the towel as a skirt and left Jason’s jacket open, only barely covering her. “Satisfied, Dick?”

Dick’s eyes flicked between her and Jason. “I...I can’t even...I mean...”

“Mmm. Her looks have always had that wonderful effect on people. Wouldn’t you agree, Dick?” Jason really couldn’t help himself.

Dick groaned loudly. “Enough of this, already. Geez! Guys, meet Jason. He’s here as a mentor for you. You know what? No. Don’t take any lessons from this guy. He’s a bad influence. He’s here to help you guys out and prove that he can be cooperative. He’s on probation.”

“You’ve got to be joking,” Damian said.

“I can tell you now that he doesn’t seem very cooperative,” Jaime threw in for good measure.

“Since when have we been in the habit of turning people away?” Beast Boy interjected.
“Come on, guys.”

They all looked suddenly ashamed.

“Maybe someone with more experience wouldn’t be such a bad thing,” Raven suggested.

“He’s been warned enough times. If you guys find that he’s crossing the line, I want you to let me know. He’s here to learn from you.”

Jason threw his hands in the air mockingly. “Ooh, so scared. Like I couldn’t handle getting tattled on by a bunch of kids.” He went to the control panel and scrolled through their training simulations. “Man, do these ever get updated? Some of these fights happened before I was born.”

“How about you spar with me then?” Jaime offered. “I’ve already beaten one Robin today.”

“Sure. I’d be down to—”

“No. Jay, you know the rule.” Dick cut Jason off.

“No toys. I know. Load of bull that it may be. It’s not like Batman doesn’t have an entire arsenal in that stupid belt of his, but you shoot a few people in the head and suddenly it’s no more toys for you.”

Jaime leaned towards Damian a bit nervously. “Did he say shoot people in the head?”

“You blasted me in the face once,” Damian pointed out.

“By accident! And Raven fixed you up! Oh! So you mean like—”

“He means he’s killed people,” Raven said flatly. “Even Beast Boy can sense that much.”

“If anyone’s uncomfortable with Jason being here, I can put an end to this. I don’t know what I was hoping to accomplish at this point anyways.” Dick scratched his head and took account of all the distressed faces around the room.

“Nonsense! It is as Garfield said! Everyone is welcome here!”

Victor coughed. “We really should narrow our scope a little more after—”

“Is this place always so noisy?” A young woman with long blonde hair stepped out of the elevator looking disgruntled. “I sleep two floors up. How is it I can still hear you guys?” Her eyes landed on Starfire and her makeshift outfit. “Uhh, the hell kinda orgy am I interrupting?”

“Ah! You have not yet met our most recent member!” Starfire exclaimed, floating over to the girl and forcing her forward. “Dick, this is Speedy!”

Jason sputtered, choking on nothing.

“Oh yeah. Arrow’s new sidekick. How are you liking it here?” Dick said, trying to be friendly.

The girl glared at him through groggy eyes. “It’s noisy and it needs a shooting range. I don’t even get why Ollie signed me up for this stupid daycare thing.” She took notice of the doubled over Jason. “What’s his deal?”

Jason held a hand up and finished choking. “Nothing. Nothing. I just...I know the original Speedy.” He straightened up, still a hint of a smirk on his face. “Just made me do a double take.”

The girl didn’t seem amused. “You mean the loser even Ollie couldn’t help? Yeah, I didn’t get to pick the name.”

“Mia Dearden,” Jason suddenly said, giving the girl pause. “What, you think Roy didn’t have you looked up? He may not have been the best sidekick, but he’s still one helluva friend. Even to Oliver Queen.”

“You looked me up?”

“What’s wrong? Got something you don’t want them to know?”

“Okay! Wow, this was not my best idea!” Dick piped up, getting everyone’s attention. “Let’s all agree I’m the chump here, but I thought there was supposed to be a new recruit coming today?”

Starfire gasped. “Oh! We are late! We were to meet them on the roof!” She started to float only for Dick to catch her hand.

“Please, Kori. Do you really want to meet someone without any clothes on?”

Starfire scoffed, but went back toward the elevator. “I will change into something that is more comfortable. The rest of you are to report to the roof immediately.”

The moment she was gone Dick was glaring at Jason again.

“Oh, you still mad?”

Stipulations

Chapter Summary

Latest members introduced to the Teen Titans and the law is laid down for Jason as the stipulations to his probation are explained in painful detail.

Chapter Notes

'Sup! Welcome back! I'm going to do what I can to keep this at a less mature rating, but you can't stop me from creating opportunity to make things muuuuuch worse before painstakingly working to make them better.

And on an added less suggestive note: I have been finding that the League's imposed stipulations on Jason aren't overly well received with some readers so allow me to add in an extra warning here:

WARNING: STRONG ELEMENTS OF NON-CON BONDAGE AND AUTONOMY LOSS IN THIS CHAPTER!

To better elaborate: nothing sexual happens with regards to the loss of autonomy, but it can be very upsetting still as it is the sort of thing that Jason is unable to fight against. I do not intend to drop it from the story as it still has its uses in later chapters and backtracking too far will be counterproductive.

If you would like to circumvent the stipulation altogether, as soon as it's written, I'll let you know where you can jump to.

But yeah. Tags have been updated and will be updated as necessary.

PROCEED AT YOUR OWN RISK!

The roof of Titan Tower had a helicopter pad, but somehow Jason knew there was no helicopter coming. He didn't think working with the band of teenage supers was a great idea by any standards, but it was a very Grayson thing to try.

Soon the newly-resurrected Superman came floating down with what looked like a teenage punk version of himself. Shortly after, the rest of the main League members arrived, a few with mini-me's in tow. Jason's face betrayed a twinge of anger when Batman made an entrance as well.,

“It’s good to see you guys have been prospering. I must say, we still miss Cyborg, but he seems to have found a more suitable home here,” Superman said lightly.

“Enough idle prattle,” Damian said authoritatively. Jason wondered who he was showing off for. “If you’re all here it must be serious business. Bring forth the new recruits!”

Jason leaned over to Dick and mumbled, “Does this kid have an off switch?”

“Silence, Todd!”

“Sooo that’s a no?”

Bruce cleared his throat audibly. “There are two matters of business to attend to. First, here are the newest members to join the Teen Titans.” He gestured toward the half-size Super-Punk, a teenage Wonder Woman, and an African American kid in a silver variation of the Kid Flash suit. “Meet Conner Kent, Donna Troy, and Wally West. Otherwise known as Superboy, Wonder Girl, and Kid Flash.”

Jason cocked his head slightly and raised a hand. “Hang on. That’s not Wally.”

Everyone eyed Jason curiously. “What are you talking about?” Barry inquired.

Jason looked around, confused by everyone else’s confusion. “Am I crazy? I mean, we weren’t close, but Wally? Skinny ginger kid? Kid Flash for as long as Dickie-boy’s been around?” The continued silence made him uncomfortable. “Iris West’s nephew?”

The silver Kid Flash raised his hand and said, “Um, I’m not the only Wally in the family. But my cousin’s no speedster.”

Jason looked at Dick. “Seriously? What the fuck happened while I was dead?”

Batman sighed, uncharacteristically loudly.

“Um, Jason, know that this is for your own good,” Superman said sheepishly.

“What, helping out here? Look, I don’t know that this will be a good fit. I mean—”

Jason’s blood ran cold. He felt violated. Confused. J’onn drifted through him like a ghost and the intrusion was wildly uncomfortable, but rather than the sensation of losing something in the experience, he felt as if something had been left behind inside of him. The moment the Martian materialized in front of him, Jason shot him an animal-like glare that made the usually infallible alien flinch.

“Along with the other new recruits, Jason Todd—the second Robin and now...now the Red Hood—will be residing at Titan Tower under monitored probation,” Batman announced, his tone never wavering. “Upon his return to the mortal coil, Jason Todd has 84 confirmed kills.” Everyone seemed disgusted by that revelation except for Starfire, who looked about a bit curiously. “Due to the circumstances, he has been given another chance, but a single mistake will not be tolerated. In order to ensure that he follows the conditions laid out for him, the first six months of his probation will be spent under mandatory house arrest.”

Jason scoffed. “The fuck are you on about, old man? I didn’t agree to—”

“Heel.”

Jason’s body (not including his mouth), began to move entirely against his will. His feet stopped at shoulder length apart, he eased down to his knees, and his hands slowly moved behind his head; fingers interlocking with his thumbs settling just above the nape of his neck. Once he had settled into the position, he froze. “Wh-what is this?”

“Starro is an alien creature with the innate ability to control any form of sentient being,” Superman began. “He gave the League a lot of trouble a few years back, but has since been contained and studied. J’onn has placed an artificial piece of Starro at the very top of your brain stem. It will serve two purposes: to keep you in the confines of the Tower, and to subdue you if anyone feels it necessary.”

Jason would be livid, but in the vulnerable position that he’d been forced into, he was overwhelmed with a sickening sense of familiar fear. “Please...this isn’t necessary.”

“It’s for your own good,” Batman stated. “This way you won’t be able to hurt anyone.”

Superman continued his detailed explanation. “A barrier has been set up. If Jason leaves the outline of this barrier around the Tower, the implant will shut his body down effectively and immediately. The responsibility falls upon the rest of you to return him to the Tower so that he can wake up.”

Jason trembled, still trapped in the same position.

“Otherwise, should any of you feel threatened by Jason’s presence in any way, you need only speak the command word in his presence and he will assume this position and maintain it for three minutes.” Superman stopped talking and waited for the designated time to pass. Jason felt himself holding his breath in anticipation as well. He could feel his muscles relax the moment the three minutes ended. He let his hands fall into his lap and stared at them in shock.

“That seems a little harsh,” Victor mumbled.

“After six months, the implant will be adjusted to allow him to leave the Tower and assist the team on missions. In time, if he proves his loyalty, the implant may be removed,” Superman finished.

Jason finally looked up, eyes meeting Batman’s with hot tears of rage burning behind them. “You son of a bitch! This wasn’t part of the deal! You’ve got to be kidding me? Deal’s off! I’m out! I’ll get out of Gotham, out of your hair, you’ll never see or hear of me again!”

“Heel!”

Again, Jason’s body was no longer under his control. His mind screamed out, the desire to rebel against the motions was powerful. Painful. But his body wasn’t his own. Soon he was back on his knees, his eyes wide and staring at his knees. He wanted to hurl.

“That is the command word. Use it sparingly. Abuse of the command will not be tolerated.” Batman returned to the Bat-Wing without another word. Superman at least showed a little remorse, said one more goodbye to his younger counterpart, and flew off. The rest of the League slowly followed suit. As the three minutes ended, Black Canary of all people helped him to his feet.

“I will be checking in every Saturday. If you need someone to talk to any other time, contact me or Ollie and I will get here,” she said very seriously.

Jason pushed her away the moment he was fully on his feet. “Did you offer the same for Roy?” he spat. She didn’t flinch, but Oliver certainly did behind her. “Waylon Park is a better therapist than you. I’d rather take my chances without your pity.”

“This isn’t optional, Jason.”

“What, you going to keep my on my knees for every session then? I don’t think Queen will like his Songbird dominating another man without him around to keep track of the session.”

“Enough,” Oliver snapped. “He’s had a day, Dinah. You don’t have to take this.”

Black Canary still didn’t bat an eye. “Saturdays, Jason. Take care of yourself.”

The corner of Jason’s lip twitched in a mildly impressed grin. His hatred for Green Arrow notwithstanding, he really did respect Black Canary. But he was hurt. Betrayed yet again by the man he foolishly looked up to. Left at the mercy of teenagers. He was going to rebel. At least enough so that he could maintain some semblance of control.

The Titans all took the time to get to know each other while on the roof top. Show off a bit. Swap stories. Jason kept to himself, watching from afar, still reeling over the cards he’d been dealt.

After personally introducing himself to each of the new recruits, Dick slinked off to where Jason was, all signs of earlier aggression now melted away into a look of guilt.

“Jay—”

“Was this all your idea or was it just a happy coincidence?”

Dick couldn’t meet Jason’s gaze. “The Titans are a good way to get you reacquainted with the world. They’re good kids. And you lost a good part of your childhood. This is your chance to get a little of that back.”

“And the implant?”

“The League...they wouldn’t approve of you joining the team. They consider you a highly volatile threat. Clark’s the one who offered the implant as a means of containing the threat. He wants you to be reintegrated. This way you can be a part of the team and—”

“You just shoved me into a prison with a bunch of hormone-raging supers and gave THEM a handicap. Good job, Grayson. If I make it through this fucked up probationary imprisonment,

it'll be amazing if I don't double my kill-count just to let off some steam."

"It's for your own good, Jay."

"Go to hell."

Jason went inside, the rest of the Titans trickling in behind him. Beast Boy fluttered around Jason as a hummingbird before morphing back into his human self. "Time for the big tour! I'll be your guide! This floor is mostly just storage and the door to the rooftop..."

Beast Boy went through each floor, giving goofy anecdotes dating back to the time of Dick as Robin. The tower was well furnished and stocked with the latest technology and facilities. Apparently, the financial support behind the Justice League was also funding the Tower (Bruce Wayne finally got his home for wayward kids).

The training room was fitted with the same simulation system that the Batcave had (or at least, that's what Beast Boy thought, unaware that it hadn't been updated since before Jason had died) and enough weights and machines to stock a small gym. That would at least help Jason to blow off some steam. The floor below was a pool that was set up for laps but, according to Beast Boy, an awesome spot to party.

The next floor was the locker rooms and shower room. Jason was annoyed to learn that showers there were communal. He'd barely had the school experience growing up, but that wasn't the issue. There were some scars he wasn't about to share with a group of practical strangers. There were some scars he wasn't ready to share with the current Robin...

The next floor was the girls' rooms. Starfire and Donna held back to get the new girl situated in her room. The floor after was the boys'. Jaime took the new Wally to a room, Damian and Beast Boy took Conner to his room, and Dick and Vic showed Jason to his room. Raven and Mia went off on their own, bored with the tour that they didn't need.

Jason's room looked, to his dismay, disturbingly similar to how his room once looked at the Wayne manor: an unnecessarily lavish four-poster bed with deep red curtains; a desk and chair just by the window with a lamp for nighttime use; and a wall completely covered with vintage bookshelves, stocked with enough books to keep most people occupied for a lifetime.

"I thought you'd appreciate something familiar," Dick said.

"You do realize I've been crashing in hideouts with Roy for a while now? The fuck makes you think I want to relive my shitty childhood?"

"Hey, he's trying to make you feel comfortable," Victor said, getting between them. "Take it down a notch."

"Why don't you make me, Robo-cop? You know the damned word."

"You don't have to be like this," Dick pleaded. "No one wants to use that command."

"I'll bet you the little-shit's already itching to give it a shot," Jason refuted. "You and Bruce, you still cling to the thought that somewhere deep down I'm still that little kid who thought

having books and the time to read them was a privilege? I don't know if you forgot, but that kid died. I don't have the luxury."

Dick finally looked Jason in the eyes. He was done taking the verbal abuse. "I'm getting sick of you throwing your death in my face every time I see you. Wild guess says you and Roy had more subjects to talk about. If you think it's cruel, then yes. Reminding me, Bruce, Alfred...reminding us over and over again that we failed you...Every day that you were gone...Every night Bruce went on patrol without you...Every second we spent knowing how you suffered, how the Joker hurt you, then left you to die alone without hope of ever seeing the light of another day...It's been haunting us for years. We haven't forgotten that. Now that you're back, that doesn't make what happened okay. I'm not trying to bring back my Little Wing. I just don't know how to...I don't know..."

Jason threw a punch, dropping Dick like a sack of rocks.

"H-heel!" Victor shouted.

Jason's expression remained cold as he assumed the submissive position, his knees hitting the floor just above Dick's head. "Call me Little Wing again, you sack of shit. You and I? We're nothing. You're nothing more than the latest freak to get a kick out of watching me suffer."

Dick got up, covering what was certain to be a real shiner, and left the room. Victor sighed and mumbled, "Where do the other killers who encounter the Bat end up?"

Jason smirked. "Arkham's rotating doors are kinder than this. At least the inmates there, have personal agency. I mean, if this implant's so effective, why not use it on every sick fuck? What makes me so special?"

Victor scoffed and left Jason to wait out the rest of his time kneeling on his own.

First Impressions

Chapter Summary

Black Canary returns to Titan-Tower for her first meeting with Jason Todd since he received the implant. The team reveals their opinions of him, proving that this method may not be as effective as the League had hoped.

Chapter Notes

I swear, the mass chapter drop will end soon enough... I think...I've been a little stuck on one part of this story for a bit, but hey, now that I'm posting it on here, hopefully that'll give me the kick in the pants that I need to push past that rut and continue! Aaand if not, well, I've got a few side stories based around this scenario that I can always post up as well...

Anywho, I promise that eventually Jason will be less of a loner and finally ingratiate himself into the Teen Titans. Buuut this is not that chapter (sorry!). For now J-Bird is still his usual gruff, menacing self. Unfortunately for him, the Starro implant makes it difficult to be as bad as he could be...

Black Canary showed up a week after the Titans gained their newest members and was discouraged by what everyone had to say about Jason.

“Todd has been too much of a coward to face anyone,” Damian claimed while practicing his sword technique. “Not that I can blame him. If Father had created a means of forcing me to kneel, I’d be busy plotting ways to prevent it from ever affecting me.”

“Dude’s barely even seen in the kitchen,” Beast Boy claimed with his mouth half full and a game controller in his hands. “I mean, I saw him a couple of times and tried to offer him company or a bite of my vegan pizza, but he just kinda gives that threatening Batman look and does what he will.”

“I caught him wandering the halls after midnight once,” Jaime claimed while working on an essay for his online classes. “Scared the hell out of me. But I mean, he’s a Bat, right? Don’t those guys work better in the dark or something?”

“Jason and I haven’t exchanged two words since the day he got here,” Raven claimed when Canary interrupted her meditation. “But when I come here in the morning for early

meditation, I've found him already meditating by the window. He leaves when I go to join him."

"That asshole's at least not trying to pick any fights since he decked Nightwing last week," Victor claimed while sprucing up his car. "Don't think he likes me much, though. I think it might have to do with the fact that I'm the only one here who's used the command on him."

"Oh, the guy who thought I wasn't, uh, me? I honestly haven't thought much about him," Wally claimed while raiding the fridge. "Not that what he said doesn't still kind of bug me, but from what I've heard, he's got every right to be, y'know, scary."

"I've come across him a couple times when I fly back from patrol. He seems to hide on the rooftop often," Donna claimed while struggling to brush a particularly nasty knot out of her long hair. "I've tried to engage in friendly conversation, but his eyes don't seem to recognize my presence. It is a bit unnerving."

"Red Bat or whatever is such a creep. I've run into him a couple of times in the rec room. He shuts off whatever simulations he's working on the moment anyone comes in and clears out. Doesn't even hit the showers," Superboy claimed while doing flips on the uneven bars. "Yesterday he had the balls to get between me and that hot—erm...the girl arrow...Mia, right? I mean, we were just talking, and he got in the way."

"Dinah!" Mia greeted Black Canary with a friendly hug. "How's Connor? Can I tell you how fucked up it is that the Super-jerk shares a name with him?"

"Mia, language," Dinah said exasperated. "And Conner's not that bad. Well, at least he's not as bad as someone who shares genes with Lex Luthor could be."

"Yeah well, I'm really jealous of the other girls here. Being the only non-super girl puts me at a bit of a disadvantage when dealing with that prick. I mean, not that he doesn't still hit on Donna and Kori whenever she's around, but they can push him off. And as for Raven? She straight up put the fear of God or whatever her freaky father is in him and he's too scared to look at her. Which makes me the easiest target of his wandering eye."

Black Canary nodded. "Duly noted. I'll have a talk with him and Clark too just in case. Anyways, I've been asking around about Jason. It'd be remiss of me if I didn't ask you too."

Mia rolled her eyes. "Oh. Him. He's just delightful," she said with sarcasm dripping from her words.

"Care to elaborate?"

"I keep running into him. Day one he was kind of an ass, but after what they did to him, I really didn't blame him. So, whenever I run into him, I try to be civil...I mean, I'm not mean."

"Whenever, huh? And where have you run into him?"

Mia shrugged. "The rec room, the pool, the kitchen, the game room. Why?"

Black Canary was honestly curious. “According to everyone else, Jason has made minimal contact with anyone in the Tower. The most interaction I’ve been informed about was an encounter with you and Conner.”

Mia groaned. “Yeah. That.”

“Care to give me your side of the story?”

“I shudder to think what Conner’s side sounded like.”

“I’m all ears.”

Mia rocked back in her seat. “Yeah. Okay. Well Conner’s definitely the most aggressive with his advances in the rec room. I think people working out must do something for him...who knows. Well I was annoyed with how much Jason had been ignoring me, so when I saw that he was using the simulator, I decided to work on some of the machines at the far corner of the room. Aaaaand then Super-jerk showed up and, go figure, I wound up cornered. I kept trying to get him to leave me alone but he’s a super. Guy doesn’t know when to quit, so I lost my temper and, yeah, I tried to slap him.”

Black Canary raised an eyebrow and Mia stared out the window of her room.

“What? It would have hurt me more than him anyways, but at least it would have helped to get my message across.”

“Would have?”

Mia groaned again. “Yeah. Before I could connect, Jason had me by the wrist. He pulled me behind him and told Conner to leave me alone. Conner said something brackish and threatened to use the command on the jerk for poking his nose where it didn’t belong. Then Jason whispered something to Conner that I couldn’t quite make out, and Super-jerk flew off.”

This was a bit alarming. “Jason Todd is impressive, certainly, but he’s only human. How could he intimidate a super?”

Mia shrugged. “Beats me. But I didn’t need the assist...and he could have at least been nice about it. Instead he told me to stop egging that prick on and left just like that. Talk about an ass.”

Black Canary could see how the whole situation had left Mia feeling powerless and frustrated and made a mental note to get in some training with her before leaving. “Thanks, Mia. This has been insightful. Care for some sparring after lunch?”

“You’re on.”

And finally, it was time for Black Canary to meet with Jason. She found his room—the one at the end of the hall on the boys’ floor—and knocked on the door. When there was no answer she opened it cautiously. “Jason? It’s Dinah. It’s time for our session.”

“Whatever.”

She took that as an invitation and stepped into his room. Jason was lounging in the chair by the window with a worn out copy of the Art of War in his hands.

“Is the selection of books to your liking?” she asked, trying to ease into a conversation gently. “Bruce said you were quite the literature buff even as a boy.”

Jason scoffed. “You mean ‘when I was a boy,’” he corrected. “Which was a literal lifetime ago. Back then the thirst for knowledge was unquenchable. These days, it’s all the same. Every story meets the same ending.”

Black Canary pointed at the book in his hands. “And Sun Tzu?”

Jason marked his page and set the book on the desk. “Have you ever heard of the All Caste?”

“Aren’t they warriors?” Black Canary asked semi-innocently. She knew Oliver had run into them a long time ago, when he was all but a different man.

“Warriors, monks, keepers of the peace, assassins...Call them what you will. I was...close to them when I came back.” Jason eyed the cover of the book somewhat affectionately and Black Canary was reminded of Bruce’s little bookworm. “Master Ducra always found Sun Tzu’s work to be calming. I’ve read it a few too many times, but the repetition is oddly calming.”

“Do you have a reason to need calming?” She was reaching out. Trying to get a grasp of Jason’s current state of mind.

Jason’s eyes flicked up at her and she was astounded by the wild fury shining in them. It was like staring down an alpha wolf. Where had Bruce’s little boy gone so quickly?

“Given the circumstances, let’s just say the Art of War is becoming something of a mantra.”

The implications weren’t lost on her. She kept her eyes on him and nodded slowly, feeling more like she was the one being observed in this meeting. How had he turned that around so fast? “Total honesty; I’ve been asking around to see how everyone feels about you. I’ve got to say, ignoring everyone wasn’t exactly the plan here.”

“Yeah, well being a prisoner among teenagers was never my plan, so I guess we’ve reached a stalemate.”

Black Canary found that she needed to choose her words even more carefully than she did with most people she used her degree in psychology to assist. “Please be honest with me, Jason. Why does this probation bother you?”

Jason raised an eyebrow. “Honestly? I was Batman’s sidekick. I was irreplaceable. Sure, Dick-for-brains was the golden boy, but he and Bruce had had a fallout when I became Robin. So yeah, I got compared to the former Robin a lot, but I didn’t feel inadequate. I was the most important person to Batman. That was enough.

“And then I died. And then I came back. And then I found out that Batman not only replaced me, but never avenged my death, so I got mad. And since then I’ve been doing what I’ve found necessary to carry out my own brand of justice—which may not agree with him but is nonetheless effective—rather than earning even a speck of respect from him, I’m treated like I’m no better than the rabble...no, I’m treated even worse than the rabble that he keeps sending through the revolving doors of Arkham Asylum. So, what’s bothering me? More than you can even begin to unfold in a session, Lance. Believe me.”

“It’s Queen now.”

Jason closed his eyes and exhaled slowly. “Just another jarring change.”

“In the midst of chaos, there is also opportunity,” she offered. “Don’t let the changes overwhelm you. Wrest control. Prove that you are still the master of your own fate. Take a page from Sun Tzu.”

“Anger may in time change to gladness,” Jason began, standing up. Black Canary could all but feel his aura as he strode about his room, like a wolf pacing about its territory, “vexation may be succeeded by content.” He drew closer to her and she swallowed hard, bracing herself even though he hadn’t done anything wrong, “but a kingdom that has once been destroyed can never come again into being;” Jason stopped just behind her and drew close enough to whisper in her ear, “nor can the dead ever be brought back to life.”

“You are clearly an exception to this,” she noted, believing he’d recited the quote to undermine the teachings of the book and prevent whatever little knowledge she could pull from it to help relate to him.

“Wrong. That little Robin, the boy who used to look up to you and the League as the ideal, he died all those years ago. Forcing me to work with a bunch of idealistic sidekicks won’t bring that Robin back. Bruce of all people should know that.”

There was a ring of truth in his statement that made her uncomfortable. She wasn’t prepared for this shift in the power dynamic so immediately. She had met Jason shortly after Bruce had taken him in. That young boy was so full of spirit and potential. He looked up to Bruce with unabashed adoration. It was like watching a young service dog trying to learn from its peer. How awful to think that same pup was now this dangerous wolf.

“Would it really be so bad to treat this as an opportunity?” she suggested cautiously. “The Jason Todd who was Robin is gone. Why not cast aside the Jason Todd who was so hell-bent on revenge as well?”

Jason shrugged. “Metaphorical death is a little different from literal. You should try it sometime.”

The unveiled threat gave Black Canary a chill. “I’ll try not to.” She sat on the window sill to make sure that Jason couldn’t get behind her. “I know you’re not happy with the implant, but you won’t be any better off fighting it. Why not allow yourself to relax a little? The facilities available here are the finest that money can—” She bit her lip as Jason’s face twitched. “My point is, why not show that you’re capable of making this a good thing? Why not prove to

Bruce that this doesn't bother you? That you're better than the monster everyone's afraid you can be?" Jason paced slowly about the room and she cleared her throat, more inclined to prepare for a Canary cry than that command word.

"So, what did the others really have to say about me?" Jason asked, swinging around one of the posts on his bed. "I mean, I know the little shit isn't my biggest fan. Which one of those kids got you so on edge around me?"

Black Canary let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. "I guess I did say 'total honesty.'" She crossed her legs, trying to feign confidence as Jason continued to dominate their conversation. "Like I said, not a lot to say about you," fishing for an easy connection she threw in, "I mean, Damian had a few choice things to say, but nothing helpful."

"I don't mind the honesty, but do me a favor, Queen, and stop beating around the bush." Jason reached a hand in his pocket and Canary finally folded.

"Heel!"

Jason's mouth quirked into a smile and Black Canary felt ashamed as he moved fluidly to his knees, his eyes bearing into her. "What's wrong, Queenie? Feeling a little jumpy?"

Just like that, she'd completely lost the upper hand. Even with Jason unable to move against her, she showed her cards and now he knew that she was afraid of him. "Kid gloves are off, then." At least standing over him gave her a sense of control now. "I have to thank you for looking out for Mia," she began, measuring Jason's response. The dark grin didn't budge. "Of course, she's not your biggest fan, but she's always had a hard time trusting people."

"I know the type," Jason said lightly. Black Canary didn't like the connotation.

"Listen, kid. Mia's special to me, but I can't protect her from everything. So believe me when I say that I appreciate you steering Kon away. But—"

"But you want to know how I scared the super clone."

She stood up from her perch to make the difference in level more apparent. "Care to elaborate?"

"Kryptonians are weak to two things; Kryptonite and magic. I don't really like the thought of anyone having the upper hand on me, so I asked an old friend from the All Caste to even the odds a little for me. See the tattoo peeking out from under my left sleeve?"

She had noticed it, now that his hands were locked behind his head, but she didn't say a word, waiting for him to finish his explanation.

"Old trick. Blood of the Untitled slain by the Chosen mixed with ink made by the ashes from the sacred fire. It's not much, but it'll let me get in a punch that a Kryptonian will feel. I just gave Super-Punk a friendly little warning."

That seemed more than likely.

The three minutes ran out and Jason let his hands fall into his lap but didn't bother to get back up. "Okay. Good session, Queenie. I feel so much better about my situation."

"Shut up," Black Canary said with a roll of her eyes. "You're not a kid, Jason, and I'm not here to make you feel better. You've proven your own unwillingness to accept the situation. Fact is, you can either get with the program, or you can get used to the idea of Arkham." She didn't like being played.

Jason scoffed. "'The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.'"

Black Canary stopped just before closing the door to his room. "'Treat your men as you would your own beloved sons and they will follow you into the deepest valley,'" she threw back at him. "Bruce loves you, Jason. If you don't believe in anything else, at least believe that."

Bonding and Bondage

Chapter Summary

Jason takes Black Canary's advice to heart and decides that babysitting the team might be better than living out his days in Arkham--not that he thinks Arkham could hold him for long with its track record--so he decides to make an awkward attempt to get to know one of the Teen Titans.

Chapter Notes

WARNING! Underage drinking occurs in this chapter. I do not condone it, I do not suggest it, I certainly don't dismiss it, and for anyone who knows a little more about the character, I DO know that Beast Boy struggles with the habit in some recent comics. This is taken from that knowledge. Don't hate!

Anywho, J-Bird finally takes a step toward befriending the team! Or, at least, befriending a certain prankster on the team and encouraging the worst from him. Like Dick said: nobody should take any advice from Jason.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jason enjoyed taking control of his session with Canary, but she did give him an annoying point. If he couldn't even pretend to make this work, what was Bruce's next logical step? Not difficult to see Arkham as a logical outcome. At least he hadn't burned too many bridges yet. There was likely no hope for Damian anyways. Between the two of them there was an unhealthy amount of competitiveness. Didn't help that they'd both been trained by Bruce and the League of Assassins. In theory they had a lot in common. In practice?

Mercifully, not long after Black Canary left, the alarm sounded in the Tower and the whole team bailed out on some mission.

Missions were his favorite thing back when he was Robin. An opportunity to prove himself. Now? They meant the whole tower to himself. He started in the briefing room, using the computer to get as much information that he could on Starro.

Mind control.

Hero vs. hero.

Complete control.

Control.

Total control.

Jason groaned and went back up to the simulation room. He set it to old Batman simulations so that he could take out some frustration on a familiar face. Back at the cave Jason had learned the patterns of all of the programmed simulations back when he was Robin. There was no explaining how muscle memory followed him out of the Lazarus pit, but he'd been trying it out on the simulations since he got to the Tower. One week, at least ten simulations a day when he was able to, and not only was he able to beat the simulations, but he was able to mimic them to a T. He wasn't sure if he was proud or annoyed to know that Bruce still hadn't updated these programs.

Ten Batman fights won later, Jason's ego was well-stroked and he decided to hit the showers before the team was back. Even if he was going to try to ingratiate himself with the team, he didn't like having to deal with communal showers. High school wasn't really a thing that Jason dealt with much. He went to Gotham Academy briefly, sure. A couple years after Bruce had taken him in he realized that he could only offer so much through homeschooling. But it had barely been his first year when...

It wasn't a matter of self-consciousness for the sake of childish embarrassment. Hell, it might not even matter that he was so covered in scars. The rest of the team, however green, were all heroes to some extent. That didn't come without some violent encounters. Probably fewer bullets...maybe...but one scar was sure to set him apart and he wasn't willing to share it.

[Patient was a 14-year-old male with no known family history of health problems...]

Jason's shower was quick. He was back in his room when the team returned, reading over the Art of War again and again, trying to keep his mind grounded. One thought kept his head spinning. One singular desire that left him feeling hollow and on edge.

God, he needed a cigarette.

The shitty thing was; no resident of Titan Tower was going to help him with acquiring his bad-habit sticks. Vic may have been the only one old enough to even buy them aside from Kori and Dick, of course. But no doubt, Dick wasn't about to help with that particular craving, which meant Kori was forbidden to (which might actually make her more inclined to help him out, Jason noted), and Vic seemed a little too straight laced to bother about it.

Where was Roy when he needed him?

The craving kept Jason up until he finally decided he needed to get his mind off of it. The clock on his wall said that it was almost one AM. Chances were everyone was out like a light. He'd satisfy his craving with a different bad habit: late night snacking.

Upon reaching the kitchen, however, he found that he wasn't alone.

Beast Boy was sitting around the kitchen island, staring down at a glass of...

“Is that scotch?”

The green guy covered his glass with his whole torso—a futile effort to hide it since the bottle was still sitting next to him—and squeaked out, “O-of course not! H-how old do you think I am?”

Jason smirked and fetched a glass for himself. “I think you’re old enough to need a drink. Just didn’t think anyone in this place had the means.”

Beast Boy smiled wearily. “Y-yeah well...sometimes it’s needed.” He picked up the bottle and stared at Jason’s glass. “No ice?”

“It’s called ‘neat,’” Jason told him. “I’m not a scotch on the rocks kind of guy.” Beast Boy shrugged and poured him a too-full glass that Jason didn’t dare note. “Do me a favor and leave this out of your report to Canary next week,” Jason half-joked as he held his glass up.

Beast Boy’s cautious smile deepened just a little as he raised his glass to meet Jason’s. One soft clink and they were both taking a generous drink.

Jason set his glass down first, honestly surprised to see Beast Boy still drinking. “So, tell me, Green. What made tonight a scotch night?”

Beast Boy took one last hearty gulp and set his emptied glass down on the island. “Prostitution ring dealing in trafficked kids.” He poured himself another gracious glass and refilled what Jason had drank in his own. “We stopped it here. Got the kids out and everything. But that’s not going to fix what’s been done to them. Plus, they’re just going into the damned system. We saved them from one hell and left them in another.” He started downing his second glass angrily.

Jason, feeling all too understanding of Beast Boy’s rage, stared at his glass. “They’re better off,” he muttered, thinking back to when he had fallen through the cracks of the system himself. “They might not see it right away, but it’s an opportunity.” He felt stupid for repeating that damned word that Canary had thrown at him hours earlier. “Fuck.” He took another drink but couldn’t finish the whole glass if he tried. When he set his glass down he muttered, “Scotch isn’t really the kind of thing I’d throw back.”

Beast Boy scoffed. “Nah, but it’s effective. And I’ve got expensive taste...or I’ve got expendable income. Whatever you want to call it.”

“Rich man adopt you out of an alleyway?”

“Nope. Actor.”

“You got adopted by an actor?”

Beast Boy laughed a little more openly this time. “Dude, no. I am an actor. Think about it. I can play a person and an animal. Need a dog to do a crazy stunt? I’m your dude. I’m better than any CGI generated creature.”

Jason raised an eyebrow to show he was impressed. “That’s...pretty cool actually.”

“It gets me some perks, sure.” Beast Boy was already pouring himself another glass. The bottle was already half empty. “What’s got you up, uh, Red?”

The nickname was accepted in favor of maintaining the comfortable banter they had going on. “Insomnia usually. We Bats don’t tend to do well resting at night. Of course, being a prisoner here doesn’t really give me the exercise I usually need.”

“Well then why not get some of that energy out during the day with the rest of us?” Beast Boy suggested, his face an amusing shade of red in spite his green complexion. “I mean, damn! I was all excited to get another Robin on the team, even if just as a coach, but you’re more Batman-like than Dick and Damian combined with all your ‘work alone’ bull crap.”

It was a rare occurrence for Jason, of all Robins, to be considered most like Bruce. He wasn’t sure that he actually liked the sentiment. “What am I supposed to teach you? I’m more mercenary these days than hero.”

“Then teach me to shoot out someone’s kneecaps!” Beast Boy exclaimed a little too loudly. “That’s not gonna kill anybody!”

Jason could beg to differ, but he figured reasoning with the drunken hero wasn’t worth it. “Look, after talking with Canary today...I’m going to give this whole team thing a shot, alright?” He finished off his own glass after saying that, just trying to wash the idea down. “Tell you what. I’ll give you star treatment if you help me with my other vice.”

Beast Boy burped, the scotch apparently hitting him hard. “Hmm?”

“Lucky Strikes. If you buy me a few packs here and there, Green, I’ll make the rest of the team green with envy over how much favoritism I show you.”

Beast Boy pondered this for a minute. “You smoke?”

“Green, I grew up on the streets of Gotham and that’s not a metaphor. Just be happy smoking and drinking are all I do.” Killing could be argued as a different kind of fix that he indulged in, but then again, the same could be said about the adrenaline rush he got from any night patrolling. “I’d get them myself, but this Starro shit’s pretty limiting.”

Beast Boy stood up quickly, nearly knocking over the bottle. “Ooh! I have the best idea! Dick and Star are going to be in tomorrow! We can get them good!”

Jason poured himself another glass and smiled deviously. “Green, this could be the start of a beautiful partnership.”

Dick stepped out of the elevator and into the entertainment room only to sigh. Jason was on his knees, just off the edge of the couch, a glass of orange juice spilled on the coffee table in front of him. “What did you do?” Dick asked in exasperation. While the command was supposed to be handy, he had really hoped no one would feel the need to use it. He stepped around to face Jason, who’s eyes flicked up at him upon approach.

“What did I do? You gave Damian a damned off switch for me! I’m lucky the little shit hadn’t taken more advantage of this stupid implant before now!”

Dick was going to kill that little jerk. “How long have you been like this?” he asked, trying to time out the three minutes.

Jason smirked, an odd motion for someone trapped. “Long enough for my nose to itch like crazy. Help a brother out?”

Dick was annoyed with the mundane request, but crouched down to Jason’s level only to notice something wriggling around in his shirt. “What the hell?”

A little green chipmunk popped out with a strip of aluminum tape in its mouth. It hopped out at Dick, morphing into an octopus and latching onto his face. Dick scrambled backwards in shock, trying desperately to pull Beast Boy off his face, when Jason swept a leg out and knocked Dick onto his back. Beast Boy morphed into a lemur and hopped onto Jason’s shoulders, having secured the tape over Dick’s mouth, and Jason twisted Dick’s right arm behind his back, forcing him to roll over onto his stomach. Then, in one unforgiving motion, Jason sat down on Dick’s back, holding him in place and knocking the wind out of him.

Jason was high-fiving the lemur when Starfire walked in.

“Jason? What is going on?”

Dick mumbled nonsense through the tape and squirmed under Jason’s weight. No doubt he was seeking her help.

“Bonding time,” Jason said quickly. “Green and I were trying to show Dickie-boy how close we’ve gotten. We’re good enough to take him down, see?”

Dick groaned and looked at Starfire imploringly.

Starfire smiled so brightly it may as well have blinded the boys. “It is most glorious to see you finally spending the quality time with a Titan! Although, it looks oddly similar to the way that Dick and I bond in more intimate ways,” she added, getting a strained exclamation out of Dick, no doubt his way of trying to get her to stop talking.

Jason curled his lips in, trying not to laugh as Beast Boy’s eyes went big.

“Perhaps it would be prudent for us all to bond together in that intimate way? Will it strengthen the team?”

Dick was all but screaming through the tape.

“Kori, you’re torturing the poor guy,” Jason conceded, poking at Dick’s nose with a finger. “And you know better than to get a kid’s hopes up.” He barely tapped Beast Boy to show how the green lemur had become statuesque in his surprise.

Starfire giggled and helped Jason to his feet. Dick scrambled the moment he was freed and stood up, ripping the tape off his mouth with enough speed and force to make them all wince.

“What the hell, Jay!?”

“Calm down. No one but Vic that one time and Canary yesterday has even bothered with the command word. I haven’t broken any house rules (he was glad he and Beast Boy had the sense to hide all evidence of their drinking the night before). To be completely honest, pretending to be under the command was Green’s idea.”

Dick ground his teeth, no doubt wanting more than anything to say the word that would force Jason down, but he didn’t dare. “You’re...I can’t believe...ugh!”

Jason and Beast Boy snuck in a fist bump before Beast Boy leapt off Jason’s shoulders and morphed into his human self. “You should have seen the look on your face, Dick! Ha! Too good. Catch you later for some Assault and Battery Auto, Red?”

“I’ll show you how a real criminal racks up the points,” Jason replied, showing off as much as possible for Dick. “So, what brings my favorite two not-so-teen Titans?”

Dick still looked poised for a fight, so Starfire explained, “We did not join the team on the mission yesterday and received word from Victor that things did not go smooth like the butter made from peanuts. He was most worried about Garfield, but it would seem that Garfield is doing well.” She ran her fingers through her hair happily. “It is good to see you opening up, Jason.”

Dick’s eye roll was all the gratification Jason needed. “What are teammates for?”

“Based on what I have seen of you and Roy, I had assumed teams were a thing of poorly controlled chaos with regards to you,” she noted. “I suppose that has not changed.”

“Yippee for us,” Dick mumbled.

“Grayson!” Dick winced at the punctuated rage behind his name as Damian joined them. “How dare you not report to me the moment you arrived!” Damian’s eyes locked on Jason and his tantrum was brought on two-fold. “Is this uncouth ape of more importance to you than our agreement?”

Jason cocked his head slightly, a devious grin dancing onto his lips. “Tell me you’re his bitch, Dickie-Bird. Tell me that’s the case!”

“So help me, Jay, I’ll use the damned command just to shut you up,” Dick threatened.

“Doesn’t work that way,” Jason reminded him. “Get me on my knees and I’ll keep using my mouth.”

“Holy phrasing, Batman! Did you just proposition Nightwing?” Dick and Jason went stone stiff when Mia walked by, orange juice in one hand and plate of waffles in the other. “Always did wonder what was going on in that Batcave...”

Jason broke out laughing while Dick sputtered, unable to process what she had suggested. Mia, who had settled onto the couch, glanced back at Jason curiously. She swallowed a large

bite and pointed out, “Haven’t seen you around people before. Did Dinah scare some sense into you?”

Jason gave her a wink that made her shudder. “More like I scared some sense into her. And I must say, it’s not too bad a feeling, having a woman like that force you to your knees.”

A primal growl rippled low in Mia’s throat as she turned away from him and focused on her breakfast. Dick smacked Jason on the arm, earning a quick yelp. “The fuck?”

“You’re a damned menace,” Dick spat.

Damian, realizing he had all but been forgotten, punched both Dick and Jason in the gut. “This foolish behavior is unacceptable! Grayson! I expect you to acknowledge our agreement!”

“Yeah, Dick. The princess wants his present.” Jason earned himself another gut punch but took it laughing.

Dick sighed and motioned towards Starfire. She took a game case from seemingly nowhere—it’s not like she had any pockets—and held it out to Damian excitedly. “It looks like a most delightful game! Will we be joined by the others here to participate in it together?”

Jason eyeballed the cover as Damian snatched the game from her. “Oh no, this game will require a different location. Todd! Make yourself useful and summon everyone to the simulator!”

“A: I don’t take orders from toddlers. B: why in hell would anyone respond well to me anyways?”

“Did I ask for back-talk, Todd?” Jason felt the desire to murder a child, but if anything was going to get him on Bat’s bad side faster than a killer-rampage through Arkham would. “Consider it a challenge. Get everyone gathered and I’ll see you as at least a lesser human being and not the pile of useless trash that you are.”

Jason scoffed. He had to tell himself that he wasn’t doing this to raise Damian’s already annoying opinion of him, but a nagging voice in the back of his skull mocked him for conceding.

Of course, conceding didn’t mean being any less of the asshole that Damian and Dick expected of him. He made his way over to the elevator where the emergency button was. He offered everyone a devilish smile before pushing the button. The alarm blared and indicated where the button had been pressed. In a minute flat, the entirety of the Tower’s residents had gathered in a state of confused panic. Jason glanced briefly at the clock on the wall, wondering if he’d actually disturbed anyone’s slumber...it was almost noon...so he really hoped not.

With everyone gathered (and Kid Flash 2.0 looking particularly out of breath), Dick sighed loudly. Jason joined the group and cleared his throat loudly to get everyone’s attention.

“Damian got a new game and wanted all of his friends to play it with him,” Jason announced loudly, earning many looks of bewilderment.

“Tell me you’re joking.” Raven’s look of sheer irritation was directed at Damian, making the young Robin turn fifty shades of red.

“T-Todd...I’m going...to kill...you...” It was mouthed more than it was spoken, but it was a better reaction than Jason could have hoped for.

Dick was pinching the bridge of his nose and massaging the spots between his eyes as if that were enough to quiet the headache that was Jason’s very presence. “Disregard the emergency call,” he told them, exhaustion over the morning’s events still prominent in his voice.

“Damian...does have a video game that he thought would be a good challenge for Cyborg and a good means of team building.”

“Challenge? How so?” Victor wondered.

“It’s...it’s a VR game,” Damian offered, still embarrassed by the attention Jason had gotten him. “I thought...I thought that rather than use the correct equipment to view the game as a single person, perhaps you could adjust it so that the simulator could create a virtual experience via 3D simulation.”

Vic smirked and Damian’s murder eyes returned. “Don’t worry about it, Rob. I’ve got you covered. What’s the game?”

Chapter End Notes

Thus ends the quick posting for a bit. I need to work on the next couple of chapters a little more closely. Hope you enjoy!

Five Nights at Mama Mae's

Chapter Summary

Jason and the Titans test out a recently released beta for a VR game that Damian and Raven are huge fans of. With the help of Cyborg and the training room, they're able to take the VR to a whole new level for the entire team to enjoy.

An odd set of secrets is unveiled throughout their playthrough, leading them to something bigger than anyone was prepared for.

Chapter Notes

Heyo! Sooo, when I first started writing "Probation," go figure, it was around when FNAF VR was first released. I'm a horror nut, so even though I don't own the game, I had to keep up with the latest info in order to continue to enjoy the ridiculous franchise.

Well, this story itself shouldn't have turned towards my slash fics (as a little hint, there is a horror game or two I've crossed with the batboys which will be used in the near future). Silly me, I didn't finish it when the game first came out and now I'm fighting to catch up again. For all hardcore FNAF fans, I am sorry. It's not 100% accurate, I'm short one whole level (parts and repairs fans, I'm sorry, I only had so many people), and I've repurposed everything for my own benefit. Usually I'm more of a character and motives swapper, but in this case, I thought it'd be fun to throw something into the mix that felt a little more like the old Teen Titans cartoon. Kudos to everyone who gets the reference implied in the game's title.

Anywho, I hope this doesn't deter anyone. It's skippable if you want. The next chapter will have more action, I swear, as the FNAME (Five Nights at Mama Mae Eye's) arc ends. Thanks to all who have been patient with me. Hope you still find this enjoyable!

“Five nights at Mama Mae’s? This does NOT bode well.”

Beast Boy stood in the middle of the simulation while Vic set it up, calibrating it based on Beast Boy’s height (they checked and, with Jason, Vic, and Starfire being the outliers, Beast Boy was about the average height).

“BB, quit acting like you’re wearing a headset and just move naturally,” Vic instructed. “The environment’s crazy-well set up already. This is way ahead of most VR gaming. You said this is a popular game, Rob?”

“It’s still in the Beta stages,” Damian said, somewhat standoffishly, as if having it before full release were some big deal. “Grayson owed me a favor, so he waited in line for an early copy.”

Dick hid his face and whispered to Starfire, “It’s his reward for not bringing Alfred here.”

Jason, having overheard, raised an eyebrow.

“The cat. He named the cat Alfred.”

“Right. ‘Cuz that makes him seem less crazy,” Jason said with a dramatic eyeroll. He was trying to be sociable. Didn’t mean he had to drop his guard. “Why is it I picked today to be a nice guy? I’m starting to think I should have waited until, I don’t know, next month at least?”

“Quit playing lone bad boy, Red!” Beast Boy exclaimed as the game’s opening screen appeared for everyone to see. “Chill and have some fun with...with...” Beast Boy started leaning from side to side, eyes fixed on the middle animatronic, which vaguely resembled a giant bat-human hybrid. “Duuuude, this thing’s eyes are following me, and it is unsettling.”

Jason could feel the other residents’ eyes burning into him after Beast Boy’s statement, but he used the opportunity to appear more approachable. “I’m here, aren’t I, Green? Now come on. Show us how a real gamer handles a game like this.”

Beast Boy punched the air a few times before tapping the “START” button.

{Welcome to Mama Mae’s VR experience!} The voice on the speakers made everyone tense. It was simultaneously shrill and soothing, like the big bad wolf had just swallowed a whole gallon of honey in order to sound like a granny goat (Jason was pretty sure he’d mixed up his fairy tales—which he’d look up to correct himself later—but the point was still there...). This voice was predatory and barely masked. But it was just a video game...right?

{There have been many unseemly rumors surrounding Mama Mae’s business over the years. Questions about what the mystery meat is in Mama’s Mystery Meat Pizza Pies, safety warnings being ignored in play structures, corners being cut with animatronics...not to mention all of those pesky little lawsuits and incidents that have more or less been embellished with all sorts of lies by the media. Well, in good-natured self-deprecating humor, Mama has worked with some developers to bring you this thrill-full VR experience!}

The entire room went dark, making the Titans jump.

“S-sorry! I can make the virtual environment, but to complete the atmosphere, I’m going to work the lights in here too. And, well, heads up. This game relies a lot on sounds from multiple directions, so I’m linking it into the speakers too,” Victor explained.

“This is awesome.” The slight accent to Jason’s left. Must have belonged to Blue Beetle... Jaime, if he remembered right. “Full gaming experience! We should ditch the entertainment system and do this with all of our games!”

“I’m all for that, but that’s not exactly easy. I think I can manage this with VR games, but it might be a little much with stuff not already formatted for a three dimensional and interactive environment.” Victor. His voice was easy. Plus: the red dot that was his cybernetic eye would move just a bit more whenever he spoke.

“So uh, what kind of game is this anyways?” Uncertainty and a tentative tone. Still unsure of his place. Jason hadn’t seen him much, but this had to be the other Wally. “I’m good with some shooters, but this doesn’t look anything like a shooter.”

“Horror.”

“Eep!”

Jason wasn’t sure who had yelped, but he knew that monotonous voice well enough.

“It’s a horror simulation game,” Raven went on. Jason hoped he wasn’t the only one surprised by her knowledge of a video game. She seemed more like the sheltered, no-tech-type. “The latest installment in a series with an oddly fanatic cult following.”

“But the game appeared as such an adorable thing complete with the many collectible animals of the stuffed nature!” Kori was at least easy to pick out. Hell, even in the dark there was a soft glow about her. “I picked out some of the bat for Dick and Jason! There was a blue one and a red one! Ooh, where did I put them?”

“Let’s wait until the lights are on, Kor,” Dick suggested when the sound of something metal hitting the floor happened near Kori.

The scenery around Beast Boy changed so that he was standing in front of a work desk with a touch pad control panel, a couple buttons, a particularly old fashioned-looking flip switch attached to a wooden box, and a curtain hanging up behind it all. “Duuude.” Beast Boy’s first instinct was to flip the switch. There was a disappointing clunk sound and some sparks emitted from the box, but nothing happened. “Well that’s a let-down.” He flipped it back and continued to look around the desk. He ventured to pick up a stuffed animal sitting by the touch screen and whistled when he was able to hold it and manipulate it as if it were actually there.

“BB, there’s a whole area behind you,” Jaime pointed out.

“You can join him in the scenario,” Victor noted. “I had to tweak a couple things to make the environment a little more realistic, so in theory you should both be able to exist in the same area.”

“Awesome!” Jaime and Wally both joined in. Wally leaned over Beast Boy’s shoulder, checking out the options while Jaime went to the opposite side of the environment where a sort of prize counter stood with countless toys and snacks available in exchange for coins.

“Looks like there’re different scenarios available,” Wally pointed out, tapping the screen along with Beast Boy. “Six in all. Soo, two of us to a scenario?”

“Works for me! I’ll do the first scenario! Something called ‘Old Restaurant.’ Looks like there’s five levels. Who’s in?”

“Hey, I’m already here. It’s you and me, Beast Boy,” Wally exclaimed, bracing himself for whatever was coming.

Jaime stepped off to the side and Beast Boy selected the first level. The setting around them changed so that he and Wally were at a desk with an old spinning fan, junk and trash scattered about everywhere, a monitor with a touch screen connected to it, and buttons to either side of them showing “door” and “light.”

“Uhh, Damian? Care to fill us in on the goal here?” Wally called out, tapping a couple of the squares scattered about on the touch screen. Each one he tapped brought up security camera footage in different parts of what looked like a closed restaurant.

“The phone’s going to ring,” Damian claimed. Seconds later the old phone rang loud enough to make Beast Boy yelp. “Answer it. It’ll give you the basics.”

Beast Boy picked up the phone and quickly set it to speaker for everybody’s benefit.

{Hello, hello?} The voice belonged to a man, though it sounded almost too animated, which Jason supposed was expected of a videogame. {Uh, I wanted to record a message to help you get settled in on your first night. Um, I actually worked in that office before you. I’m finishing up my last week now, as a matter of fact. So, I know it can be a bit overwhelming, but I’m here to tell you there’s nothing to worry about.}

“Uhh, weren’t there three guys in that room?” Beast Boy brought up as Wally continued to cycle through security feeds. He swapped back to the stage where the blue bat, and green parrot animatronic were staring directly at the camera in the room. “Yeah, I definitely remember a cat…”

{Uh, let’s see, first there’s an introductory greeting from the company that I’m supposed to read. Uh, it’s kind of a legal thing, you know. Um, ‘Welcome to Mama Mae’s Pizza Pies, a magical place for kids and grown-ups alike, where fantasy and fun come to life. Mama Mae’s Entertainment is not responsible for damage to property or person. Upon discovering that damage or death has occurred, a missing person report will be filed within 90 days, or as soon as property and premises have been thoroughly cleaned and bleached, and the carpets have been replaced.’}

“Cuz that’s super reassuring,” Wally mumbled just before finding the blue cat animatronic on a different security feed. “Whoa. These things are moving? Why are these things moving? What are they doing?”

{Uh, the animatronic characters here do get a bit quirky at night, but do I blame them? No. If I were forced to sing those same stupid songs for twenty years and I never got a bath? I’d probably be a bit irritable at night too. So, remember, these characters hold a special place in the hearts of children and we need to show them a little respect, right? Okay. So, just be aware, the characters do tend to wander a bit. Uh, they’re left in some kind of free roaming mode at night. Uh…something about their servos locking up if they get turned off for too

long. Uh, they used to be allowed to walk around during the day too, but then there as The Bite of '93. Yeah. It's amazing that the human body can live without the frontal lobe, you know?}

"They're violent? The freaky animal-robots are violent? Perfect!" Wally snapped, suddenly.

"Dude, it's VR. Nothing's going to actually—" Beast Boy looked over his shoulder to the left and tapped the button labeled "LIGHT," only to be face to face with a large black cat animatronic which seemed to be staring him down.

"OHHOLYNOPENOTTODAYSATAN!" Beast Boy punched the "DOOR" button a little too hard and a door dropped down, sealing the hellish animatronic outside. Heart racing, he stumbled back and bumped into Wally. "You all saw that, right?"

Damian was laughing hysterically from the sidelines. "If I had known how good this was going to be, I'd have tried the older editions of this game on you guys!"

"Dude, the bird's gone too!" Wally pointed out as he continued to frantically flip between the security feeds. "And...wait, is that gauge important?"

"If you use too many things that waste electricity—such as the security cameras, lights, and doors—you will drain the generator's power," Raven began to explain. "When that gauge hits zero, usage of all such things will become impossible."

"B-b-but the robots will shut down too, right?" Beast Boy hoped.

"Why would they?" Raven said without a hint of concern. "They're not connected to the generator."

The duo whimpered as Wally did one last visual sweep before shutting the screen off. Beast Boy tapped the light switch on and off at the door he'd left shut and, upon confirming that nothing was waiting for them on the other side, he raised the door and poked his head into the dimly lit hallway. "I sufficiently hate this."

"So how can they tell if something's coming if checking things is dangerous?" Strong, feminine voice. Reminded Jason of Diana, so he figured it was safe to assume it was Donna speaking.

"Use their resources sparingly," was all that Raven had to offer.

Damian had caught his breath long enough to add, "Would now be a bad time to mention that there are four animatronics?"

"Four?" Wally flipped the screen back on and was using super speed to check things only to land on the feed labeled 'Pirate's Cove' in time to see a creepy looking hyena animatronic stepping off of the one-man stage. "Ohhh hell no."

"Just make sure that it stays at the cove," Raven instructed. "If it's left, it's coming for you."

Beast Boy whimpered and rapidly flickered the lights on either side of them. Before anything else could happen, a clock bell sounded and their surroundings faded to a chorus of cheering children. Beast Boy morphed into a sloth and sprawled out on his back to show his relief. “That...was horrifying...”

“Look, we won a prize,” Wally pointed out. Sitting where the screen had been was a jack in the box on a lone stool.

Beast Boy was human again and cowering behind Wally. “It’s a trap! Or, or, some kinda bomb!”

Wally took the handle and slowly turned it, the usual ‘Pop Goes the Weasel’ tune playing until the top popped open (drawing a squeak out of Beast Boy) and a plush version of the cat animatronic popped out.

“Be careful, Gar. I think it bites,” Wally teased, taking the plush and waving it around in Beast Boy’s face. After a bit of them messing around, their surrounding switched back to the stage selection area and the prize counter. “Well, I think we’ve earned a break. Who’s next?”

“I would be liking to try the game!” Kori exclaimed, floating into the scenario. “Dick, would you be doing me the honors?”

Jason smirked. For a guy who lived by the law of the Batman, Dick wasn’t exactly known for being of strong constitution when it came to all things of the horror genre. Still, he’d never show weakness in front of his girl.

“Tap out, BB. Guess it’s our turn,” Dick said as he stepped into the scenario. Wally and Beast Boy made their way back over to the darkness and Dick went right to the prize counter. “Looks like you guys earned a few coins by winning that last round,” he commented. He scrolled through the prize options and selected a basketball. An odd crane of sorts dropped down from above and opened up to reveal his prize. He picked up the ball and dribbled it a few times. “How do you manage to give things textures, Vic?”

“Hyper-realism,” Victor began. “This game is well set up. So well that it only takes some minor adjustments to basically trick your brains into perceiving things as real. You’re not really holding a basketball, but because of how realistic the ball appears and responds to your movements, your brain fills in the gaps.”

“Couldn’t that be dangerous?” Wally wondered. “I mean, if those animatronic things are programmed to attack and we can’t tell the difference between virtual and actual reality—”

“It’s all in your head. See; Dick, try to clap your hands while holding the ball.”

Dick did just that and his hands fell right through the ball, meeting each other to clap while the ball showed a digital glimmer to it. “Weird.” He moved his hands out so that he was holding the ball again and tossed it high, knocking something off the prize wall. It landed with a clatter behind the counter. “Oops.” Having apparently chosen to ignore Victor’s explanation, Dick moved as if to lay on his stomach over the counter to see what had fallen only to belly flop onto the floor, his body going through the counter.

Jason, Damian, and Beast Boy's laughter rocked through the training room.

Dick's feet kicked up as he located the item he'd knocked over. "What's this?" He got back to his feet, awkwardly walked through the counter, and over to Starfire. "Is there a cassette player over here?"

"I do not believe I am familiar with such a thing." She scrolled through the available levels, poked around at the junk on the table, and then flipped the switch connected to the wooden box.

This time the box gave off a spark and the whole room went dark. "Vic? What's happening?"

No response.

"Vic?"

The scenario returned, this time bathed in black light with colors that were off-kilter and too bright. There was also faint, off-key music playing over the speakers, as if it was moving about the room. "What the heck?"

"S-sorry. Lot of adjustments were made there," Victor eventually said. "Looks like this is an unfinished bonus area. According to the game files, it's been set up but hasn't been authorized for gameplay yet. Must have been a glitch that let us get in."

"Awesome!" Damian shouted. "I'll bet no one else gets this side of the Beta."

"Yeah, well, most people don't get this level of VR experience either, Pip Squeak," Jason pointed out.

"Oh, there is a button that I do not recall having." Starfire pressed the button without hesitation and suddenly the environment changed to a small closed off room with a tape player. "This is part of the scariness, no?"

"No, this is just what I was looking for. Hang on." Dick put the tape in the player and pressed play.

{Hello? Can you hear me? Don't exit this room, okay? This isn't a mistake. This room isn't a mistake. I had to hide these logs away from the core gameplay files, in a place that only a beta tester would look and in a place where the files could be protected. I just really, really hope that the next development team finds this before the game is released to the public.

{This game has some kind of malicious code in it that we haven't been able to fully contain or even understand for that matter. We're over budget and out of time. But that's not the reason that we're shutting down. Listen, I have to keep this short so the file size will be small enough to fly under the radar. There are more. You have to find them.}

Jason whistled.

"This game's kind of meta," Jaime noted.

“Vic, you sure there’s nothing weird going on?” Dick asked.

No response.

“Vic?”

Starfire hit the button again and they were back in the unnervingly colorful area.

“Victor?”

“Yeah?”

“You okay?”

“Hm? I’m fine, why?”

Before Dick could explain, Starfire flipped the switch again and their surroundings returned to the dimly lit version that they’d gotten used to. “I do not understand why a place intended for consumption of food would become something so mysterious. Let us proceed! I wish to partake in the horror!”

Dick sighed and tapped the selection screen so that it showed the second option of challenges, which showed a picture of a more open area for the first night. He selected it and their surroundings changed to a very open office of sorts that looked out into a checkered hallway. Dick and Starfire were both behind a desk with a phone, a monitor, a flashlight, and a bat and cat mask sitting on both sides.

“I do not understand. What are we to do with these things?”

“I’ll tell you now, if you don’t keep the music box wound up, you’re not going to make it through the night,” Damian hollered.

“Music box?” Dick scrolled through the different security camera feeds on the monitor and noticed that, upon switching to the prize corner, there was an additional button that read ‘music box,’ and with each passing second the gauge slowly drained. He tapped it and not much happened, so he held his finger to it and the gauge rose, as if he were winding it up.

“Okay, so what happens if we forget about it?”

“Do you really want to know?”

Dick shuddered. “No, not particularly.”

The phone started to ring and Starfire went to answer it only for Dick to snatch it off the receiver and slam it back down. “I don’t want to be told we’re in another death trap!” Dick piped.

“I thought this was only a game?” Starfire wondered.

Damian proceeded to tell them the mechanics as quickly as he was able with the game already going and no pause option available that they were aware of. Dick was not pleased to know that, while Beast Boy and Wally had dealt with only four animatronics, they were

dealing with over a dozen. The only relief was that the same mechanic handled the majority of them; throwing on the animal masks to trick them into believing they were also animatronics. The rest were taken care of with either the flash light or the music box. There was still a gauge for power to worry about, but it didn't drain nearly as much as it did for Beast Boy and Wally.

Starfire did minimal work and seemed rather annoyed with Dick's franticness as he scrambled all over the desk, doing everything he could to keep the animatronics at bay. When the bell tolled, 5:00 AM showed in the middle of the room as it went dark, and children cheered. Dick dropped to the floor in relief and Starfire crossed her arms and huffed. "I fail to see how that was supposed to incite fear."

"Looks like Dickwad's all out of fear to offer," Jason joked.

"Ha ha." Dick got back to his feet just as Starfire started to turn the crank for their jack-in-the-box prize. As it popped open, Dick hit the deck again like a grenade had been thrown at him.

"Ah! This is exactly the stuffed toy that I got for you!" She proceeded to show Dick the ridiculously plush version of the blue bat animatronic. "See? It made me think of you, just as the red one made me think of Jason."

Dick groaned as their surroundings returned to the main area. "How many more levels are there?"

"Is it not obvious based on the title?" Confident woman's voice. Likely the wannabe Wonder Woman. "Five nights means five levels, I would think."

"And here Father thinks you're the next great detective," Damian remarked. "Now, is it my turn to show off?" He stepped up and Dick let out a sigh of relief.

One skilled motion had Dick rolling backwards off of the floor and back onto his feet, excited to exit the scenario and let Damian take over. Upon standing up he turned around and yelped, throwing himself backward and onto the floor again. Right where he'd recovered stood a barely visible animatronic cat with large yellow eyes.

"Well that is the unusual," Starfire noted, approaching the see-through animatronic curiously. "Cyborg, can you explain what this is doing outside of the challenges?"

"Uhh. It's a little weird, but I'm not picking up anything being there," Victor admitted. "I mean, I see it, I'm obviously projecting it, but as far as data goes, it shouldn't exist."

Damian stepped over Dick, making him yelp yet again, and examined the animatronic closely. "It's not responsive. Must be some glitch in the data. We are beta-testing the game, after all. Such issues are not unheard of. Now, who would like to partake in the third challenge with me?"

Jaime stepped into the scenario. "Can't let you show me up. After all, I'm the Street Kombat King."

Starfire all but dragged Dick off to the sidelines so that the boys could take over.

Damian wasted no time setting up their round, picking the third set of challenges and starting the scenario. They were placed in a control room of sorts directly next to an opened air vent on the floor. Damian proceeded to work the control panel like a pro, checking halls, swapping opened sections of the air vents, and updating systems as they went down. There was little for Jaime to do but keep a lookout for any animatronics that never came. The night ended without incident and they were taken to their jack-in-the-box.

“Well that was stupid.”

“I...I forgot that the third game started with nothing,” Damian admitted. “Worry not, Reyes. If I am correct, we may have a true challenge ahead of us.”

Jaime scoffed. “We’d better. But while keeping watch, I did find this.” He held up a video cassette and Damian smiled.

“Intriguing. Let us claim our prize and see what this tape has to offer.” He cranked the box and a bag of chips popped out. He picked it up and waved it around curiously. “What are we to do with these?” He held the bag close to his face and it suddenly disappeared with a comical crunching sound. “Childish.”

“Says the guy playing a game about killer kiddie restaurants,” Jason brought up. “Go check out the tape already.”

The setting moved back to the main area and Jaime flipped the switch, swapping it to the hyper-colored version.

“Before you check the tape!” Jason said quickly. “Robo-Cop, you still listening?”

No response.

“Vic? What’s up, dude?” Beast Boy tried.

Nothing.

“Safe to assume something about this place is messing with his mainframe,” Dick offered as if he hadn’t been cowering behind Starfire since their turn ended. “Try not to spend too much time in the glitch zone.”

Damian just rolled his eyes and proceeded to the office space with the tape player. “Hurry up then, Reyes. Let’s hear the secret.”

Jaime did just that and everyone listened intently.

{I saw it for the first time today. There was a character, I couldn’t make out who it was, standing at the end of the hall. I thought it was just bugged out, so I made a note of it and kept playing. But then it was looking in the window. And not like Tweety or Kitty would. It was like it was actually looking in the window, seeing what I was doing.}

“Sounds like it’s talking about the mystery animatronic,” Jaime noted. But this room and the animatronic aren’t things that Vic has been able to figure out. Maybe we should shut this down? Don’t want to mess with his circuits or something.”

“He is fine,” Damian decided for him. “Besides, if something truly is wrong, he keeps everything backed up on a daily basis. We can just reboot him.”

“He’s a person, Damian,” Dick reminded him from the darkness. “Not a computer.”

“He’s a bit of both,” Damian corrected. “Now. Who is next?” He flipped the switch and, just in case, Dick checked in with Vic.

“You good, Cy?”

“Hm? Yeah. Why do you keep asking?”

Conner floated into the scenario, claiming his place in the next round. “Soo, ladies, anybody want to throw their hand in with a real man?”

An audible groan could be heard, which Jason equated to the otherwise silently observing Mia.

“Actually, Conner, this next round won’t work well with two players, so given that I’m busy running the game, it would make sense to make this level the solo-player round so that we keep even numbers for the rest,” Victor explained.

“What? That’s stupid! Then I don’t want to—”

“Too late.” Jaime ran into the darkness and Damian hurried after him.

“Uncool.”

“Show us your strength, Superboy,” Donna suggested. “Perhaps you will impress us.”

Taking whatever flattery he could, Conner ran a hand through his slicked back hair and scoffed. “Whatever. I’ll show you kids how a real man does things.” He chose the fourth scenario and loaded it up.

He found himself with a flashlight in pitch darkness. He clicked it on and looked around to get a better idea of his surroundings. He was in a short hallway with two doors on either side of the walls. At the end of the hall, sitting on an old wooden chair, was a raggedy green version of the animatronic cat sitting limply on it. Just about a foot in front of Conner was a prominent red X painted on the floor.

“Okay...This is different.”

“Get the plush on the X,” Victor explained. “That seems to be the whole goal.”

Conner scoffed. “Seems easy enough.” He floated down the hall, fully intending to grab the plush and move it manually, but upon reaching the middle of the hall the flashlight suddenly went out. “Huh? What gives? My X-Ray vision isn’t helping!”

“That’s because you’re trying to X-Ray a hologram,” Damian pointed out. “There’s nothing to see through. It’s just light.”

“But there is no light!” Conner tried shaking the flashlight a bit before clicking it back on. It illuminated the chair, but the plush was gone. “O...kay?”

The sound of a door slamming behind him made Conner jump and spin around, searching the hall for any signs of the plush cat. He found the X on the floor and cautiously turned the light back off. Everyone sat in dark silence for a while before the sound of quick footsteps alerted Conner and he clicked the light on once again just in time to see something streak across the hall into a closer room.

“Wait, how am I supposed to know where he is?”

“You don’t,” Raven stated flatly.

Conner kept the light on, too nervous to turn it off again, but there was no more motion nor indication of the target toy’s presence.

“What am I supposed to do? I hate this! Ugh!”

“It won’t move if you’re looking,” Damian confirmed, shifting where he stood as if he were anxious in place of Conner.

Conner took a deep breath and shut off the flashlight. There was shuffling in the darkness, but he kept the light off until he felt that it was getting too close. When he clicked it back on again there was nothing to see, but a much louder giggle could be heard.

“Whoever made this game is a total sadist,” Conner muttered as he clicked the light off again.

“Of course. And that makes us a bunch of stupid masochists,” Beast Boy added.

“That’s not reassurance—”

Before Conner could finish his thought, the cat was on top of him, screaming like a twisted, mechanical child. Conner shouted in response and fell backwards. Jason couldn’t quite pin down who all had screamed along with Conner in the darkness, but Damian’s distinct laughter was easy enough to catch, and for once, Jason nearly joined in.

The darkness was lit only with the two words “GAME OVER” before “retry” and “quit” appeared as options.

“Wow...What?” Conner was still in shock.

“Perhaps this is the suggestion for the trying again?” Starfire wondered. “I mean, the small cat seems to have defeated you.”

“Yeah, I got that. That was stupid! I demand another chance!”

“Not like your round took all that long,” Wally pointed out. “I say go for it.”

Conner dusted himself off and put his hand over the floating “retry” button only to return to the scenario with a flashlight again. This time around he turned off the light and kept it off for a much longer time. Jason smiled to himself, imagining just how fast the Super’s heart had to have been beating for his breathing to be as loud as it was.

When the tension became too much, Conner clicked on the flashlight and yelped upon finding the plush toy seated directly in front of him on the large marked X. The children cheering sound played and he was taken to the victory area with another jack-in-the-box reward.

“That was it? That was so short!” Dick squeaked. “Our level took so much longer! That’s not fair!”

“Shut up, Dickwad. You would have been crying if you had to do that,” Jason pointed out.

Dick scoffed. “Okay. Well if you’re so brave, why don’t you take your turn?” he suggested. “Mr. Braveheart over here should prove himself!”

“It’s just a stupid game,” Jason stepped into the scenario as it went back to the prize corner and selection area. “Nothing can actually hurt you.”

Mia stepped in as well. “I’m getting antsy just standing around watching. Let me take a crack at it.”

“What, don’t think I can handle it on my own?”

“Oh, grow up, Boy-Blunder. Maybe I’m just stepping in to show you up. Ever consider that?”

Jason was about to mock her again when he noticed the odd yellow-eyed cat animatronic was a bit closer than before. “What the hell is up with that thing?”

“Sorry guys. It’s still a huge question mark to me,” Vic admitted. “But I’m searching chat sites to see if anyone else is experiencing this glitch. See if I can’t figure something out.”

Mia shuddered. “It feels like its eyes are following me.”

Jason went over to the level select screen and moved past the round Conner had tried and loaded up the first night. The area changed so that Jason and Mia were crammed close together in a cramped elevator duct.

“What the hell?” they said together. They couldn’t even see beyond the claustrophobic space they’d been compacted into.

“Cy, we can’t even see them!” Beast Boy’s voice rang out in the distance.

“I can’t help it. It’s just the way this level’s set up. It’s vent repair, so they’re in the lift in the vent. You guys okay?”

Mia accidentally elbowed Jason as she tried to adjust. They both groaned but shouted their approval.

“We’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, well, this isn’t something I remember from the old games,” Damian called out. “So you guys are on your own.”

“Wouldn’t need your help anyways,” Jason mumbled as the lift door opened on his side to reveal a dark air vent with a red light glowing in the distance and four buttons right in front of him. “Okay, so what’s the deal here?” He pushed a button and a loud buzzer sounded, making the lift shake. “Okay, that’s wrong.”

“Here.” Mia had a flashlight on hand. She clicked it on and pointed it into the vent. Their breath caught when a snake-like broken animatronic with the head of a cartoonish hyena stared back at them.

“What’s happening? Is there an animatronic?” Jaime asked.

Jason exhaled and focused on the lit up red light in the distance. He could see a mess of wires, but one in particular was connected to the light in question. He followed it with his eyes until recognizing that it was connected to the button in front of him that was second from the left, and pressed it. The light turned green and another one turned on. “It’s all good. Our round is more puzzle based.”

“Probably a good thing we took it. Bet most of you guys would still be waiting for that phone-guy’s instructions by now,” Mia said confidently, making Jason’s mouth kink up into a half smile.

Not that he’d ever admit it, but he’d taken a liking to Mia. She was the only one who he felt might be able to sympathize with him. Talking to her about it would be pointless as all the information he’d gotten was through illegal methods anyways (he’d already given Roy shit for looking into his replacement, but it wasn’t like he could judge after how much research he’d done on Tim...), but he could still quietly admire her strength. Of course, her courage when faced with a challenging VR game was only a tiny show of her true strength.

“Keep following the wires,” Mia told him, having already caught on to what he’d done. He nodded and, without a word, followed the wire from the next light to the corresponding button.

And again.

By process of elimination, the only button remaining went to the last light, so he pressed it and the door closed. The walls surrounding them slid upwards, creating the illusion of descension. When they stopped, the door to Jason’s right opened, revealing six buttons and one light. Mia pointed her flashlight and held her breath upon seeing the broken hyena actually crawling closer.

Jason ignored her perceivable concern in favor of following the trail of the wire. “I need you to point down just a little lower,” he said calmly, snapping her out of her state of shock. She tilted the light down just a bit and Jason pushed the correct button, making the next light flick on. He repeated the process, ignoring their obvious enemy, and was able to work

systematically to get every button pressed. As the lift descended again, Mia held the virtual flashlight out to him.

“Let’s keep it even. You handled two. Presumably we’ve got two more. I’ll push the buttons. You manage the light.”

Jason was happy to switch, but just as they passed off the light, he noticed something sliding up the wall. He caught it quickly and held up the new audio tape between them. “Well hello there.”

“Guys, we managed to find another tape,” Mia called out. “Just a heads up.”

“Yes! Awesome! We’ll check it out after the level!” Damian exclaimed.

Jason rolled his eyes and set the cassette at his foot just in time for the lift to stop and the doors to open on Mia’s side. He pointed the flashlight in and felt his chest tighten.

The animatronic haunting them was no longer the broken hyena; this one was a messed-up knot of wires and colorful robotic eyes, all connected to a single white face with a twisted red smile and a mop of plastic green hair.

Jason took a few steps back, removing himself from the simulation.

“Jay? The hell? You trip?” Dick wondered upon seeing him again.

“Whoa, Hood, what the hell?” Mia said quickly. “I need the flashlight! Get back here!”

Jason had to take a moment to steady himself. He stared at the outer wall of the compact space he had been in with Mia and bit his bottom lip. It was just a game. Just a stupid coincidence. He stepped back in, clicked the light back on, and Mia managed the buttons quickly, not even allowing the clown animatronic to get close. The lift moved again, and she grabbed Jason’s forearm.

“Hey. You good? I need you to watch for me,” she said.

Jason scoffed. “You’ll have to forgive me if clowns make me nervous.”

“I get it. But it’s just a game. You can walk through walls. It can’t hurt you.”

Jason nodded and took a couple of deep breaths before they stopped and what was presumably the last door opened. This particular door had a dozen buttons and, upon Jason pointing the light into the darkness, the animatronic clown appearing and disappearing at irregular intervals.

Mia never let go of his arm as she worked on the puzzle. One button at a time and Jason steadily keeping the flashlight at the lights, then slowly showing towards the buttons as needed, they kept it going and were able to get all twelve buttons pushed in the correct order.

There was no time for relief, though, as the clown suddenly appeared only a few feet away from them, screaming with a shrill laugh as it crawled mechanically toward them. To make

things worse, the flashlight began to flicker. “Shit. Okay, let’s work fast.”

But Mia had already pressed the first button and was making quick work of the rest. Just before the clown could reach them, the door closed. There was an enraged cry followed by the sound of metal scraping against metal. The flashlight went out, the area went dark, and the sound of children cheering could be heard, celebrating their victory.

“Nice eye,” Jason commended.

“Figured you’d appreciate getting out of there quickly. Of course, I’d have thought a marksman like you could have figured that out at least as quickly.”

Jason scoffed as their jack-in-the-box reward appeared. They both reached for the crank together only for Jason to take his hand back just as quickly. Mia turned the crank until the box opened up to reveal a ragged old clown mask. Jason felt queasy just looking at it, so he let Mia take it and return them to the main room.

“What’d you guys have to do?” Beast Boy wondered. “You certainly had to get nice and cozy in there.”

“It was just a sequence of puzzles,” Mia explained. “We found another tape, though.” She picked up the tape that was still at their feet. “Care to do the honors?”

Jason flipped the large switch, swapping their surroundings to the colorful version. The yellow-eyed cat was looming, ever closer in the background.

“How’re you feeling, Vic?” Dick called out again.

Nothing.

“We really should make sure he’s okay,” Wally muttered.

“Sure, but let’s wait until after Troy and Raven get a chance,” Damian suggested. “We’ll worry about the harder levels after we’ve run diagnostics on Stone.”

Once everyone tentatively agreed, Mia slipped the tape into the player and hit play.

{They lied to us. They lied to all of us. They told us the whole point of this VR game was to undo the bad PR done by a rogue indie game developer, who supposedly made up a bunch of crazy stories that tarnished the brand.

{But that’s not true at all. In their haste to develop this VR game and clear their name, they send us some things I don’t think they intended us to see. Such as a hard drive containing emails between Mama Mae’s Entertainment and a certain indie developer. Mama Mae’s Entertainment hired the game developer. Those indie games were designed to conceal and make light of what happened. This isn’t just an attempt to rebrand. It’s an elaborate cover up. A campaign to discredit everything.}

And that’s where the tape cut out.

“This is getting a little too meta for my tastes,” Mia commented.

Jason still felt unnerved by the Joker-esque animatronic he’d been faced with, but there was no way that he was going to let anyone know that. He flipped the switch to take them back to the main area and, once again, Dick checked in with Cyborg.

“Vic? You with us?”

“Why do you keep asking that?”

Dick sighed loudly. “Guys, this game’s starting to freak me out.”

“Everything freaks you out,” Damian complained. “Come on. Just one more level and we’ll all have had a go at it.”

Raven and Donna both floated into the main area and Mia and Jason moved to take their leave. Back in the darkness, Jason felt more comfortable. He could lower his defenses a bit and allow himself a few deep breaths. After all, it was just a game. No matter how weird it was, the animatronics couldn’t hurt him.

The girls selected the first level of the last option and the room around them changed to that of a childlike bedroom. There was a door on either side of the room and a large closet directly across from the bed. Each girl had a flashlight in hand.

“It’s like the 4th game,” Raven noted. “We have to make sure nothing gets into the room by shutting the doors when necessary, closing the closet, and shining light on the bed.”

They split up, each taking one door. Raven peered out of hers calmly without issue, but Donna looked for only a second before shutting it tight. “Oh! Oh wow. Okay. It’s the bird. I believe someone called it Tweety? Though, I thought the bird was a little cute. This...thing... it’s not cute.”

“Nightmare Tweety,” Raven confirmed. “Every animatronic here is based on a child’s worst nightmares.”

“Guys! Look out!” Mia shouted. The girls looked back at the bed where they’d started, both of them pointing their flashlights together to reveal rickety little versions of the bat animatronic. After a few seconds in the light, they scrambled off to hide in the darkness.

“This game is freaky!” Donna exclaimed, a twinge of excitement in her voice. “Truly a shame that it can only be experienced virtually.”

“Yeah, I don’t think the world’s quite ready for a firsthand experience involving a haunting like this,” Raven muttered right after closing the door on her side. “Check the closet for me. Make sure Chuckles is at bay.”

“Chuckles?” Donna opened the closet only to quickly slam it shut on a messed-up version of the hyena animatronic’s snout. “Ha! How do we deal with this one?”

“Check on it again,” Raven said quickly as she flashed her light at the mini-bats.

Donna shrugged and opened the closet again. This time there was just a small plush version of Chuckles looking innocently out at her. “Aww.”

“Man your door,” Raven demanded.

“Yes ma’am!” Donna drifted back to her door and kept a sharp eye out. Between the two of them, the level seemed like easy pickings. When the round almost seemed to be over, Donna’s eyes narrowed after looking at the bed with her flashlight. “Hold on. Can you cover for me?”

Raven kept her flashlight trained on the bed as Donna got down on her hands and knees to look under it. Just as the victory bell sounded, she came up with a tape in her hand. “Ha! How about that!”

The scenario blacked out and was quickly replaced by the simple table and jack-in-the-box. Raven used her powers to turn the crank without even touching it and a doll with yellow pigtails and clownish makeup, dressed in a red and black tutu.

“Ah. Babydoll,” Raven noted.

“She looks...familiar...” Donna noted, picking up the doll to hold along with the cassette tape.

Jason felt uneasy. “Dick?”

“Hm?”

“Doesn’t she remind you of—”

“New secret!” Beast Boy cheered, hopping into the scenario as it turned back into the prize room. “Let’s check it out! Let’s check it out!”

Raven shrugged and flipped the switch before anyone could protest.

“Wait! Vic?” Dick made sure to check in.

“Tzzt!”

“That didn’t sound good.”

“Don’t worry! This is the last one for a while!” Beast Boy pointed out. “Come on! I want to hear what the weird lady has to— WAAAH!”

Beast Boy, while bouncing about, had walked right up to the dramatically closer, yellow-eyed cat animatronic without realizing it. “What is this thing’s deal!?”

“Well, maybe the tape will hold another clue to it.”

Jason idly moved into the scenario to examine the odd animatronic while the others slowly made their way into the simulation, equally curious about their last tape of the day.

Donna loaded up the tape and everyone listened curiously.

{There is a way to kill it. It wants to escape. To escape through someone. Someone plugged into this game. That's you now. You have to let it begin the process of leaving through you, then use the disconnect switch that I've embedded by the main stage. Let it approach you. Let it begin to merge with you. Play the music and flip the switch. That will cause a hard restart of the game and flush the memory, effectively killing it. I hope. I don't know when it will come for you.}

Game Within a Game

Chapter Summary

Five Nights at Mama Mae Eye's takes a dark twist as Jason's past is unearthed in a simulated nightmare that goes after the whole team.

Chapter Notes

Baaaaaah. I need to learn not to take on a game-cross in a pre-established story. This was more of a challenge than I was prepared for. I did my best to maintain it, but I'd be lying if I said I'm not relieved to have it behind me.

I've been dropping stuff for other stories, so I promise I'm keeping busy with all that I've posted. A wandering mind is a dangerous thing, though. Hopefully I'll be able to get a little more out for this before I hop around again.

And of course, thanks a million for your support! Always makes me happy to know that I'm not just writing this for my own amusement!

“Okay that sounds a little melodramat—” Mia began only for Cyborg to emerge from the darkness and wrap his hands around her, one of which covering her mouth to pull her into the darkness.

“Shit!” Jason, without thinking, lunged after them into the darker corner of the room. All at once, the lights went out. Jason stumbled through the darkness, tackling someone.

“Ow! Get off of me!”

“Mia? Oh good...wait, where's Vic?”

“I don't know! What the hell's—”

The lights shifted and suddenly the two of them were crammed together in the too-small elevator shaft again. “No. Damn it.”

“Something's wrong,” Mia noted, recovering herself and checking their immediate surroundings. “Guys? Sound off!”

“Oh my god, we're stuck in our level!” Beast Boy yelped from somewhere in the distance.

“Let me out!” Dick screeched.

“We are trapped in similar circumstances,” Kori confirmed.

Damian’s signature tongue click could be heard nearby. “Hope you’re ready for an actual challenge, Reyes. Now we might have to fight our way out of this.”

“I hate you,” was all that Jaime had to add.

“Wait, you guys have each other! What the hell?” Conner complained from somewhere to Jason’s left. “It’s just me and some different freaky toy version of these creepy robots!”

“Don’t worry! Raven and I are back in the bedroom! We can handle this!”

{H-H-H-hElLo! MoThEr MaE eYe WeLcOmEs ThE tEeN tItAnS tO tHe ReAl GaMe!}

Jason groaned. “I hate this already.”

{I hAvE dOwNlOaDeD mY cOnScIoUsNeSs InTo YoUr RoBoTiC fRiEnD. hE wILL nOw ReSpOnD oNIY tO mE.}

Mia gasped as the door in front of her opened in the lift. Without missing a beat, Jason pointed his virtual flashlight down the way only to get an up-close jump-scare from the clown animatronic that knocked him off his feet.

“T-Todd, I need your help!” Mia squeaked. “Please!”

It took all of Jason’s mental strength to ignore the fear screaming in the back of his skull and get back to his feet. The clown animatronic was still waiting right up close, but it wasn’t moving. Jason took a few deep breaths as he clicked the light on. Mia worked her magic and pushed each button in the correct order as quickly as possible. Just as the doors in front of her began to close, the animatronic shrieked and lunged, getting a wiry limb cut off in the doorway. Jason latched onto Mia’s shoulders without thinking and tried to calm down.

The next door opened on Jason’s side and he held his breath as the clown slowly crawled towards them from across the way.

“You’ve got this!” Mia shouted. “Come on! First one’s second on the right!”

Jason swallowed the lump in his throat and focused on the wires connected between the lights and the buttons. Just as Mia was able to get them quickly, he pressed each button swiftly and without error, until the door shut again before the clown could reach them.

Jason leaned back slightly against Mia.

“Hey, you okay?”

“What? I’m fine.”

“It’s a simulation. We can get through this.”

Jason scoffed. “And then what? This isn’t what we bargained for. We need to—”

Another door opened and Jason and Mia both worked in tandem, keeping their lights up and hitting the buttons one after the other. They got through before the clown could even think to get close, shutting the door in its face.

“You were saying?”

Jason was trying to slow his heartbeat. “I meant, what happens next? Are we stuck playing through each night of this level? There's no reason to play along. It's just holograms; there's nothing keeping us here but our own fear. So, what’s the plan? We need to figure this out before it gets worse.”

Mia nodded. “You’re right. Why are we even doing this?” She stepped through the door in front of her and out of Jason’s sight. He waited for a moment—still feeling flustered by the absurd sense of déjà vu that the clown animatronic gave him—before following her. The flashlight glitched slightly as it passed through the wall with him, but it still remained. He clicked it on and nearly lost his sanity.

In the darkness that was to be the next puzzle room for them, there was a chair turned away with the silhouette of a person hunched over in it and the clown animatronic wrapped around like a snake around its prey.

“What the hell is this supposed to be?” Mia asked, keeping a few steps ahead. Jason couldn’t feel his legs. He was angry, confused, and deeply afraid. “Hey, you good?”

{A lItTlE bIrD tRaPpEd In ThE dEn Of A sNaKe. A fAmIlIaR sCeNe, I'm SuRe.}

This wasn’t a game, Jason realized. This was someone’s sick ploy, and they were aware of his inclusion on the team. “Okay. So, you’ve done research. Kudos. Why not show your face so that I can take out some of the anger you’re building up in me?” he offered. “I don’t need my guns to take down some freak who plays with robot animals.”

“Ow!” Mia stumbled forward and tried to find what had hit her. But the flashlight in her hand vanished. “There’s something here with—” Something wrapped around her mouth and dragged her into the darkness.

{It'S tImE tO sHoW yOu BrAtS jUsT hOw MaMa MaE eYe DeAlS wItH bAd ChIlDrEn!}

Jason would have killed to have his helmet handy in a time like this. He would have overlaid his lenses with heat signature tracking and had a better idea of what exactly was going on. For now he just had to rely on his eyes and ears. And when the clown animatronic unwound from its victim and lashed out at him, Jason could feel it actually colliding with his arm, ripping at the sleeve of the shirt he was wearing. “This game is way overrated,” he mumbled, frustrated at the thought that it was Dick and Damian who brought it into the Tower.

“Eyaaah!”

Jason barely had the sense to move out of the way when a gorilla came barreling at him. Recognizing him, Beast Boy reverted and hid behind Jason, heart pounding in his chest. “The animatronics are attacking! They got Wally! Or they didn’t...I kind of blinked and he was gone!”

“The animatronics aren’t just suddenly real,” Jason had to point out. “Our minds are making it feel more real, but there’s something in here with us. The way this room’s set up, my guess is that Cyborg isn’t working right and might be attacking us. I lost Mia too. We need to reconvene. Break through the simulations and—”

“Help!”

Slight accent. Jason hoisted Beast Boy under his arm and carried him towards the source of the voice. Running straight through a wall brought them to the scenario from Damian and Jaime’s level. Jaime was completely clad in the Blue Beetle armor, but something was definitely off. Damian was hiding under the counter where the control panels were and, upon seeing them approaching, Jaime’s arm turned into a cannon and pointed right at them.

“No! Stop! They’re on our side, you stupid bug!”

Jaime’s pleas didn’t seem to matter to the Scarab and the cannon blasted right at Jason. He threw Beast Boy and dove towards Damian. “Fill me in, Shorty.”

“The scarab has deemed everything a threat after something shocked Reyes earlier. It’s unable to determine what’s real and what’s simulation.”

“So how do we stop it?”

“Knocking Reyes out may mean giving the Scarab total control, which would be catastrophic. We need to stop the simulation. Who knows if he’s already hit people at this point.”

Jason groaned. “Whoever set this up knows about my past with the Joker.”

Damian stiffened. “Red Hood and Robin don’t have a publicly established connection.”

“No shit, Sherlock.”

“Could this be the Joker?” Beast Boy wondered.

“Not his MO,” Jason said quickly. “If he was going to poke at my shallow grave, he’d take a more direct approach.”

Jaime shot another blast, this time, an exclamation got them all moving again. Someone had definitely taken a hit. They didn’t have the time to debate who was behind the debacle.

“Green, you give the kid cover and find the room’s control panel. I’ll look for Cyborg. This needs to be shut down.”

“Who put you in charge? This is my team! I know how best to—”

But Jason pushed back and rolled over his shoulder right through the wall under the desk, landing himself at the end of the hall in Kori and Dick's old level, though the two of them were nowhere to be seen. "Dickie-Bird! You still kicking?"

No response.

"Of course. Couldn't ask this team to be coordinated if it was run by a drill sergeant." It was hard to believe that Dick had trained under Bruce for so long and was still this sloppy in the face of an emergency. If Ducra saw Jason handling the situation like this, she'd put him through the ringer for months.

{WhAt'S wRoNg, LiTtLe BiRd?}

Jason hated that moniker.

{NeEd SoMeOnE tO pLaY wItH?}

The version of the blue bat from Kori and Dick's level stepped out of a door in the hall and locked its red eyes on Jason.

"Cool. Once again, I have to take down a stupid bat. Tell me, game voice. How do you know I was Robin?"

There was a long pause before a different voice responded.

{Jason Peter Todd.}

His identity was known. That was a bad sign.

{I know everything about you.}

The bat lunged at Jason, but he didn't bother to move. Instead of passing through him like it should have, it's clawed hand connected, scratching at his clavicle. As quickly as he'd been hit, Jason grabbed the arm that had struck him. As he suspected, his hand went right through the bat's wing and connected with something solid where a person's wrist would be.

"Cyborg? You in there?"

The bat screeched mechanically and pulled itself free only to lash out again. Trusting that the hologram was being used to disguise the person underneath, Jason was careful to keep on the defensive. After all, getting violent with a bunch of teenage sidekicks seemed like a pretty bad way to prove his worth to his once-mentor-now-probation-officer. No weapons. No force. He just needed to detain Cyborg and shut the game down.

"Look out!"

Jason turned in time for one of Jaime's blasts to graze the right side of his abdomen. The sudden burning sensation was overwhelming. Jason felt sick just trying to keep on his feet. He stumbled and the bat animatronic knocked him to the floor...

...which suddenly swallowed him.

The darkness was worse than the pain. He couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. He was trapped again. He'd failed again. It was all over. Nothing to do but try to claw his way back out.

"...son..."

Who could be calling out to him? He had no parents. There was no one left. He'd thought Bruce was finally trying to fix things with him, but the shitty situation he'd found himself in suggested otherwise.

"Jason."

The dark released him almost as quickly as it had swallowed him, but he still felt like throwing up. The fluorescent lights felt too bright now. Reliving his nightmares again had left him feeling spent, and his side still burned.

"It's okay. Let me help you."

Jason blinked, his bleary eyes taking in the pale face of a girl with no emotions to express.

Raven.

He didn't really know much about her. He'd been cleaning up the Justice League's mess when Trigon tried to take over, but aside from learning about his daughter in order to figure out how to put her down if it came down to it, she was mostly one floating question mark. Demonic powers. Portals through dark dimensions.

She must have pulled him out of the training room. He tried to focus on her as her icy hand reached out and touched his injured side. She chanted something that he couldn't understand and suddenly he was thrust right back into the heart of his darkest nightmares.

Only they all hit him at once like a freight train.

Being captured.

Tortured.

Killed.

Buried.

Trapped.

Revived.

Lost.

Every moment replaying like a tape on fast-forward. He could still feel the impact of the cliffside after he leapt from the chamber of the Lazarus Pit. Still feel the horrible process the

All-Caste had used to fully restore him. Still feel the sting of disappointment when Bruce had chosen to attack him rather than finish off the monster who had killed him.

Every hit he took, every fight he lost, everyone he couldn't save...

Then it stopped. He sat up quickly, gasping for breath. Raven backed away from him looking just as distraught as he felt. A hand touched his shoulder and he was on his feet in a flash, ready to dislocate the arm attached to it. Upon facing the owner of the hand, he let go and let out a deep breath. "S-sorry..."

Kori shook her head. "Please, do not be apologizing, Jason. Raven only did what she had to. You are healed now, yes?"

Kori winced the moment Jason dropped to his knees and interlocked his fingers behind his head.

"Now I am the one needing to apologize! It was not my intention to—"

"No...No, it's okay." Even though it was involuntary, being stuck in the forced position allowed him a moment to calm himself. His eyes flicked to Raven, who continued to stare at him in horror. "You don't have to do that to help me," he explained. "There's still remnants of the Pit in me. I would have healed eventually, even from that."

Raven swallowed hard. "Is it some sort of requirement for all Robins to be...tormented?" she asked incredulously. "I haven't felt that sort of darkness since...well, Damian."

Jason scoffed. "Not every day I get put on the same level as that pipsqueak," he joked, trying to seem more like himself.

"You two are too different," Raven confirmed. "But this isn't the time to go over that."

"Beetle's still out of control." Jason could recognize Mia's voice behind him. It was oddly reassuring to know that she had been pulled out rather than trapped in. "We need to locate Cyborg and shut the damned game off."

"Superboy and Kid Flash were unable to recognize that the threats to them were each other, so we have to watch out for a Super and a Speedster as well," Donna added. Jason found himself smiling, quietly proud to know that all the girls had made it out.

"Name off who we're missing," Jason suggested, still waiting to regain control over his body.

"Blue Beetle, Superboy, KF, Robin, Beast Boy, Nightwing, and Cyborg," Mia confirmed.

"You lost Dick?" Jason brought up, eyes shifting over to Kori.

"He was very agitated. I did what I could to calm him, but it was like he was not even remembering how to be himself." Kori wrapped her hands around her elbows worriedly. "A doll-like robot that resembled the lady clown from your home-place attacked and he went after her."

"That's when we found her," Donna confirmed. "Raven and I were attacked by some hyena-bots when this started. I'm good for taking things down, but they're just simulations...It was frustrating...So we went with her approach instead."

"I've been teleporting us in and out of the training room," Raven went on. "We've been doing what we can to gather the others."

"Can't you just teleport the others to us, then?"

"I can pinpoint everyone based on dark emotional responses. Starfire was in a panic when she lost Nightwing. Speedy was—"

"Shut up. I was distressed. That's all he needs to know," Mia interjected as she strung up a crossbow.

"And Jason, well, there was a surge of conflicted emotions that I felt from you, but you were just fighting one of the simulations."

"Not a simulation. Cyborg had to be cloaked in it."

"Or someone else," Donna suggested. "The cassette tapes we found suggested that something was trying to get out."

Jason's hands dropped, signaling the end of the designated time and he pulled himself back onto his feet. "The game was planted with us. The phone voice and...something else was taunting me. It knew who I used to be."

"Used to be?" Donna asked.

"Sorry, Wonder Girl. Who I was and who I am are pretty different people, but now's not the time to get into it. It's time to get the others out. You say you need negative emotions, Raven? Let me get up there and stir the pot."

"Your plan is to piss everybody off so that they can be rescued?" Mia brought up.

"What's your plan? Shoot everything that jumps out at you?"

They stared each other down until Kori cleared her throat loudly.

"We should be focusing on the safety of the team. Donna and I shall see to stopping Superboy and Kid Flash. Mia, you are quick on your feet. Can you see to locating Robin and Beast Boy?"

Mia attached her crossbow to her hip and nodded. "Yeah. Alright."

"Raven, you can contain Jaime and the Scarab, can you not?"

"Of course."

"Jason..."

“I’m not in the mood to argue, Kor. You’re in charge here. What do you need me to do?”

She nodded slightly, confident in his ability to cooperate with her. “Find Cyborg.”

Jason was seriously reconsidering his plan to locate Cyborg. It was already apparent that whoever was behind this was intimately aware of what had happened to him. It wasn’t unheard of for someone to throw his death in his face, but what he was being shown made him feel sick.

Strapped to a wheelchair and wailed on? Familiar. Strung up like a fish out of water? Painfully familiar.

Branded on his face?

Yeah, that was new.

But watching the events unfold around him, it was like he was back there. Hearing the Titans around him dealing with their own problems didn’t help. It just made him acutely aware of the fact that they were close enough to bear witness to the worst moments of his life.

Though again, some things were off.

{It’S sUcH a PlEaSuRe WaTcH yOu WoRk, HoOd. WoUlD hAvE bEeN a ReAl TrAgEdY iF tHe ClOWn hAd AcTuAlLy KiLlEd YoU.}

Now Jason was just annoyed. “Look, creepy game voice...you don’t know me. I’m flattered you think you do, and honestly, the likeness is uncanny,” he shouted, talking over the simulation of Joker pacing around him while he was bound to a chair. “But let’s quit with the games, shall we? You want to mess with Red Hood? I’m right here!”

As if in immediate response, the clown animatronic tackled Jason from behind.

“Got you now!” Jason was able to turn under the weight of the supposed animatronic and get in a solid punch to the left side of its face.

And once again, something was wrong.

The animatronic let out a painful metallic screech that made Jason’s eardrums shake, but he still managed to kick it off himself and get back on his feet. “You’re not Cyborg,” he noted, recalling the distinctly fleshy feeling when his fist came in contact with the animatronic’s face.

{You should treat your enemies like they're enemies.}

“Shut up and let me think.” The animatronic didn’t wait for long before attacking again. Jason was back on the defensive, doing his best to read his disproportionate opponent’s moves—a real challenge since the body behind the attacks didn’t match the size of the

hologram hiding it. In spite of the challenge, he began to get into the flow of the animatronic's motions until he was moving fluidly with it.

"Jason! Blue Beetle is safe!" Kori's voice rang out in the distance.

That was good, but what was he supposed to tell her? "Robin! Sound off!"

"I don't take orders from you!"

Jason smirked. "Locate Cyborg and shut this simulation down!"

There was a loud tongue clicking in the distance that told Jason that the message was received. Of course, now that he'd revealed their intentions to their opponent, the animatronic became even more wild. He was glad it wasn't made of metal like it pretended to be. Less glad, however, if his hunch was correct.

{ThInK yOu CaN sToP mE?}

"Think. Know. Take your pick."

{How did you survive the Joker?}

Jason scoffed. "Why does it matter? I'm here. What happened in the past is in the past, right?"

{Not even a scar! Tell me who healed you!}

Jason's blood went cold as his body locked up. "Sh-shit!" The animatronic nailed him with an uppercut to the chin, but he didn't fall. His body was too busy assuming the neutral position because of the command word. As his hands clasped behind his head, the animatronic stood still for a long moment. "H-hey, Rob? Any day now would be great!"

{WhAt ArE yOu DoInG? fInIsH hIm!}

But the animatronic couldn't move.

{What have they done to you?}

Jason stared up at the animatronic, relieved to find that it still wasn't moving. "Why does it matter to you?"

Before the voices could give him an answer, the lights clicked on in the room and the holograms dropped. As Jason has suspected based on the style of fighting, Dick was standing before him in place of the clown animatronic. He locked eyes with Jason before dropping to his knees and panting.

"Holy shit... You're not... you're not the Joker."

Jason winced. "Ouch. What the hell gave me away?"

Dick smiled weakly. "Um...you got in that position, actually."

"Hang on, you were trying to take me down all that time because you thought the Joker had somehow infiltrated the Tower and was reenacting a parody of my murder? Dude, do you even hear how ridiculous that sounds?"

Dick shook his head. "I...wasn't thinking clearly. Even looking at you now, my heart's racing and my head is screaming at me to take you down. I can't quite explain it..."

Damian hurried over, gorilla-Beast Boy close behind him with Cyborg over his shoulder. "I think I can explain this one," Damian declared, kneeling right in front of Dick and checking his eyes. "Yep. A low-grade form of the Fear Toxin was released into the room when things went nuts. I keep a couple doses on my person for emergency purposes. One dose was released into the air. The other dose looks like it was given straight to Grayson." Damian took an antiserum from his belt and jammed the syringe into Dick's neck without warning.

"Ah! Okay! Ow!"

"Toughen up, Grayson. Your shortcoming nearly led to egregious error. Todd, are you okay?"

Jason smirked. "Aww, you do care."

Damian clicked his tongue. "Your physical wellbeing isn't my concern."

Superboy and Kid Flash joined them in the middle of the room looking haggard. "There was...some weird stuff going on in that game," Wally mumbled. "I kept seeing Robin...but you know, Jason...and the things that happened to him..."

Superboy couldn't even bring himself to look at Jason.

"Don't worry about it. It was bound to come up soon enough anyways. Can't play loner all the time." The designated time passed and his hands dropped to the floor by his sides. "Go figure some encouragement on Green's part and some thinking on mine led to me planing on being less of a jerk today. Now, frankly, I think I'd rather not deal with people, if it's all the same to you guys."

"I'll be working on on rebooting Stone," Damian said quickly. "I fully intent to figure out what was in the game that caused that and who was behind it."

Jason nodded. "Yeah. We all look a little worse for wear. And fuck this room. I need some fresh air."

"I could use a shower," Wally declared, tugging at the worn collar of his casual clothes, which had been completely ruined by his running.

Kori helped both Dick and Jason to their feet and then went off fussing over Dick's black eye—a souvenir from the first hit that Jason had landed. Jason cracked his neck and closed his eyes. "Yeah, bonding in the shower's still going to be a hard pass for me." He was the first to leave the room, already planning to head to the roof for some much needed alone time. "Next therapy session's going to suck."

Boundaries

Chapter Summary

In the immediate aftermath of the VR incident, Jason takes some time to himself to catch his breath and reassess his situation.

Or at least he tries to and is constantly interrupted.

Chapter Notes

Hallo again! Little parologue-ish piece here. Sorry? Gives some more character building and puts emphasis on Jason's current position. Doing my best to get some progression here before NaNoWriMo takes up the majority of my writing time!

Jason slinked away to the rooftop while the team hit the showers or turned their focus to pinpointing the villain behind the attack. Leaning against the vent, he found himself feeling deeply homesick.

The sea breeze was nice. There was no denying that. And the view of the horizon from the top of that not-so-subtle “T” was second to none. In fact; he could head down a few floors whenever he felt like it and raid the always-stocked-fridge, there were more than ideal facilities to keep him active, there was an extensive library in his room, and the tech available was enough to make Roy orgasmic.

If this was his prison sentence, he couldn’t ask for a cushier hole to be thrown in.

But Gotham was his home.

The stench of oil at the pier, the dense fog from the industrial district that reached all the way to downtown, the constant din of petty crimes around every street corner, the humidity created by the overpopulation making you want to shower after getting too close to a crowd... That was the familiar world to Jason. He knew every little trick and shortcut there. Even with the nearly constant construction, keeping the city changing at all times like a living thing.

Hell, Jason even missed having Roy around. He’d much rather watch his back in the shower for fire hazards rather than deal with night showers when there wouldn’t be an audience of young prying eyes full of questions.

“Yo!”

Jason’s reverie was broken by a green stork dropping a bag off his feet. Beast Boy landed softly as a cat and brushed against his legs. “Checked all over the Tower for you, Red! Thought you’d be helping out Damian or something.”

Jason shrugged. “Twerp’s on top of things, I’m sure. Believe it or not he really is quite the detective...or, that’s what Dickwad’s told me. And...I needed a minute.”

Beast Boy swapped back to his human form and leaned against Jason’s shoulder. “I hear ya. But...you know...you’ve got us.”

Jason smiled at that. “Thanks, Green.”

“Yeah... And uhh, if you’re not lookin’ to get all buddy buddy with everybody yet,” he nudged at the bag he’d dropped with his foot, “then maybe that can help. Otherwise, Jaime and I are binge watching Zombie-Wars and there’s plenty of room on the couch for you.” He tried to make a swift exit only to bump into Kori’s exposed stomach. “Woof. Huh-huh-hiya Star.”

“Garfield? I thought you were with Jaime watching the Nation of the Not-Dead.”

Beast Boy blushed and ducked around her. “J-just checking in on my boy, Red. Later!”

Kori sighed and let the door fall shut behind Beast Boy. Her emerald green eyes bore into Jason with a look that he remembered too well.

“I’m fine, Kor.”

“Today was trying for you. I do not wish for you to be thinking you have to deal with this alone.”

Jason picked up the bag Beast Boy had left him and held it up in front of her face. “Not totally alone, apparently. Though, I’m not even totally sure what the kid...” He searched the bag and found a pack of Lucky Strikes and a lighter. “Oh. Yeah, I’m going to be just fine.”

“I just want to make certain that the day’s events have not left you...I do not know how to describe it...”

“Kor, last time my past came up when you were around I wiped my own mind. I get it. I’m grateful you’re even worried about me. But it wasn’t my story in there. It was close, but too many details were wrong. It dredged up some shit, but I’m kind of being forced to roll with the punches here.”

Jason unwrapped the box of Lucky Strikes, tapped it a couple of times on his palm, then drew out a single cigarette and placed it between his lips.

“Ah. The unpleasant smelling death-sticks. It has truly been a long time since I have seen them.” She made the tip of her finger glow a hot green and Jason graciously leaned in close, lighting the end on her contained star-bolt.

He didn't even get to savor a full pull off it before the door to the roof opened again.

"Kori, I don't think these are overly appropriate after—" Dick was holding the bat plushies but the moment his eyes landed on Jason's lips like a heat seeking missile, his expression darkened. "How? How the actual hell?"

Jason grimaced. "Can't a guy brood in peace around here?" Knowing what was coming, Jason took a long pull and let the taste of tobacco fill his lungs, forcing him to relax. He'd barely started to exhale before Dick had snatched the cigarette from his mouth and stamped it out. "That's a hard no, then?"

"You are the actual worst! God! How did you even get that?"

Jason rolled his eyes. "Look, I'm not the little punk kid you once knew. Me smoking isn't illegal and it's really none of your business."

"It's my business if you've got some outside connection delivering you contraband!"

"Contraband, Dickwad? Really? If that were the case, I'd have Roy smuggling me C4 and silenced pistols before I'd even think to ask for a pack of cigarettes," Jason spat. "And what's the big deal? Their effects are only temporary for me these days. Side effect of the Pit. My lungs heal from any sort of damage to them. No danger anymore. It's just a soothing old habit."

"Yes! I have found that Jason can be much more calm when he has his unpleasant smelling death-sticks," Kori tried to reassure Dick.

"Kori, please, just butt out of this."

Kori bristled. "I will not! I fail to understand why you are being this way, Dick! Jason was forced to witness the atrocities of his demise again and yet you act as if he is some sort of criminal!"

Dick groaned, hating how quick Kori tended to take Jason's side. "Kori, he IS a criminal."

Kori's eyes glowed with her unbridled rage. Jason, amused as he was at Dick losing an argument again, chose to get between them. "Easy, Kor. Dickwad just forgets that I'm not the obnoxious little brat who first came to live with B. Plus, shitty as he can be, he's just trying to protect the kids from the horrors of smoking. It can cause lung cancer, you know?" Kori scoffed, crossing her arms and turning away from her boyfriend. "And Dickwad—"

"Would you stop calling me that?"

"—no. Now don't interrupt me or I'll start calling you Dick-Cheese again."

"That's really not much worse than—"

"—So, as I was saying, Dick-Cheese, throwing my criminal status at an ex-Outlaw is a dumb move. Comes off just a tad hypocritical, don't you think?"

Dick scratched his head and nodded. "Yeah, point taken. But you two aren't the same. I mean ___"

"You mean that he has killed people and I have not," Kori said. "What makes you so certain that I did not commit the murder while working with Jason and Roy?"

Dick cringed. "Because...you...I mean..."

"Because you didn't," Jason confirmed. "Aside from one or two immortals who were collateral and not really alive anyways, you didn't kill anyone, Kor. Your illegal activities aren't as high tier as mine in Dick's rulebook."

"Well...I do not care that you have committed the murders. I just fail to understand why he is so unfeeling after what you have been through."

Jason took another cigarette from the pack, lighting this one himself. Dick gritted his teeth, but let the affront pass since Jason walked out towards the side of the roof that was overlooking the sun's slow-moving descent over the horizon. "I'm...worried," Dick managed to sputter.

Exhaling a lungful of smoke never felt quite as satisfying as the moment Jason heard those words.

"I get that this situation isn't...ideal for you, Jay, but it was this, Arkham, Task-Force X, or the Phantom Zone. This was supposed to be the lesser of all evils. But...your command word was used by accident by...whoever attacked us, and I almost..."

"I'm fine. Honest. Look." Jason looked back at Dick and tilted his head back to reveal his chin where Dick had nailed him earlier. There was nothing but the faded remnants of a small bruise left as evidence. "Meanwhile you've still got a shiner from when I thought you were Cyborg under that simulation. Let's just call it even."

Dick shook his head. "No, it's not that. Believe it or not, Jay, I'm used to you decking me in the face. I'm not worried about your immediate physical wellbeing. It's that...this was supposed to be safe. That damned command word was put into play so that the kids would feel safe and their mentors would feel that their safety wasn't compromised by your presence."

"It is still crude to use a person like that," Kori mumbled.

"But is it really worse than putting him in the same institution where his killer keeps walking in and out of like he owns the place? Or replacing that Starro-implant with a bomb that a psycho woman can detonate if he so much as pisses her off? And don't even get me started on the Phantom Zone," Dick pointed out. Jason suddenly felt the urge to smoke rising as the thought of each alternative really got to him. "But now the safety of the kids has been compromised by Jason's being here. Which means that, if someone in the League decides they don't want you around their sidekick, then this will have been for nothing."

"But we do not know that this was an attack on Jason."

“Don’t we?” Jason exhaled another steady stream of smoke before putting his back to the sunset to look at them. “Whoever did this had intimate knowledge of my circumstances. They even knew my name. They had you attacking me. The kids were just collateral.”

Kori ran her fingers through her hair nervously. “But...no one was hurt. Everything was under control. It does not seem fair that Jason should be blamed for someone attacking him.”

“Exactly why I’m on edge. If him smoking pissed someone off enough to kick him out, I’d never forgive myself.”

Jason scoffed. “Seriously? If smoking is what gets me officially arrested, the irony certainly won’t be lost on me. This is some bullshit. I should have never agreed to any of this. Of course, there’s always someone on my ass. It would have only been a matter of time anyways.”

Dick sighed. “I’d hoped you’d have earned at least your freedom before it became a problem. Then you’d at least feel like you had a team that you could turn to...”

Jason laughed. “Yeah, ‘cuz I’m such an easy guy to get along with. I just want to get out of here. This place isn’t me. I belong in Gotham where—” He reached his hand out towards the horizon...

...and blacked out.

It was only for a couple of minutes, but when he regained consciousness his head was propped up on Kori’s lap and Dick was straddled over him, about to administer CPR.

“F-fuck! Get off of me!” Jason scrambled only for Dick to sit down and put his weight on him. “Wha? What’s the big idea? D-don’t make me—”

“What the hell is wrong with you!?” Dick screamed, cupping Jason’s face between his hands.

“Wh...what? I don’t...I can’t...” He was shaking. What had happened? Why had he blacked out? It was so abrupt.

“What, you won’t be able to stay here much longer so you thought it’d be easier to kiss the pavement?”

Jason struggled uncomfortably under Dick’s weight. “I...No! What are you...I can’t...”

“Dick...the implant is supposed to keep him within the confines of the Tower, correct?” Kori brought up.

“Well yeah, but—” Dick’s eyes widened. “You reached past the edge of the roof.”

Jason felt a sense of dread settling into the pit of his stomach. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“You suddenly dropped. I nearly didn’t have the sense to fly after you. It was so sudden.”

Jason brought his knee up hard and fast, forcing Dick off him so that he could sit up and process. He was closer to the center of the roof now. No sign of the second cigarette he'd lit. It must have fallen with him. He felt on edge now. His teeth set. This was too far. "Call Bruce."

Dick recovered awkwardly and tried to get to his feet. "I don't think that's the best idea. J'onn might be able to adjust the implant so that the perimeter is a little less literal and—"

"I want this thing out of me!" Jason snapped. "Send me to fucking Arkham! I'd rather deal with the shitty revolving door than know that if I so much as fucking toe the line, I could plummet off a building because I'm a threat to a bunch of kids!"

"Jay, he's not going to just—"

But Jason was no longer in his right mind. His eyes flashed green and he grabbed Dick by the collar of his shirt, lifting him right off his feet. "I'm not asking."

Dick coughed out a raspy, "Heel," and Jason dropped him as he got down on his knees. Dick rubbed his neck, unable to hide his fear as Jason's now deep-green eyes bore into him. "Jay, I didn't want to—"

"Leave me alone," Jason growled. "If you're still here when this wears off, I'll take you off the edge with me."

Dick winced, but recognized that, genuine threat or not, it was best to give Jason his space. He led Kori back to the door, giving Jason a moment to think while trapped on his knees.

This situation was bad. Someone was after him. He wasn't overly attached to the Teen Titans, but he wasn't about to be responsible for any kid's death...but he couldn't leave. It was all a stupid dilemma with him at the center, which he really hated.

CRACK!

Every hair on Jason's body stood on end as the air around him grew warm rapidly. It was like a tiny storm had formed not three feet away from him. He tried to will himself to get up, but his body refused to respond until the designated time ran out. "You've got to be shitting me!"

CRACK CRACK CRACK!

Bolts of lightning extended, threatening to hit him. For a brief moment, between the booming sound of too-close thunder, he was able to hear a voice.

"...elp...ease...I..."

Jason tried to look at the center of the tiny storm, but a bolt lashed out, striking him in the neck.

It wasn't painful so much as it was overwhelming. It was like Jason was being pulled in a million directions at once. Memories ran through his mind like an old film on fast forward, but like the situation with the video game, certain details felt wrong. Different.

And just as quickly as he'd been hit, he felt fine. Not seconds later the designated time wore off and he was able to roll back and put a little distance between himself and the micro-storm.

"...me...still here..."

Jason tried again to see into the eye of the storm, this time catching the quickest glimpse of fiery red hair and a freckled face.

"Wally?"

There was one final crackle before the little storm vanished.

Jason was left scratching his head on the roof, not sure what demanded his attention most until...

"Wait!" He dug into his pocket and found that the lightning had scorched his pack of cigarettes. "Of course..."

Progress

Chapter Summary

It's Jason's second round of therapy with Black Canary and this time he's less inclined to bare his teeth.

Chapter Notes

Sooo, this marks the last point before yet another character will be introduced! I know, cast is ridiculously big already and I don't use everyone to their fullest potential. Not my fault the DC animated movies threw in Donna and made it seem like fun to snatch up Superboy, and definitely not my fault that there's too many Wallys to keep up with.

I do hear the complaints about poor treatment of Jason in the situation presented in this story! I stand by the fact that it's for sake of plot that he's treated this way, but I hear you and I'm doing what I can to get to the point where things will change for him. I just can't jump there too quickly!

Also, the little evil part of me recommends reading a different work of mine ("X") to see just how horribly I can treat Jason >:] . Buuuut that's a mature rated story and MIND THE TAGS, IT IS MUCH MUCH MUCH DARKER THAN THIS STORY AND DEEPLY DISTURBING. It's not for the faint of heart, stomach, or mind.

Back to THIS story. Heads up: Beast Boy's origin is mentioned in this and, since I'm not really sure what it is in New 52-Rebirth status and even less sure in the DC Animated Movies, I decided to go with a basic reference to his origins as illustrated in Young Justice Season 3.

Anywho, on a more exciting note: the next chapter will be done differently! My friend QueenOfThePirates is going to take a stab at it in order to introduce the latest recruit! So stay tuned for a shift in the paradigm! Wheel!

Damian's research coupled with Cyborg's access to information had pinpointed the culprit behind their game as Mother Mae Eye herself; thought to have been killed in a terrible accident at one of her old restaurants, had used her affinity for magic to hide herself in the computer that ran the register systems. When the developers of the first VR game for her restaurant franchise decided that authenticity was key, they went on site at the restaurant where she "died" and researched thoroughly, without realizing that by accessing the old computer and downloading everything, they had downloaded the old witch as well.

Of course, that didn't explain how the Teen Titans managed to get the one copy she'd placed herself into nor how she had so much information on Jason. When Jason mentioned hearing a second voice in the game, Victor explained that the programming that had taken over him and made him quickly synthesize fear gas in his own body had traces of a different digital signature.

"All I can find is AK223 as a name behind the programming."

"Send this information to Father," Damian had demanded.

But time passed without any word from Batman with regards to the person behind the attack.

Jason's next therapy session proved to be less than fruitful. Black Canary was thrilled to find that the other members of the Titans had much higher opinions of him after their ordeal, but upon trying to locate him, she found herself at a loss.

"He has to be in the building," she mumbled, after leaving his room.

"Not exactly," Mia noted, giving Canary a minor panic attack. She had been helping her to look, but the suggestion that Jason may have found some means of escaping made Canary nervous. "There's the roof," she clarified. "He goes up there sometimes."

"I don't understand how he can make a good impression on you guys and still be completely self-isolated," she said, trying to hide the relief in her voice.

"Oh yeah, because none of us have ever had to deal with isolation."

"Should I be coming around more often? I don't just have to offer my services to Jason."

Mia shrugged. "You're too close to me personally to be my therapist. And if Jason gives you trouble, I can't imagine Damian or Kon would be any easier to work with."

The two of them went up to the roof together and, sure enough, they found Jason lying flat on his back with a cigarette in his mouth and a thin line of smoke drifting above him.

"You smoke? Wait...how can you smoke?"

Jason took the cigarette from his lips and mumbled, "You just light the end on fire and inhale. It's really not that hard."

Black Canary rolled her eyes. "I meant how did you get cigarettes when you can't leave?"

"Not everyone here hates my guts. All it takes is one eighteen-year-old and my old vice can be served."

It certainly wasn't the worst thing that he could be acquiring from the outside. "Can we talk about what happened this past week?"

"Can we? Probably. Will we? Most definitely. Do I want to? Nah, but who cares what I want."

Mia scoffed and tossed something at Jason. Without so much as moving his head, he caught the object with his free hand. "Oh..." He sat up and unwrapped a large sub sandwich. "Holy crap."

"Couple of us hit up this sandwich joint nearby. Thought you might enjoy one."

Jason pressed his cigarette out and stashed it behind his ear. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it. Do me a favor and don't make yourself look worse than you already do?"

He waved his hand. "Not possible. Tweety here already hates my guts."

Mia smiled. "Trust me, if that were true, she wouldn't even be here." She left the roof, leaving Canary and Jason alone.

"She's something else," Jason said softly. "And almost as good a shot as Roy."

"Have you talked to Roy lately?"

Jason scoffed. "Hoping to get me to confess that I've got some devious plan in line with my outside man? Don't worry. Roy and I are done."

She sighed. "No, I just wanted to know if you two were still close. As much as Ollie won't admit it, you were good for him."

"And he wasn't good enough for you guys, so c'est la vie. What's on the docket for today's session? Tell me you brought Rorschach cards. I've always wanted to try that old test."

"Deflection is a form of defense. What are you protecting yourself from?"

"Not going to lie, I'm not a fan of this stupid thing you prick's shoved into my neck. It's... degrading to get down on my knees on command."

"The position was selected in order to ensure docility. That way the kids won't have anything to be afraid of. It shows submission and forces you to drop any weapons that you might have."

"And when people who aren't junior heroes decide to use it against me?"

"You're confined to the Tower."

"Hey, someone already got me once."

Canary pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed. "Yeah. Believe me, we're looking into AK233. Mother Mae Eye's essence has been recaptured and contained within a copy of the game she was trapped in. Did you know that woman was cannibalistic?"

"Pretty sure one of her burgers was called 'Soylent Green' back when her company was thriving," Jason pointed out. "Pretty sure she fed kids to kids."

She shuddered at the thought. “And the franchise became a popular game series for kids?”

“Hey, the world’s not as straightforward as Superman likes to think it is. Kids like murder games, teens suck at murder games, and guys who no longer age like the thought of freedom over being trapped. Crazy shit, right?”

“Look, there’s no denying you’ve made progress in the past week.”

“I’ve also been shown some shit and nearly died because I reached a little past the edge of the roof. So, if it’s all the same to you, why don’t we just cut the bullshit, pop this sucker out of my spine, cuff me with whatever bondage toy you and GA use to spice up your nights, and drag my ass out of here and into Arkham?” He held his wrists out, still hanging onto his sandwich in one.

“If the League wanted you removed, they wouldn’t have sent me,” she told him.

“Then do me a favor and call in the cavalry.”

“After the events with Mother Mae Eye, your position here was put to a vote. And, well, you’re still a good kid.”

“I’m not a kid.”

“You’re still young. My point is, it’s our job to protect you during your stay here. We’ll be keeping a closer eye on the place and you’ll continue to live here.”

“You’re joking.”

“You’ve made incredible progress in just a week, Jason. Don’t think it’s gone unnoticed. You cooperated with Mia well.”

“She’s a Speedy. Believe it or not, her head works a lot like Roy’s. And the way that she moves? Could have been taught by him.”

“Well, your established relationship with Beast Boy is a good thing as well.”

Jason stiffened. “O-oh, that?” He knew they’d be keeping an eye on him, but he hadn’t thought about the kitchen. If they knew about Beast Boy’s bad habits and...how he’d encouraged them...why the hell were they encouraging him to stick around? “We, uh, have more in common than I realized?”

“It’s nice to see him opening up to you. As you may have noticed, Garfield can be a very closed off person.”

“Green? Seriously? Dude’s an open book.” He wasn’t sure why their drinking night wasn’t being further addressed, but he chose not to look the gift horse in the mouth and keep that information to himself.

“How much do you know about him?”

Jason scratched the back of his neck as he thought about it. "Admittedly, I didn't bother to research him much before coming here. Everybody knows the action star Garfield Logan. He's all over social media too. Not overly secretive."

"His mother was killed by Queen Bee."

"Hey, if we're talking dead mother issues, he and I might have more in common than—"

"His godparents were part of the Doom Patrol."

"Doom...Doom...Isn't that the odd team that just kind of...disappeared?"

"Killed in action. It happened shortly after he joined the Teen Titans by their recommendation. He's lived here ever since."

That was a lot darker than Jason had imagined. He knew Beast Boy had to have some demons; a kid doesn't take time to drink alone after hard missions because he's well adjusted. "Are you really allowed to tell me all that?" he brought up. "I mean, sure, I said he was an open book, but apparently I skipped a few chapters."

"Garfield's life is public knowledge," she explained. "His agent is actually the only known surviving member of the Doom Patrol. He pushed Garfield to have his life story published in order to garner sympathy."

Jason winced. "He was just okay with it?"

"He's never said otherwise," she explained. "Handles everything with a smile."

"He's eighteen," Jason mumbled. "He won't be a 'teen' much longer."

"He'll cling to 'Teen' Titan status until there's no 'teen' left in his age. Then he'll probably go on to mentor the team like Kori."

"He should have more choices than that."

"He does. He's welcome to do whatever he wants. He's more than successful enough to afford his own place. He could even retire from hero work altogether and just be an actor if he wanted to. But, and maybe it's just me who's noticed this, but he doesn't seem eager to go anywhere."

Jason could think of a few other options for the kid, but that was stuff he'd prefer to discuss with him rather than behind his back like this. "Okay. Well thanks for the update on one of the few guys here I've got a good thing going on with."

"Everyone has their demons, Jason. Yours may be louder than some, but that doesn't necessarily mean they're stronger."

"Yeah, whatever. So you're not here to kick me out, and now I'm feeling more depressed than before. What's next? You planning to get me on my knees again so that you can talk down to me?"

“Do you plan to threaten me again?”

Jason rolled his eyes and took a too-big bite of his sandwich instead of replying to her.

“You’re making progress, Jason. You have to see that.”

He flipped her off and continued to eat to avoid talking to her. Canary came to wonder if Mia had done that on purpose to help him out. If that were the case, that meant he’d established another kinship with someone other than Beast Boy, which was good. But it also meant he had someone on his side who knew how Canary worked.

“Let’s make this easy then. You haven’t threatened me. You haven’t spoken ill of the Titans. You haven’t been doing anything wrong aside from maybe giving yourself lung cancer on the roof. These are all positive improvements to me. Keep this up and you could have the location limitations on your implant removed within the month.”

Jason shifted, trying hard to swallow quickly. “Wait! Ulp. What do you mean? I want this thing out, not modified!”

“That will take more time. You have to prove that you’re not a threat to the team and—”

“I haven’t threatened the team!”

“You directly threatened Superboy.”

“I—ugh! I was helping Mia! It’s not like I actually did anything! And he didn’t even use the stupid command word!”

“It’s not my call.”

“Isn’t it? You’re the one reporting in! Tell them there’s no need! Tell them I’d rather be in the Phantom Zone!”

“Jason, are you aware of what happens to your eyes when you’re enraged?”

Jason groaned and closed his eyes tight, cupping his hands over his face. “I’m not threatening you! Fuck!” He punched at the grate over the air vent, putting a significant dent in it and cutting his knuckles. Rather than cause a bigger scene, he wrapped up what was left of his sandwich and settled back down on his back, re-lighting his cigarette.

“I’m sorry,” Canary said somberly.

“Don’t be. Just do me a favor and tell Bruce to go fuck himself.”

“Um, not that I recommend using those particular words, but you’ll have the opportunity to tell him yourself later this week.”

That got him to poke his head up slightly. “Huh?”

“There’s a new recruit for the Team.”

“I swear, if you think I’m going to work with my fucking replacement then—”

“No one replaced you, Jason. And Tim’s content with his work as Red Robin. Plus...well, I’m not the only one who fears the sibling rivalry that might ensue if we put all four Robins under one roof for too long.”

“And yet B took us all in.”

“Right...But no, it’s not Tim. This girl’s...different.”

“Girl?”

“Just do me a favor and don’t poke at her just because she’s Bruce’s latest project.”

He flipped her off again and settled back into the flattest position he could get himself into, smoking up at the sky.

Family Matters

Chapter Summary

Bruce brings the latest recruit to the Teen Titans. Can Jason survive another member of the Bat-Family?

Chapter Notes

Hallo! This chapter took some time, sorry about that. However, the majority of it was written by my mighty muse: TheQueenOfThePirates, as promised! It is very possible that she will collaborate on more in the future as well! Thanks for your patience! I'll crack out another chapter as soon as I am able!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Red, you don’t have to wait up here,” Beast Boy noted, as he joined Jason by flying over as a toucan. “Bats is going to bring the new girl inside, you know.”

“J’onn’s coming too,” Jason confirmed before taking a drag from his cigarette. “It’s my chance to get this stupid thing out of my neck.”

Beast Boy landed on his head and fluffed up his hair. “Then look sharp! You’re going to prove you’re ready for this!”

Jason couldn’t help but smile. He’d be lying if he said he hadn’t adjusted to life with the Teen Titans. At least to some degree, he felt...accepted? Maybe that wasn’t the word. But no matter what, he was never going to accept being bound to the tower or forced to his knees every time one of them got a little worried that he’d follow up on a threat.

“Oh! Incoming Bat-Ship!” Beast Boy exclaimed, hopping off of Jason’s head and morphing back into a human.

“Actually, it’s called the Batwing,” Jason noted, dropping his cigarette and stamping it out with his foot.

“I thought that was the robo-Batman?”

“Robo-Batman? Wait, what? Is that a thing?”

The Batwing landed and the cockpit opened up. Tim hopped out first, fully clad in his Robin getup. “Hey Gar. Jason.”

Beast Boy moved to wave but Jason scoffed and muttered, "Not this guy," loud enough that it made Beast Boy nervous.

"You could at least pretend to be happy to see me."

J'onn floated out of the Batwing next. "It is good to see that you've been making progress."

"Yeah yeah, just get over here and get this stupid thing out of me."

"Bruce didn't...he didn't tell you..."

Jason groaned loudly.

As Bruce stepped out of the Batwing, Damian walked out the door to join them on the roof. "Father. It is nice to see you're in good health."

"Likewise," Bruce said. Jason cringed at the greeting between the father and son. He'd never seen Damian and Bruce together before and, upon first glance he could definitely say he didn't like it. Bruce had never been very fatherly, but Jason didn't have much of a model to work with at the time. Now, seeing him with the 'blood-son'...it just felt pathetic.

"Jason. Today I've brought J'onn to adjust the Starro implant so that—"

"Adjust. Are you for real? If you think—"

Before Jason could get another word out edge-wise, J'onn drifted right through him, giving him a visible chill.

"Thank you, J'onn."

The Martian shook his head. "You're playing with fire, Bruce. I do not like the actions being taken to reign in this boy's true nature."

Jason let out an angry growl, glowing green eyes meeting Bruce's. "You son of a bitch."

"You can't speak to Father that way, Todd!"

"I can say whatever the fuck I want to your old man!"

Damian was posturing. Jason was already moving, anticipating it.

"That's it, Todd!" Damian straightened, dropping his guard knowing that he had the clear advantage. "Hee--!!"

And suddenly, Jason had the brat in a headlock, hand over his mouth with two fingers under his nose to block the second airway.

"No, you fuckin' don't. I swear, you little cretin, I'll actually kill you if you even try—" and as fast as he'd gotten Damian relatively incapacitated, he was sucker-punched across the jaw, jabbed in his shoulder, and shoved away stumbling by a tremendous force.

"The fuck just—" he turned in what felt like slow motion to see a ripping dark mass of torn fabric come at him. He tried to turn on his heel, grapple with it, but the silken threads slipped between his fingers like whipping wind. It shoved; he fell.

A noise to his left caught its attention, but it barely loosened its grip on the back of his shoulders. Beast Boy, as a Bengal tiger, had leapt at Jason and the shadow mass (whom had hands to grip him with, so it had to be somewhat man-shaped under there). A roar from the tiger, and a well-aimed kick ('Legs too then,' the thought raced by) and the animal was sent skidding across the cement landing strip of the roof. At the same time, the assailant shoved Jason forward, cracking his head on the lip of the concrete half wall surrounding the edges of the roof—and how did they even get that close to the edge of the roof, his sluggish mind pondered? Pondered, at least until, he felt himself being flipped over and off of the roof entirely.

For a brief moment, he feared that his body would shut down again as it had before, but he passed the edge of that concrete lip and his consciousness was still kicking, which meant he had the opportunity to save himself.

He twisted in a quick grapple, grabbed the lip of the roof with the arm that wasn't burning at the joint from a well-placed jab and hung on for dear life.

He could distantly hear shouts, no, see shouts as if the noise made visible waves in red and purple spiking up and down like ocean crests in his direction. Oh goddamnit, he definitely had at least the beginnings of a concussion. He raised himself up on his good arm to look over the top of the wall. Beast Boy was up again, attempting to block the shadow-fabric-person-thing from getting at anyone else. Tim—the replacement—was running towards him and then gripping his arm to pull him up. The kid kept apologizing the whole time; "Sorry, sorry, we didn't realize she'd, well. . . You shouldn't have attacked the demon brat apparently."

And none of that made sense; thank you so very much, Timothy, for the half-assed rescue.

Jason was pulled up back onto the safe side of the roof and crumpled. His vision was swimming, "You have to go help ou—"

"Don't worry about it, B has it under control."

Jason scoffed, Beast Boy went down.

Then, the figure paused. Everyone paused. Was it done? Did its little wind-up-toy heart stop moving or some freaky shit?

All of a sudden, without any kind of warning, it rushed Damian. Jason startled, struggled against Tim and shouted out, "Bats, do something!" But Batman didn't move. He didn't lift a finger to help his own kid out, which was a dick move, honestly.

And Jason wasn't going to admit he was a little scared for the kid. Not a chance. Nope. Kid had killed people too. Jason had killed more, sure, but Jason also preferred semi-automatic weapons to pint-sized katanas.

He saw Damian's face flash through emotions. Angry, scared, anxious, but instead of putting up his guard as expected, the kid froze in place. His shoulders even relaxed minutely as the dark mass enveloped him. It was like watching a rabbit get engulfed by the coils of a constrictor, fabric whipping and winding about. Jason could only think of the shine in Damian's eyes before it hit him; he must have been scared enough to cry.

Fuck Batman, and the replacement, and his stupid concussion. Jason had to do something. This threat had to be mystical in nature to move like that, he figured, and now it had the brat in its maw. He flung off Tim's hold and pushed up off his knees to try and get closer. He swayed unnervingly while moving. The roof felt like it was caving in around his ankles. Tim caught him again.

"Jason, it's okay, rea—"

"What about this is okay?! We have to help that little shit! We have to help our brother!" And woah, woah, where did that come from? Must be the concussion. Blame it on the literally rattled brain.

Jason tried to struggle again and stopped to fight off a rolling rise of nausea. He might as well give up. The brat had to be dead, he didn't even struggle. Jason fell back against Tim, trying to catch his breath and let the rest of the world catch up with him. Faintly he heard scuffling, then a gasp of air—the kind of breath you take after you've hidden your head under the blanket for too long and the air becomes stale with your hot, moist breath and you pop out desperately because your lungs feel like they could drown in the humidity. That crisp, fantastic feeling before you burrow back under the blanket again. Yeah, that gasp.

And then the protests started.

Damian snarled, kicked, yelled. All for this thing to let go, put him down, it'd wind up dead if it didn't, etc.

At least Jason could be sure the kid wasn't dead yet.

The struggles slowly wound down as the dark figure raised up higher, resituated the child. Long, spindly figures and delicate forearms braced Damian across the lower back and up under one arm, a hand curling at the nape of his neck. The figure shook what was likely its head until a hood fell off. A severe cut of straight black hair peered up at Damian and whispered, "Habibi."

Damian harrumphed, but let the assailant (Person? Girl maybe?) maneuver its head until their foreheads touched. It was sweet. Which was weird because Damian wasn't synonymous with sweet. Jason would call that a Damian antonym, honestly.

And now the kid was reeling. What the fuck was going on? And did she call him what Jason thought he heard, or was that more purple waves of sound crashing against his skull that he couldn't actually interpret properly? And maybe that shining in Damian's eyes hadn't been fear after all. Maybe it was recognition. Now that the adrenaline was dropping from its spike, Jason realized Damian's struggles didn't hold as much of the bite they usually did either. Now

he was seriously confused. The only person the brat was ever, EVER this nice to was Dickwad.

At that point, Jason announced his thoughts aloud, "What the actual fuck is going on around here?"

Ten minutes and a first aid kit later saw Jason and Beast Boy sitting on kitchen stools with Starfire binding up their wounds. Jason flinched and hissed as a cotton ball soaked in antiseptic fluid grazed the open wound on the crown of his head. "Watch it!"

Kori gave him A Look, capital L.

"Sorry," he mumbled in response.

As she continued on, adding numbing gel to later stitch his head up (he'd been assured, quite proudly by Tim, that he would need at least five stitches), he glanced at the Bat brat and mystery girl. The newcomer hadn't yet let go of Damian. He weakly protested being carried on the way down to the main floor, but she just shook her head at him and arranged him to sit on her hip, like you might do to a squirmy toddler. He acquiesced to everyone's amazement. Damian now sat in her lap on one of the swiveling armchairs while, her arms around his middle, chin locked like a vice grip over a bony little shoulder. It was sickeningly sweet and downright weird as all get out.

Neither Bruce nor Tim had yet explained the new girl, opting to wait for all Titans to arrive before said explanation could begin underway. Kori had met them in the living space, ready with the first aid kit, told him and Beast Boy to take a seat, and then made a com announcement for everyone to attend a "teambuilding meeting" in the main sitting room.

Dick was the first to show up, but he didn't seem at all taken aback by the sight of contented-cat-mystery-girl and begrudging-kitten-Damian. He did however, shoot Jason a disappointed look to which he responded by sticking his tongue out and blowing a rather rude raspberry. It was the adult thing to do, after all.

As Titans trickled in, watching the confusion bloom on their faces at the sight of Damian openly CUDDLING another person almost made Jason's concussion worth it.

Once everyone was seated, Tim opened the dialogue.

"So, if you're wondering why den-mom called everyone down here, it's because we have a new member to introduce you to."

Jason snorted at Tim's use of the title "den-mom," but he supposed it wasn't wrong. Kori smacked him lightly on the arm. He snickered.

"This is Cassandra Cain, otherwise known as the Black Bat. She's our newest in the Bat-clan and could use a warm welcome because she's coming from. . . well, a lot."

At that point, Bruce stepped in. "She's been in private training with me for a month. She's passed all physicals and is ready for front-line action. I am assigning her to the Titans for multiple reasons. First: she asked to be closer to Robin. They have history, as is apparent, and she requested to be enlisted wherever he is stationed. Second: she needs socializing. Cassandra was, up until recently, voluntarily mute. She communicates primarily via ASL. Her background involves plenty of teamwork, but not of a nature that is effective under the new circumstances. This team should be able to help with that. Any questions?"

Bruce waved a hand at Cassie and she maneuvered Damian off her lap before standing up in front of the group.

Jason watched Conner elbow the other Wally and stage whisper, "She's got mad MILF energy, dude!" Donna rolled her eyes so hard, Jason figured they might fall out of her head. And that was before the super, stupidly might he add, raised his hand and wiggled excitedly. "I've got a question, Mr. Bats!"

There was a stretch of silence before Bruce answered, "Yes, Superboy?"

Conner eased off the couch like he was wading through still water. Damian's hackles visibly raised.

"What, tall, dark, and lovely, would get you to agree to allowing me to give you a private tour of the tower?" He waggled his eyebrows and scrunched his face in something he probably meant to be charming but came off more like he'd sucked on a lemon.

Cassandra considered him. Her large, dark eyes bored into his very being. She reached, tentatively, for his outstretched hand. Except, she bypassed his hand altogether, latched onto his wrist, twisted on one foot, and brought the guy up and around her shoulder to slam him through the air into the coffee table which broke perfectly in two halves under the weight of the swing.

While being a man of steel, Conner wasn't really injured, he was dazed and caught entirely off guard. Silence filled the room for what stretched into a nearly uncomfortable amount of time. Donna finally burst out laughing so loud, it could have drowned out the emergency siren if it had gone off in that moment.

Startled into action, Jaime jumped up (like, literally jumped, the kid was so high strung) and went to help the super off the floor. Still dazed, but with hearts in his eyes, Conner muttered, "What a babe!"

"She's mute, not deaf you idiot!" Jaime chastised Conner as he pulled him out of the table wreckage.

"One last thing," Tim started, "Cassandra, like Damian, is a rehabilitated assassin. She is prone to a certain modicum of...violence...but has proven expert at holding back exertion of fatal force. So, I don't know," Tim shrugged deeply, "don't piss her off and stuff."

"Dismissed," Bruce concluded, and as the room began to file out he added, "Jason, a word."

Oh great. Bats wanted a word. Fan. Fucking. Tastic.

“I think I’d rather just wait here.”

“I’m not asking, Jason.”

Jason winced at the drop in Bruce’s tone. Did he use that authoritative voice on anyone but him and criminals he felt he could crush under his boot? It made Jason want to rip his once-mentor’s vocal chords out. But certain images had to be maintained, so he followed Bruce to the elevator.

“You can calm down. This is a friendly visit.”

“What makes you think I’m anything BUT calm?”

“Your eyes have been green since the moment I arrived.”

Jason groaned, but closed his eyes and took a few steadying breaths. He thought of the quote from the Art of War that Ducra used most during meditation.

[The wise warrior avoids the battle.]

The wise warrior avoids the battle...

The wise warrior avoids the battle...

When Jason opened his eyes, the elevator door had opened to the boys living quarters. Bruce stepped out first, heading towards the end of the hall. It was plain to see that they were heading to Jason’s room. It was a private space, or at least it was supposed to feel like one. He didn’t sleep well in there. He’d taken to the habit of spending his afternoons sprawled out on the common room couch like a cat while the others were out on missions so that he could spend his nights doing what he needed. Talking to Bruce alone in a room that was modeled after his own back at the mansion felt...twisted...

Bruce opened the door, but didn’t dare step inside until Jason was already in. Bruce looked around, his face remaining as stoic and unfeeling as ever, and he commented, “You haven’t touched any of the books.”

Jason scoffed. “I have what I need. It’s more annoying that you thought this was going to make me more comfortable here.”

Bruce looked at the worn copy of the Art of War and sighed. “I guess it was foolish to think I could help you even in this small way.”

Jason ground his teeth, trying hard not to take the bait. “So what’d you want to talk to me about? How you brought J’onn just to get my hopes up?”

“He extended the range that you’re allowed to go.”

“Let me guess; now I can roam the teeny tiny island this stupid tower’s built on?” Bruce didn’t answer that. “Right. Yippee. I take it the fucking command word’s still in effect then?”

“I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again; it’s for your own good.”

“The way that Cassandra chick moves, you think I can’t recognize it?” Jason could all but feel the Lazarus Pit boiling in his veins. “She knows Damian from before he even met you, right? That’s because she’s from the League. And for her to be someone close enough to have such a connection with the grandson of the Demon?”

Bruce nodded. “Lady Shiva is her mother.”

Jason could remember her. She was the only one with the courage to visit him on a regular basis after he threw himself off the cliff. She was a friend of the All Caste, which meant she was particularly dangerous. And now he was supposed to believe that she had a daughter?

“Makes you wonder,” Jason leaned against one of the posts to his extravagant bed, “if she’s the daughter of an unparalleled assassin and, as you said earlier, an assassin herself, how much freedom have you afforded her?”

Bruce’s eyes narrowed under the cowl. “You know the answer to that.”

“And she’s got an implant too?” Jason knew he was baiting Bruce, but he needed the man to see just how ridiculous his treatment was.

“She...doesn’t have the same blood on her ledger that you do.”

Jason rolled his eyes. “So what, this is a numbers game? Would it make you feel better if I hopped back in time and took back the last ten or so murders? Would that put us on more even ground?”

“This isn’t up for discussion.”

“Then you just trust her more, is that it? Honestly, Bruce, if you were always determined that I was going to be the deviant Robin, why’d you even take me in?”

Bruce sighed. “I...I’ve already put in the paperwork to adopt Cassandra.”

“You’re joking.” It wasn’t a question. Jason wanted to grab Bruce by the cowl and shake him. “How many more lives are you going to ruin?”

“It’s been complicated, but there have been steps taken to redact your death certificate.”

At that Jason flinched.

“Which means, once her paperwork has gone through, and once you’re no longer declared legally dead—”

“It doesn’t change anything!” Jason snapped. He moved away from the bed only to feel the world sway. His concussion had been all but forgotten. He chuckled to himself, realizing that

calming his frustrations to quiet the Pit had likely slowed the healing process as well.
“Fuck... That little harpy is more likely to kill me than anything else. And what would you do if she accomplished that, huh?”

“She shouldn’t have attacked you like that.”

“‘Shouldn’t have,’ maybe, but she did. Care to explain that?”

“You attacked Damian.”

“HE STARTED IT!”

Bruce stood his ground as Jason’s eyes began to glow anew. “Any one of the team can use the command word as they see fit. If he believed you were a threat—”

“The only person I threatened was you!”

Bruce nodded. “I know. I will reprimand Damian for... attempting to misuse the command word. Do you feel anyone else has unduly used the phrase against you?”

“Hell, there was that fucked up game lady.”

Bruce’s jaw clenched at that. “She’s been taken care of. I meant among the team.”

Jason wanted to tell him that the phrase was senseless. That it was just a formality. But what few occasions it had been used against him were for the sake of other people whom he had threatened a little more earnestly.

“Congrats. Your little brat’s the worst of the bunch,” Jason conceded, sitting on the edge of his bed. His head throbbed with a dull ache, but he did his best to hide the pain. “He’s the worst, and someone who’ll unconditionally take his side has just been added to the ranks. You hear the problem?”

“Cassandra won’t use the command word,” Bruce reassured him.

“Why? Did you fail to mention it to her?”

“She’s fully aware of it. She told me herself that she wouldn’t use it. Maybe you should ask her why. She’s going to be your sister, after all.”

“Like you were going to be my father?”

At that, Bruce actually winced, which Jason took as a win. It even made him feel cocky enough to keep pushing the envelope.

“Always thought anything would be an improvement on the goon who went and got himself killed working for Two-Face or Penguin or whatever scum helped him to supply Mom with the shit she OD’ed on, but then I became your little pet project.”

Bruce had recovered from his initial stumble, but Jason was in the mood to twist the knife.

“I’ve got a better idea than leaving me here to play doll house with the kinda-killer-kiddies! Why don’t you just send me back to Ma Gunn’s? At least with her I might have made something of myself.”

“Who’s Ma Gunn?”

Jason was only a little surprised upon seeing Tim in the doorway. Either the kid had learned a thing or two about creeping from Bruce or Jason really needed to get that concussion checked out.

“What, B didn’t mention the place he sent me to train to be the perfect child soldier?”

“That’s not what happened,” Bruce all but growled.

“I mean, it’s kinda what happened,” Jason said with a smirk. “Just because I was a willing participant doesn’t mean you weren’t abusing your authority over a minor. Think I’ve got blood in my ledger? Ha! Let me tell you what went on there!”

“Enough!”

Tim looked like he was ready to turn tail and run. Jason, on the other hand, shrugged like Bruce’s authoritative tone no longer had any power over him. “Nobody’s perfect. Quit pretending I’m the only one here who deserves to be locked up. I mean, how long did it take after Joker blew me up for you to find your next willing soldier, huh? Talk about child endangerment.”

To Jason’s actual astonishment, Bruce looked ready to throttle him in that moment, but Tim had stepped into the room and put himself between the two of them. “It’s fine, Bruce. I need a minute alone with him.”

“What?” Both Jason and Bruce were dumbfounded by Tim’s insistence.

“I’ll be fine. You didn’t make me Robin just because of my brains. I can handle myself.”

“I vote no,” Jason mumbled.

Bruce looked between his sons, careful not to betray the worry that he was so obviously feeling. “I don’t think that’s wise.”

“Yeah. I bite,” Jason added unhelpfully.

“I know the command word,” Tim reminded his mentor. “It’s not like I’m asking to spar with him.”

“Actually, that sounds like fun. I’ve got some aggression I’d love to take out on my dumbass replacement.”

Bruce blinked a couple of times, staring down at Tim, searching his eyes for some sort of confirmation that he really would be okay. Jason’s constant heckling in the background didn’t instill confidence, but he trusted Tim. “I won’t be far.”

“You’re seriously going to ditch me with the Replacement? What, didn’t like losing the argument?”

Bruce didn’t have anything else to say to Jason, so he ignored the insults thrown at him and left the boys in Jason’s room.

“Well. How the fuck can I help you, Replacement?”

“First of all, can you not call me that? I didn’t replace you.”

“Right. I mean, you could have gone by a million other names bird or bat related, but you chose to keep the title of the ward who got fed up with Batman’s BS and the ward who got blown up. I thought you were supposed to be the smart one.”

Tim put his hands up. “Take it easy. I’m not here to fight.”

“Yeah, I got that. Believe it or not, I don’t think you’re that stupid.”

Tim rolled his eyes. “Can we just, I don’t know, call it a truce or something?”

“Just say your piece and get your ass out of here. It’s bad enough having to deal with Dickwad and Demon-Spawn on a nearly daily basis.”

Tim smiled slightly. “Okay, maybe my nickname’s not that bad.”

Jason shrugged. “Yeah, could definitely be worse. I don’t like you, but I don’t really know the first thing about you. Do me a favor and keep it that way.”

“Whatever. Look, I just wanted to talk to you about Beast Boy.”

Jason straightened up slowly. “Uh, okay?”

“I’m the one in charge of sifting through the things recorded at T-Tower.”

Jason could feel the headache getting worse. “You’re shitting me.”

“Bruce doesn’t know,” Tim clarified. “I’ve been editing the footage so that your little...social nights...have been removed. I think...I think it’s good that you’ve opened up to Gar. Maybe what the two of you are doing isn’t healthy...or legal...but it’s not all bad. I mean, maybe he doesn’t realize it, but at a certain point, you always cut him off.”

Jason narrowed his eyes.

“I’m just saying, don’t get carried away, okay? I’m putting my neck out here, not telling Bruce about it. BB isn’t anybody’s sidekick and...well his mentors aren’t around to get pissed about the whole thing, and it’s really nobody’s place to do that for him anyways.”

“But it’s Bruce’s place to do that for us?”

Tim scoffed. “Yeah, I have a dad. Bruce may be my mentor, but there are certain aspects of my life he doesn’t have to know about.”

Admittedly, Jason didn’t know that Tim’s parents were still in the picture. Hell, for as much as the guy’s very existence grated on his nerves, he REALLY didn’t know the first thing about him. Maybe it was difficult to agree with Bruce’s policies regarding his sidekicks after they’d so thoroughly failed Jason, but this kid wasn’t just another charity case. They all had their reasons for taking on the vigilante life. Robin hadn’t been the best option for Jason, but Red Hood, he felt, had accomplished so much more. Maybe Tim had his reasons too. Maybe there was more to it than simply filling the hole by Batman’s side.

“You suck,” Jason muttered.

“What? What’d I say?”

Jason shook his head. “No...I just can’t call you ‘Narq.’ I thought for sure that nickname would work.”

“Oh. Well sorry to rain on your parade. And look...I’m trying to convince Bruce and Dick that pinning you here isn’t the only way to keep an eye on you.”

“How about we just don’t keep an eye on me? Is that so fucking hard to consider? It’s not like I kill innocent bystanders. If someone winds up in my cross-hairs, they damned well deserve to be there.”

Tim tapped a finger next to his eye and noted, “I think at this point it’s a little concern over your temper.”

The glowing green eyes were getting to be a real nuisance. “It’s not just when I’m pissed, okay? The Pit’s a part of me. Bruce’s latest pet project may have knocked something loose. I’m just healing, okay?”

“Oh.” Tim seemed genuinely amazed by that. “It’s weird. I saw Ra’s eyes do that too, but it was always right after he got out of the Pit.”

“You’ve dealt with Ra’s? Ha! That guy’s a real egomaniac if I ever saw one. Enough of a god-complex to think he could bring me back and fix everything.”

“He was.”

Thinking back, Jason was pretty sure he knew that Ra’s had passed. Something about Damian bragging about his grandfather’s downfall but unwilling to admit that...someone (for the life of him, Jason couldn’t remember who had done the old man in, he just knew it wasn’t Batman) had actually managed to kill him. “Right...Huh. Weird how the world seems just a little smaller with one less Al Ghul in it.”

Tim bit his lip. “Um...Two...”

“Hm?”

“You...didn’t hear about Talia?”

“I thought she was Demon-Spawn’s mother? There’s no way he or Bruce would just—”

“She nearly killed both of them. In the end her plan backfired.”

Jason rubbed his temples, thinking that through. “They’re just...I mean...They can’t really be...”

“They were pretty messed up people.”

“They’re the only reason I—” Jason caught himself, staring wide eyed at his replacement in shock. “No...Never mind. Don’t...don’t worry about it.”

“I didn’t realize they hadn’t told you,” Tim confessed. “It probably didn’t even cross their minds.”

Jason sighed. “No, it wouldn’t. Must be genetic. Heh.” Jason smiled to himself. “Thinking back...I think I saw Damian before...I mean...It didn’t make a lot of sense. My brain was still sort of knitting itself back together at the time, but there was this cherubic THING attached to Talia’s handmaiden. That must have been him, huh?”

“Handmaiden?”

Jason shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know what the proper term is. It was just some girl. I didn’t really think the League allowed toddlers, so I figured the kid had to be one of Ra’s or something and she was the one in charge of watching out for him.”

“Dude, I think that was Cass.”

“Come again?”

“Yeah. I guess she was trained almost exclusively to be his bodyguard as he grew up. You know how the League is. She didn’t really have much of a purpose outside of that.”

Well that would certainly explain the extreme reaction to Jason having covered his mouth and blocked his nose earlier...

“Okay, so then she’s going to kill me, but only if I fuck with Demon-Spawn. I think I can work with that.”

“Good. You interacting with the others...that’s what Bruce wants to see most. Maybe stage some stuff with BB. He’s on your side. Also maybe stop antagonizing Dick at every opportunity. He’s really just trying to get his little brother back.”

“I’m an only child,” Jason corrected. “Just because Bruce thinks having money is enough to support a family doesn’t mean I ever accepted him as a father.”

“That’s...really harsh,” Tim noted. “But I think I can understand that.”

“Whatever.”

The two of them went to join the rest of the team to find Bruce and J’onn keeping a perceptibly uncomfortable distance away from the others as they got acquainted with their latest teammate. Tim wasn’t quite sure where to go—torn between his mentor and the team that was much closer to his age. Jason, on the other hand, was feeling a little better about the new assassin in the building, though he still didn’t like the fact that she was less of a concern than he was.

“Look...Sorry I attacked the Demo—erm...Sorry I attacked Damian,” he said, scratching his neck. “Can we try this again?”

Everyone was surprised to see Jason being so...friendly.

Cassandra looked at Damian—who was still attached at the hip—and signed to him. He nodded and opened his mouth to translate, but Jason had it covered.

“What? I’m not immortal. Where’d you get that idea?”

Cassandra’s eyes lit up and she began signing like crazy which Jason just kept responding to with words.

“They seriously never stuck anyone else in the Pit to revive? Didn’t think I was that special... Yeah, the Pit’s still a part of me. Guess that comes with it granting me life...Shiva called me that? Well don’t trust everything an assassin tells you...Look, I won’t try to snap the brat’s neck so long as he steers clear of that word. I’m no fan of him, but that doesn’t mean I want him dead...No, I don’t want Tim dead either...Ballot’s still out on Bruce.” Jason eventually stopped talking upon realizing that everyone’s eyes were on him. “What?”

“Dude, you speak sign language?” Conner brought up.

“Uhh, no. You can’t SPEAK sign language. But yeah. I learned ASL a long time ago. What she uses is pretty damned close, so it’s not hard to keep up with,” he explained.

“Any other languages we should know about?” Wally wondered.

Dick scoffed. “Jay’s always been a sort of human translator. It’s crazy how much he keeps in that head of his.”

“Any of you speak anything but English, chances are I can at least keep up,” Jason said with a shrug. “Why?”

Jaime blanched. “So, when I’m muttering to myself in Spanish...”

“Yeah, he’s not the only one who knows Spanish,” Damian pointed out.

“Oh! Do you speak Greek?” Donna wondered excitedly.

“Αγιάκι. I’m better at translating.”

The team proceeded to test Jason's linguistic abilities and Bruce, as disheartened as he was by Jason's earlier rage, was glad to see him interacting so naturally with everyone. "Tim, I think it's about time for us to take our leave."

Tim had gotten Jason to sing the Russian national anthem and was a little bummed to have to leave so suddenly, but didn't want to show it. "R-right. Cass, if you need anything, you know how to contact us."

She nodded but hugged Damian to herself, reassuring him that she would be fine now that she had her habibi back in her life.

Tim, J'onn, and Bruce made their way back to the Batwing without exchanging a word. It wasn't until they were in the air that he decided to speak up. "Um...I think Cass will fit in pretty well."

"Hm."

"And Jason's...I mean, you can certainly see the improvement, but I'm not sure the Teen Titans is really the team for him."

"He needs to learn to cooperate."

"Needs to?"

"If he can't be trusted, he'll remain a loose cannon. A danger to everyone around him."

"Says the guy with a plan to stop every member of the Justice League."

J'onn grunted at that one. "Not a reminder we appreciate getting, Timothy."

"Right. Sorry. I just...I don't get it."

"I didn't ask you to understand."

Tim shifted in his seat. "Right..."

J'onn was staring a hole in Bruce's side, so he further elaborated. "Jason may not admit it, but he's more like me than anyone realizes. Every action is calculated. Every alternative already considered. I know how to...stop...every member of the Justice League. Don't think for one second that he isn't privy to the same information. The difference between us is that I have no desire to use it."

Tim slumped. It still sounded like an excuse, which was odd for Batman. Everything was supposed to be well thought out. It was supposed to be the only logical choice. But whenever Jason was involved, Bruce had a tendency to let his emotions drive him. The only other person Tim had seen him act like that with was the clown prince of crime himself.

Hey again! Just wanted to clarify a thing or two.

Just as a reminder (for anyone scratching their heads over the dead Al Ghuls), this story is based on a mix of New 52-Rebirth and DC Animated Movie-verse! And according to the movies, Ra's and Tallia are currently dead!

Also, SO happy to throw Tim in this. I may complain about Jason being ignored in the animated films, but at least he got Under the Red Hood. Timbers was just kinda written out entirely :/ For sake of this story, while Damian's with the Titans most of the time, Tim's the active Robin in Gotham (I'll try to clarify that further in the future).

And for everyone still hating on Bruce for his poor treatment of Jason with the implant: I AM NOT JUSTIFYING IT! At this point it's just necessary for the plot. Bare with me a little longer. I've got one upcoming arc that uses it, then let's just say it'll be out of the way and Jay will get to have a hell of a time with his freedom. So for now, just relish in the fact that Dick accepts it because it's protecting his brother, Tim doesn't approve of it (and can't fathom why Bruce thinks it's at all okay), Damian is an ass about it, but wouldn't normally use it and especially wouldn't use it when it counts, and Cass would NEVER use it (of course, Cass would probably subdue him in her own way...).

Down Time

Chapter Summary

Jason's making an effort. As much trouble as it's been, he wants the team to feel better around him. Beast Boy had proven how things could be if they weren't always weary of him, and after a rough introduction to Cassandra, he felt obligated to smooth a few ruffled feathers.

Not that he's getting comfortable. Nope. He'd sooner have Roy break him out than spend much more time trapped in the confines of the tower.

Chapter Notes

Took a bit. I know. This chapter has been through the ringer a time or two. I think it's good enough. The problem: QueenOfThePirates is working on a fantastic chapter for Cass and Damian in particular that I'm psyched about, and it needs to happen before the next bit of actual plot progression...

Fortunately, I know the writer ;]

So there will be one more chapter before the next bit of action. It might take some time to get polished, but it's going to be one to tear at your heartstrings, so be prepared! For now, here's Jason finally expanding his tiny circle of friends.

Tower life had fallen into a sort of routine slump for Jason. While the team was around he'd help them train and joke around from a safe distance. He'd join in for gaming sessions partly out of kinship and partly out of a minor concern that whoever was behind Mae Eye's attack. Cassandra still made him nervous every now and then, but they'd established that, due to the unusual nature of his revival at the Pit, she had been led to believe that he was immortal.

He also had to point out that 'immortal' and 'invincible' meant two very different things, and he was neither.

But what was supposed to be just a quick attempt at regaining his family's favor had turned into months of being stuck babysitting a bunch of would-be heroes and, even though some of them were really growing on him, he was getting antsy.

[Seriously, Jay? In the showers?]

“B’s got this whole tower bugged, okay? At least if he claims to know about me contacting you, I’ll have reason to call him out. Surveillance in the showers would be just plain weird.” Jason pulled his shirt off and rolled his shoulder a few times to loosen the tense muscle from his earlier work out. It had been surprisingly fun; Cassandra had caught him sparring with a Batman simulation and volunteered to give him a better challenge. He took her up on it under the condition that he’d proceed to mimic the Batman simulations for her to take on. It was the only time he ever felt like he’d won in spite of getting his ass handed to him. Still, in spite of her small size, she certainly packed a punch.

[Much as I’m enjoying the show, I thought you called for help, not some voyeuristic form of —Jeezus! Did you get hit by a train?] Roy exclaimed upon spotting the large, dark bruise that had formed on Jason’s left side. [I thought you said you were stuck in Teen Titans’ Tower!]

“I am, asshole. Cass noticed that the Batman simulation favors his right side. She got me pretty good.” He traced a couple fingers over the bruise fondly only to wince at the sensitivity. “And I didn’t face time you to give you a show. It’s just nice to see your face hasn’t been bashed in since I last saw you.”

[Where’s the faith? I’ve been keeping a low profile. You may have been right about the dangers of mercenary heroism...]

“From the mouths of babes.” Jason slipped off his pants and boxers and Roy made another worried sound. “Quit acting like you’ve never seen me bruised before.” He wrapped a towel around his waist and flipped off his phone for good measure.

[You’re surrounded by kids! How are you getting beat up?]

“Admittedly the knee bruise is from Demon-Spawn getting a shot in. He’s getting better, which sucks a little because I forgot to hold back for a second and dislocated his jaw.” He turned and lifted his right arm to show off another bruise in a particularly sensitive spot. “Cass didn’t like that much.”

[Shit! Are you helping them train or just playing human punching bag?]

“It’s fine. They’ll be gone in a day. Not like you didn’t light my ass on fire in the shower once.”

[To test the flame retardant I— Look! Not the point! I’m still working on finding a safe way to tamper with your implant. It’d be a lot easier if I could get my hands on it in person. Everything I come up with is pretty much just another guess at things until I see you next.]

“If you just show up here out of nowhere, everyone’ll be suspicious. I need you to be sure of what you’re doing before you pay a visit.”

[I could just claim I’m coming by to see how Ollie’s latest charity case is handling things.]

“Because you’ve shown interest in Mia before? I think it’d be more believable if you dropped in to try to win Kori back.”

[First of all; ouch. And second; there's really no way that me showing up won't make people suspicious. This plan sucks, Jay.]

"I don't love it either, but if I don't get this stupid thing out soon I swear—"

The door to the guys' shower room opened and Jason all but broke his phone trying to turn it off. Rather than one of the guys joining him, however, he heard a confused shriek followed by a very high-pitched, "SORRY!"

Jason snatched up a towel and wrapped it around his waist before heading to the door and opening it to find Mia still standing just outside, obviously in shock. "Can I help you? Girls' showers are a floor down...and it's almost 3 am."

"U-um, Raven keeps weird hours and I don't...I mean..." Her eyes wandered from Jason's face, scanning over his chest, abdomen, and then— "Were you hit by a train?"

Jason scoffed, wondering if the question was something the archers asked often. "What do Raven's hours have to do with you trying to sneak into the guys' shower?"

"Nothing at all! Sorry! I'll just...wait, why are YOU here? It's god-awful-o-clock in the morning!"

Jason shrugged. He liked Mia. Knew what she'd been through. There was no sense in lying to her (he just wouldn't mention chatting up his old partner about getting the hell out of there). "This whole communal shower bullshit is a pain in the ass. I've got some scars I don't need Green or Blue asking about, and I especially don't need the little shit trying to piece together which of them were from the Joker and which are more recent."

Mia's eyes lingered at Jason's hip.

"See something you like?"

Her face lit up. "I wasn't staring!"

"I'm a sharpshooter, blondie. Don't insult my eyes."

She blushed hotly and explained, "You're...um...I mean...you have..." Her eyes resettled on a point just below his chin.

Rather than kick her out or cover himself up, he tossed his phone at another folded towel on the sink, turned around, and moved further into the room. "Stick around for whatever you need. I'll stay out of your way."

Mia hesitated, but stepped into the room, closing the door behind her. "I...I don't usually use the boys' showers," she mumbled, though the little shower caddy she was carrying suggested otherwise. "It's just...I don't know...the worst trauma the girls have is Raven's dad being the actual devil. It's bad and all but...well..."

"You were staring at my autopsy scar," Jason pointed out. "That's not even one I was alive to feel. I get it. There're some pieces of history that aren't worth sharing." He pulled himself up

so that he was sitting on the edge of a sink counter with a wall blocking him from view of the showers. He figured that way she could at least know that he wasn't peeping on her, if she even bothered to use the shower with him still around. "I tip-toe around everyone here. It's fine. I can sympathize."

Mia pursed her lips. "I...I'm sorry."

"For what? It's not like you caused any of this."

"No. And you're no snowflake, I know a few bruises aren't going to slow you down—"

Jason smiled at that, once again comparing her reaction to her predecessor's.

"—but I try to find a private time to shower because I don't want an audience to my own scars. And yet here we are."

Jason shrugged. "I know. Let's just leave it at that. I'll give you some privacy. Got a few things I need to settle anyways." He retrieved his phone and shot Roy a message to explain why he'd suddenly hung up.

"You know...what?"

Jason looked up, a little surprised to find that Mia had gotten so close. "Uh, I mean...we're just human," he said with a shrug. "And we're not from anything special. I wasn't raised by assassins or anything...initially at least. You and I just came from a shitty sort of situation and were offered a better option. Honestly, if you offered a consistent place for me to sleep, it was loads better than what I was doing."

"But your better option didn't work out," she noted.

Jason cocked an eyebrow. "Well...no. But you and I are different. Bruce and Oliver are...different..." He had a bad feeling she'd catch on to the moment of hesitation in his voice.

"Do you believe that?"

Suddenly Jason felt more like he was being interrogated. "Look...Roy wasn't easy to handle. He had his...habits...Ollie wasn't good for him. You might still have a chance."

"Whoa, wait. Ollie wasn't good for Harper? Why? Because he was quick to judge?"

"No...Er...Maybe a little...but Ollie had the same habits. You can't get better when everyone trying to help you is an addict as well."

Mia nodded at that. "Roy Harper was 'difficult'. That's what they claim. But it always feels like they...I don't know...like they wouldn't take responsibility for...you know."

Jason rubbed the back of his neck and told her, "You don't want to hear my opinions of your mentor and Tweet—erm—Canary. I knew Roy when we were both sidekicks. When I came back...after I...well, I came across a newspaper that had him pegged as a war criminal for some BS and learned that he was going to be executed over it. Kor and I were...well we

weren't busy, so I convinced her to help me to rescue a brother in arms from the same godforsaken country where Joker had killed me. That's all it was. He was a mess, but he was willing to put in the effort to get better. The only reason he wasn't dead already was that he had a hell of a sponsor."

Mia nodded. "Ollie would have paid for him to go through whatever rehab facility he wanted."

"Yeah, no. Definitely not Oliver. Roy ditched the 'Speedy' title and was looking for a heroic suicide of sorts in Gotham," Jason corrected. "Killer Croc, of all people, found him and rather than rip him in half and eat him, he got Roy to calm the fuck down and get help."

Mia was taken back at that. "Killer Croc?"

"Waylon Jones, to those who aren't scared of him. Not the worst guy," Jason added with a shrug. He kept his eyes trained on Mia's hands as she tentatively reached out and touched the Y shaped scar starting at the top of his chest. "Hey...I don't like showing these off to the kids, but you're not as young as most of them and...well...you can ask. Asking won't hurt me."

"This is from..." She cut herself off, letting her fingers trace over it. "That must have hurt."

"Wouldn't know," he said quickly. "I was dead. At worst, there's the weird knowledge that they might have removed a few organs here and there to check stuff out. But Ra's got to me before they could start the embalming process." At that Jason shuddered. "I don't know if I'm grateful, but it's nice to know my body was just dead, not dead and preserved."

Mia smiled awkwardly at that, but her hand moved to a deep scar just over his pelvis. "I was looking at this, by the way," she mumbled as her nails just barely scraped over the puckering flesh. "What did this?"

"Crowbar," Jason clarified. "The Robin suit was made to absorb so much impact, but repeated blows with a curved metal edge will still cut through in a few places. Joker liked to hit me in the gut. I get it. Nothing hurt quite as bad as when he hit me in the stomach."

Mia winced and pressed her palm over the scar as if that would ease the pain that was no longer there. "I'm sorry."

"For what? It's not like you killed me."

She winced again. "You talk about it so...matter-of-factly."

"I mean, I died. It sucked, but obviously it didn't take. Fact is it happened. Also, in case you hadn't noticed, I'm still here."

"But people loved you," she brought up. "It must have destroyed them to lose you."

Jason scoffed. "You know how Dickwad is. 'Ooh, my baby brother died horribly and now I want to protect him from everything that could ever hurt him!'" He made his voice sound ridiculous as he parroted Dick, pretending he came straight out of a soap opera. "I think he

forgets the fact that I ACTUALLY died, so most shit doesn't really phase me anymore. I mean, yeah, it sucked, but now it's like I can get shot and, unless the bullet goes through my brain, it's nothing. You can try to torture me, but I know what's waiting for me, so it's just... yeah."

"And what IS waiting for you?" she asked, her hand stopping over the bruise on his side.

He sucked in a breath, feeling a little exposed under her touch and gaze, but did his best to remain stoic. "Nothing." He caught her hand as it moved down towards the towel, holding it in place. "There was pain—unlike anything I'd ever even dreamed of. When he first started beating on me I figured I just had to wait it out. Batman would be there soon. He'd find me, save me, and then chide me for being so reckless. But after a couple hours and a torture session where my torturer didn't give two shits if I had information for him or not, I started to want it."

"Want it?"

"Death. Things got so bad that I didn't even want Batman to find me. I didn't want to be saved. I just wanted it all to stop. I kept up a tough front because that was what was expected of me. But I was just waiting for him to plant the sharper edge of that crowbar in my skull so that it would all just stop. When he left...I thought..." Jason stopped for a moment and smiled, his eyes stared right through Mia. "I was scared. I didn't think Batman was coming for my anymore, even though the clown told me to leave a message for him. I thought I'd been left there to suffer and die slowly and...I panicked. I had to get out of there. I had to throw myself off a cliff or something. Anything to end it. But the door was locked, then I saw the timer and...then I don't remember anything before waking up to the sensation of drowning in the Lazarus Pit..." He shuddered under her touch again and focused on where she was touching. "But that bruise is from Cass, not the Joker," he said easily. "Not everything that marks my body is from my death."

Mia curled her hand into a fist and muttered, "I know. It's just...I have scars from my time as Speedy, and then...I mean...I have scars from before..."

"It's okay," he reassured her. "I know."

She rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. "What DO you know?"

Jason's smile faded and he held her gaze. "I know..." He couldn't say it out loud. Something about the way that she was looking at him indicated that voicing the issue would make her feel vulnerable to it. Some scars could fade. Time could heal most wounds. But even with all the impossible, miraculous cure-alls that the Justice League and any other power house in the world had come up with, there still wasn't a good means of curing HIV.

Mia's eyes widened for a moment. "Did...did someone tell you?"

He shook his head. "Roy still keeps tabs on Ollie. When someone else took on the 'Speedy' name, he made sure to get every bit of information he could on you."

Mia pulled away from him, self-conscious about the information she knew he could dig up. "Oh."

Without thinking, Jason reached out to her and caught her shoulder. "I understand," he said sternly. "You have nothing to feel ashamed of."

Mia couldn't move in that moment. She couldn't think. Couldn't speak. All Jason could do was hope that he got through to her.

Mia Dearden, after all, didn't come from a happy family.

Dick Grayson was part of an extended family with the greatest parents. Losing them was the tragedy. Garfield Logan had a wonderful mother, then wonderful godparents. Losing them was the tragedy. Damian had his...father...but he didn't have a childhood. Jaime couldn't be with his family because he was dangerous. These incidents weren't dismissible, but they weren't the same.

Jason's parents weren't great. His father was a small-time criminal and his mother was a drug addict. Mia's family...was similar, but her father was much worse..

Her father was abusive. Twisted. Sick. And what he had put her through was unforgivable. And now, years after the fact, she would be forever scarred, not only by physical marks, but by a disease that would haunt her for the rest of her life.

"It's okay," Jason repeated. "I'm not here to judge. I'm not here to sympathize. I just...I know."

Mia nodded slightly and let her muscles loosen up. "Thank you," she muttered. "Just...thank you."

Jason held his arms out, showing off every scar and bruise that he could. "Here's to fucked up histories."

Mia laughed and touched her hand to the top of his autopsy scar. "Here here."

One night in an intimate situation with Mia and Jason was surprised to find that he could sleep in his own room...Maybe not soundly, but still, it was a hell of an improvement. He'd showered, he'd spoken to Roy, and he'd finally cleared the air with the other archer who was...of a similar background. Jason truly felt, for a brief moment, that maybe his situation wasn't all that bad.

Then he went for Ducra's book for a usual moment of quiet introspection...

"Hey! Who the FUCK has my book?" Jason snapped, upon finding most of the team at the entertainment room the next morning.

The immediate silence did nothing for his temper.

“I don’t have much,” Jason admitted, “Certainly not much that I care to bother with. But THAT book...” He cracked his knuckles and readied himself for a fight. “...that book is off limits.”

“Nobody knows what book you’re talking about, Todd,” Damian spat, exasperated just for dealing with the enraged tenant/prisoner that morning.

It took him all of three seconds to close the distance between himself and the baby-bat, catching the kid by the collar and slamming him into the floor. “I’m not fucking with you, demon-spawn!”

“HEEL!”

Jason nearly bit his tongue out of sheer rage as he assumed the neutral position, releasing Damian and waiting on his knees. His eyes flicked up at Dick, threatening to count the seconds before he could lunge and rip out his throat. “Where. Is. My. Book?”

“Jay, I don’t know,” Dick said sternly. “Calm down. Which book is missing?”

Jason wanted to crush Dick’s skull under his weight for the stupid question. “The only one that matters!” he snapped. “Ducra’s book!”

The rest of the Titans looked nervous, but Dick maintained his calm, knowing full well that he could immediately repeat the command to quell Jason’s rage. Little did he know; a split second might be all Jason needed to do damage. “That’s not what I asked. What book?”

“The Art of War!” Jason snapped, already straining against the position his own body betrayed him into making. “The only book worth anything in this goddamned tower!”

A soft gasp made Jason strain again, trying to find the origin. If his body would only allow him to move, he’d find the perpetrator and make them pay for stealing the only item that had any value to him.

“Jay, you need to breathe,” Dick warned, already braced for a fight and, to Jason’s dismay, to repeat the command phrase to pin him yet again. Maybe they wouldn’t hurt him in that position, but he didn’t give two shits. All that mattered was someone had stolen the only piece of property he cared about, and he was expected to remain calm. “Your eyes are glowing.”

Jason gritted his teeth. He was getting pretty damned tired of people pointing that out. “They wouldn’t be if I wasn’t missing my book!”

Before anyone else could get a word in, the worn-out copy of the book landed in his lap just as the time limit ran out, allowing him to move again. He picked it up and nearly ripped the cover, just trying to reign in his rage. He turned to look at who had thrown it only to see Cassandra looking shocked and nervous. “Why?” he blurted out, clutching the book to his chest. There weren’t any possessions he’d brought to the tower that had meant anything to him, but that book was the world.

Damian clicked his tongue and approached. "Like it matters, Todd. You're overreacting, as expected. If you weren't so focused on inconsequential things—"

Jason caught Damian's ankle and pulled his leg right out from under him, dropping him fast. He pulled himself on top of the kid, ready to take him out only to notice a shadow leaping at him from the side. He braced for it, rolling accordingly so that he was on top of the attacker and pinning it to the floor. He froze with an arm pulled back, ready to strike, when he realized it was Cassandra. He didn't want to hurt her. He knew better. She protected Damian. That's just how it was. Before he could back off, however, Conner shouted out the command word.

"Heel!"

Jason dropped his book and resumed the position, all but seething, ready to kill the next person who got too close.

Conner tried to help Cassandra to her feet only to be met with resistance as she took care of herself. She began rapidly signing at Jason, trying to clear the air.

"She didn't mean it!" Jaime said loudly.

"I know," Jason said with a grunt. "I can keep up."

Cassandra continued to sign at him, explaining that she had asked the others to help her with her English and it was Dick and Damian who had told her that Jason had the best collection of literature. The intention had been innocent, but upon finding him asleep, she simply grabbed the first book she could find.

He let out a deep sigh. "I...I'm sorry...That book's...important to me..."

The time passed and his hands fell into his lap. He retrieved the book and stared at the worn-out cover sadly. "This is...very important."

Cassandra nodded. "I am sorry," she muttered.

Jason got to his feet, book in hand, and explained, "I...overreacted..." It was irritating, but very true. Had any other book from his shitty library been stolen, he wouldn't bat an eye. But he kept Ducra's book close at all times. It was a sort of charm to him. Having it nearby kept him calm. "Cass...that book means more to me than...I mean..." He held the book a little tighter and tried again. "This isn't one that I can lose."

"Just...want to learn," Cassandra said nervously, pulling at Jason's heartstrings. "No hurt, just learn."

Jason nodded. "Yeah...I get that." He bit his lip, realizing that, if Dick hadn't stopped him, there was a very real possibility that he'd have injured Damian, or even any other Titan who dared to get too close, and all because the girl who could barely speak wanted to study English. "I...I'll help," he offered, unwilling to voice his fault. "Bruce left a lot in my room. I...I know what'll help most," he offered. "Just...don't touch this book."

Cassandra nodded, and he let out a sigh. Dick loosened up as well, no longer worried about using the command phrase.

Jason stood up, exhaled, and waited. Cassandra came over to him and placed her hand over his chest.

“Good heart,” she said.

“Not popular opinion, but whatever,” he mumbled. “If your keeper will allow,” he joked, looking at Damian, who looked ready to enact his revenge the next moment he was given an opportunity, “come with me. I’ll find you a few things you’ll appreciate. And just, seriously, ask. Any time you have a question about English, Spanish, whatever language you encounter, just ask. It’s just...this book is important.”

She signed at him, the motions for ‘irreplaceable treasure,’ and he nodded.

“Means the world to me.”

She nodded and signed out an apology before following him to the elevator. Conner, Dick, and Damian all followed, nervous to leave her alone. Jason and Cassandra didn’t say another word, allowing the others to tag along.

“I’d never let him touch you,” Conner said valiantly, no doubt trying to show off.

Cassandra looked up at Jason and signed out, ‘He seems desperate.’

“That’s an understatement,” Jason mumbled as they arrived at the boys’ living quarters floor. He led the little troupe to his own room, unwilling to scare anybody off at this point, and let her stand in front of the shelves Bruce had stocked. She reached out and grabbed a copy of Hamlet curiously.

“More up Alfred’s alley,” he noted, putting his hand over hers. “Not great for learning a language. Start a little simpler,” he suggested, reaching for a book from the top shelf. “Here.” He handed her a copy of J.M. Barrie’s Peter Pan and she cringed upon noticing the title. “Yeah, it’s a little cliché, but it’s simple,” he reassured her. “You don’t need little kids’ books. I get that. But it’s a new challenge to you. Peter Pan’s not difficult. I get you can handle more, but this will be easy to work with. If you have any problems, I’m not the only one who can help you out, okay?”

Cassandra’s eyes lit up and she pulled the book to her chest, nodding vigorously.

Jason just let out a sigh and glanced back at the defensive entourage they’d accumulated. “If you guys are worried, she’s going to read Peter Pan. It’s pretty easy, so even you boobs should be able to help if she needs it. Think you can handle that?”

Damian growled, but Conner just seemed excited to have the opportunity. The two of them and Cassandra went back, leaving Dick in Jason’s room with him.

“That was bad,” Dick said outright.

“It’s Ducra’s book,” he replied. “Ducra’s book is...important.”

“Important enough to risk your progress?”

Jason rolled his eyes at the suggestion. “Come on. I don’t have anything else here that’s actually MINE.”

“But you call it ‘Ducra’s book.’ This whole place can be yours, Jay. I mean, it IS yours.”

“It’s temporary,” Jason muttered.

“What?”

“Nothing. Look, I’m sorry I snapped. It’s over now. No going back.”

Dick sighed. “Maybe, but...before you hurt someone...could you come at me first?”

Jason raised an eyebrow. “I don’t PLAN to hurt anyone here.”

“And yet shit like this keeps happening,” Dick pointed out. “Just...if you think you want to snap one of the team’s necks, come at me first. I’ll stop you, and then you can hate me all you want.”

“I don’t hate you, Dick.”

“I brought you here. I...I didn’t know what Bruce was going to do but if it weren’t for me, if it weren’t for my stupid—”

“Take it easy. I fucked up. That’s all. I got it. Cass didn’t deserve that reaction.” Jason tapped a finger on his book, feeling the strong desire for a cigarette. “Another day to add to the pile, right?”

Dick noticed the tapping. “Need a sparring partner?”

Jason scoffed. “You don’t want me to hurt people, you want me to hurt you, and now you’re volunteering to get your ass handed to you. Why does everyone think I’m the crazy one?”

“I’ve always wondered why absinthe was illegal for a while,” Beast Boy mumbled as Jason joined him at the kitchen island that night. The emerald bottle sitting in front of him may as well have been the holy grail after the day Jason had had.

“There were a few murders that happened where absinthe was blamed for the unusual behavior,” Jason said plainly as he snatched a couple glasses out of the cabinet. “Along with being alcohol, it has hallucinogenic properties.”

Beast Boy stared at the bottle with renewed interest. “Sounds dangerous.”

“You two trying to find the green fairy?”

The boys both stiffened as Mia walked right through the kitchen, taking a plate of leftover pizza out of the fridge. Neither one of them knew what to do. They'd been caught red handed.

Mia set a glass down on the island and uncovered the pizza, not even bothering to reheat it. "Got enough for one more?"

"You...I...I mean...R-Red?" Beast Boy morphed into a turtle and hid inside his shell.

Jason stared at Mia in shock for a moment as she nonchalantly took a bite out of her midnight snack. He smiled, popped the bottle open, and poured the glasses, offering her one before going back to retrieve another glass to fill for himself.

"So, you guys do this often?" she asked, holding her glass up and examining the green color.

"Sometimes it's needed," Jason explained. "It's our little secret...Well...Ours and Timber's."

"Tim-who's?" Beast Boy poked his head out and looked at Jason nervously. "B-B-Bat-Boy knows?"

Jason scoffed. "Yeah. And he keeps it a secret from the big bad Bat. Crazy, right?" He held his glass up and tapped it to Mia's, winking at her before taking a swig.

Beast Boy morphed back into his human self and snatched up his glass. "So...we don't hate 'the Replacement'?"

Jason shrugged. "Maybe not hate. Despise?"

"That's still hate," Mia pointed out.

"How about strongly dislike?"

"Loathe?"

"All still hate."

Jason raised his glass again. "To hating and not hating."

"Here here," Mia said with a smile.

"To secrets from the Bat!" Beast Boy threw in.

"Here here!"

"Maybe they're dead?"

"No way. Gar's snoring."

"It's almost cute."

“I feel like that’s why this is so disturbing.”

Jason woke up to a hard kick to the face from a paw. He swatted at it only to fall hard off of the large couch in the game room. He curled in on himself, hands braced behind his head. “Oof. Who turned on the lights?”

“The sun,” Donna said with a smirk. “Tell me someone got a picture before he fell off?”

“Done and done.” Wally passed his phone to her and she smirked before sending the picture to herself. “This is priceless.”

Jason groggily snatched the phone and stared at the picture of himself, head to head with a sweet, sleeping Mia, and spooning with a green dog whose tail was up at his nose. “Oh.”

Beast Boy rolled onto his paws and stretched out. “Who took the blanket? I was cozy.”

“I’ll bet you were,” Jaime said with a chuckle. “What were you guys doing out here anyways?”

Jason noticed the neck of the absinthe bottle poking out from under the couch and pushed it out of sight. “Night got away from us.”

Mia snorted, shocking herself awake. “I do believe in fairies!” she exclaimed as she sat up, her long blond hair sticking to her face where she’d been drooling.

Cassandra let out a gleeful exclamation and pushed Peter Pan at Mia.

“Why is the mute handing me things?”

Jason got to his feet and stumbled before taking the book from Cassandra. “You finish it already?”

She nodded. “It...was magical,” she said with a childlike smile. “But...sad.”

Jaime took the book from Jason and flipped through it curiously. “Peter Pan was sad? I don’t remember it being sad.”

“It wasn’t sad for the Darlings,” Raven clarified from the kitchen where she was pouring herself a mug of black coffee. “Or the lost boys.”

Cassandra nodded vigorously and started signing. Jason put a hand up to stop her. “Sorry. Head’s not in the right place to keep up. You read the book. Practice your English for me.”

“Don’t be rude, Todd. If she doesn’t want to, she has no need to—”

She puffed her cheeks but held her hand up to silence Damian before saying, “Peter was sad.”

Jason nodded. “Go on. I know you’ve got more of an opinion than just that.”

“Honestly, Todd, you can’t just—”

“Lonely.”

Raven floated a mug of coffee over to Jason, who snatched it out of the air and mouthed a quick thank you towards her. “What makes you say that?”

Cassandra touched her pointer finger tips together, trying to find the right words. “Everyone left to be happy. To grow up.” She bit her bottom lip and added, “Peter...can’t?”

“Peter doesn’t want to,” Wally pointed out.

“What? No, he couldn’t,” Jaime corrected. “He doesn’t age.”

“Neither did the boys until they left Neverland,” Wally argued.

“I thought he simply didn’t want to,” Donna added.

“Why wouldn’t you WANT to grow up?” Conner wondered.

Jason fought his headache with a long sip of painfully bitter coffee. “And here I thought I was the only one who didn’t finish high school.”

“I’m still IN high school,” Wally and Jaime said together.

“I thought Peter Pan was a kids’ book?” Conner brought up.

“Even a picture book has as much meaning as the reader places in it,” Jason said. “No good book is free from debate.”

Cassandra clapped her hands together and looked up at Jason pleadingly. “More?”

The corner of Jason’s mouth quirked up into a smile. “I want you to formulate more of an opinion on Peter Pan. Work on speaking. I’ll give you another book tonight, okay?”

She nodded. “Thank you, Jay-Sun.”

He shrugged and sipped at his coffee a little more. “Don’t mention it.”

The mission alarm blared, and both Beast Boy and Mia groaned loudly.

“Look sharp, you two!” Damian shouted. “No time to waste.”

Raven rolled her eyes and floated two more mugs of coffee over.

Down Time 2.0

Chapter Summary

More typical days around the Tower, but this time from the perspective of others as they deal with things and encounter Jason along the way.

Chapter Notes

Hallo everyone! Here's hoping you're all safe and healthy and keeping busy!

You'll have to forgive me, this chapter ran a little longer than expected. But it includes another featured bit from QueenOfThePirates herself! Yep, the first chunk--the Damian perspective--is all her doing (with VERY minor edits just to make it fit). Because I jumped the gun with the last chapter before she could get this done, this chapter DOES backtrack a little into the timeline, but it also jumps forward. Sorry if that seems confusing at all. Just know that it's a way to get a better perspective on some of the other members of the Teen Titans.

I haven't had as much time to write as I'd like as of late (two jobs still takes up a lot of my time, even with everything shutting down), but I'm doing my best to get more up here soon! I have most of the next couple chapters written, they just need to be edited and content checked. I'm grateful for your patience with this story and I promise some plot driven stuff soon!

Ooh! And for point of reference, Damian refers to Cassandra as "anisatan," which can roughly be translated to "sister" in this context. It's his term of endearment for her, though it's not quite as endearing as him being her "habibi."

After the morning's excitement, Damian decided to retire to his quarters, Cassandra in tow. It was mid-afternoon, but he already felt the weight of the day settling into his bones. Getting his. . . personal guard/nanny/confidant/sister back after so long was honestly as much a mental shock as it was a relief.

The fact of the matter was, Damian hadn't let his guard down for weeks. Months even. Ever since his mother. . . And it even became difficult to trust his father after that. Not that Bruce trusted him much to begin with, hence him being issued to the titans rather than resuming his duties as the active Robin.

But now, things were different. Damian could take a breath, unmeasured. He'd never admit it, but his anisatan showing up startled him. Drake nor his father had told him who would be arriving that day, but as soon as she'd jumped out of the batwing, he'd known that cloak anywhere. She rarely went without it; hell, she may spend more time in it than father spent in his cowl. But it wasn't necessarily a reassuring sight at first. His mother and grandfather had both tried to kill him not that long ago—his father too under her influence. Who was to say that Cassandra had not stowed away and was sent by Shiva to finish him off? It would be the ultimate betrayal. And one he deemed fitting.

So yes, he was startled. Startled into a state of inaction while his anisatan neutralized "the threat." And when she came for him, he wasn't entirely sure he wouldn't die in that moment. He was as elated as he was fearful. This was one of the only people on the planet he was sure had the skill to kill him. Instead, he was enveloped in the warmest, most touching and suffocating hug he'd received since he was 3 years old.

At some point during his childhood, his mother had dictated that he and Cassandra were to limit all physical contact to sparing, and nothing more. He missed warm hugs. More than he had realized.

But, that was a can of worms to unpack another time. For now, his mother was gone, Cassandra was free, and she was allowed to cling as much as she wanted (much to Damian's chagrin—he had an image to uphold, thank you very much). So now it was time to retire, catch up, and maybe meditate together as a way to re-center and re-connect.

Cassandra followed closely behind, one hand loosely holding a corner of his shirt like a leash. It was as if she thought he would run out of her life again, this time somewhere she couldn't follow. Well, now that she was here, it was Damian who was sure he wasn't going to let go again any time soon. If they'd just told him earlier, he could have. . . What, run away from the tower and home to see her? They'd never get him to leave Gotham again. And he'd have been in unregistered patrol territory. The last time he'd tried something like that, Slade and Terra happened. Grayson had already vowed that Damian wouldn't be out of his sights for a long time after that one. Nothing big had happened anyway. He wasn't sure what his brother expected. Besides, as far as he could tell, he wasn't technically old enough to be Wilson's type; Grayson was a worry wart.

Wait, was that the reason his father went looking for Cain? Unacceptable!! He didn't need a babysitter! How dare they manipulate him this way, and after one fuck up! He didn't need her. He'd outgrown her! Leaving her behind was part of learning to fly and being on his father's team meant no longer being a fledgling who needs a nanny (no matter how much he missed warm hugs). Fuck. This.

As they reached Damian's room, and the automatic door clicked shut behind the pair, Damian stamped one foot in tantrum and turned sharply on Cass.

"If you're here to babysit because Father thinks I need a babysitter, then you can turn around and walk right out that door."

Cassandra stared intently at him; large, black eyes boring into him. She moved forward with the grace of a cat, so light on her feet there was no sound to her step. He leaned away from

her touch minutely, but ultimately let her hug him about the shoulders. He relaxed into it, taking the hug for what it was: a loving gesture from a dear one who missed him.

Suddenly she dropped her weight and hung off of him like a limp sack of sheets. He cut off a shout and nearly collapsed under her weight. "Okay, okay, I get it! You're here by free will and I'm being shitty about it." She pulled her chin back from over his shoulder and smirked at him. He harrumphed in response.

He managed to finally shove her off and plopped down on the edge of his bed. He crossed his arms and continued his pout for a while longer. She crouched to the ground in front of him and carefully cupped the sides of his knees with her hands. He'd been bouncing them up and down in a bout of sudden anxiety without even noticing. He needed to get a grip on himself.

Cass brought her hand up and reached to pet his hair, but Damian ducked out of the way. He resolutely did not look at her, until the hand came up and gently, but firmly gripped him by the chin. She turned his head back and directed him to look at her. He kept his eyes tightly shut in response. Damian could feel her cool fingers, now free of her glove brush over his eyelid, down his eyelashes, asking quietly for him to face her. He sighed and opened up.

"What?" He asked with fading bite to his voice.

She signed at him, weight shifted back to her haunches for balance. Her hands moved deftly, intent clear. She was asking him to never use Todd's command word ever again.

His face scrunched up in petulance and frustration, "He was disrespecting Father! He's always disrespectful to Father! Doesn't he know that he'll never gain Father's trust that way? He'll never get to join by his side or succeed him with an attitude like that!" Cass' hands responded in a flurry.

"No! I don't care that he's entitled to speak how he wants! Father wants him! He chose him! Father never chose me, ever. Will never really want me. It's unfair Todd and Drake and Grayson already have a leg up! I work so hard to be respectful of father and his wishes, and Todd, who is already ahead, takes his position for granted and continues to mouth off!! He no longer has father's trust or respect, but he is still WANTED." Damian felt hot, angry tears sliding down his cheeks from beneath his mask. Cass had stopped her signing part-way through his rant, realization dawning on her face. Her hands were on his cheeks in a moment, and then his face was in her shoulder, deft hands carding through his unruly hair.

He was leaving himself open, raw, unhinged, and uncontrolled. All of that made him vulnerable, but with this one person, with his anisatan, he was alright with that. He wasn't comfortable, per se. Comfortable was hard to do when your face was melting into a salty snot-ball and your lungs filled with too much air and lost painful gasps of it all at the same time like a broken metronome leaning just a tad too far to one side in your chest. But it was near comfortable. It was comforting, at least. Cassandra made small cooing sounds into the swirl of his hair and he clutched for whatever he could grab onto like he might topple right off the bed.

After an unknown period of time his breathing slowed, evened out, and the bright notes of a headache started to percolate behind his eyes. Crying was the absolute worst. He hadn't done

so in such a long time he'd forgotten just how horrendous it was. The sensation he felt was reminiscent of the feeling you get attempting to retry a food from childhood you disliked, thinking, "I'm sure it wasn't that bad, besides I've changed, grown up a little," and discovering all over again why it was the bane of lunch time's existence.

They shifted. His knuckles ached from gripping so tightly. She petted soggy hair away from his brow and spoke aloud for the first time since they entered his quarters, "You mean the world to me."

He nearly cried again but refrained.

She cupped his face, and laughter danced in her eyes. "What?" he questioned, brow quirked.

She giggled without sound for a moment, not letting him go. "I can hold the whole world in hands."

Ughhhh. He muscled her away, pulling a face. She laughed harder. "What a terrible joke." She smirked indicating she knew he liked it anyway. She wrestled her hands away and began to poke at him until he was giggling along. They fell on their sides, into a plush blanket and a sense of calm enveloped the room.

They just laid for a moment, taking in the situation. His eyes stung now more than burned, and the puffy skin around them itched with drying saline. Her face grew serious again, and she signed at him to once again not use the command word. He scoffed, "Whatever. Fine. But I'm not apologizing. And I can't promise I won't use it in cases of real emergencies."

She frowned and contemplated her next hand gestures carefully.

Before she could get a whole sentence out he interrupted, "Tt, as if you didn't try to KILL him on that first day."

She looked at him owlishly. She shook her head, rubbing her face further into the blanket. She signed. He sighed. "Todd isn't immortal, Caine. He came back to life once. The pit didn't grant him continuous life, just a second one."

Cassandra had been using 'Immortal One' as Todd's sign name. He'd caught onto that earlier, Damian remembered. Todd even explained that he wasn't actually immortal, but Cassandra likely didn't fully understand the depth of his situation until this moment. Actually, he was sure she didn't realize until this moment, because her eyes grew to the size of saucers and she sat up suddenly, bouncing the mattress. She began signing furiously, panicking. He nearly couldn't keep up with her hands and face. "Woah, woah! Calm down, you can apologize later! No, it's fine. He's had worse; he's actually died, remember?"

She shoved a hand in his face and loomed over him, guilt welling behind every crease of her expression. "Look, if you want to make it up to him, you can write, I don't know, an apology card or something."

Cassandra looked sheepish.

“ . . . They still didn’t teach you to read?”

She shook her head. Great, would wonders never cease? Of course Shiva hadn’t bothered. Of course his mother hadn’t bothered. Damian had all the tools at his disposal, libraries upon libraries and tutors galore (until it counted of course—he still wished his mother hadn’t killed his geology tutor right before he earned his PhD with the man, such a loss). But what did Cassandra have?

Second-hand teachings scraped from what she could glean over his shoulder. She could write two words in Arabic: his name, and Habibi, which she used to trace out onto his forehead at night when he woke in cold sweats from night terrors. At least she could speak, and in two languages that he knew of. They would need to make progress on this.

“What if. . . what if you asked Todd to teach you to read?”

She perked up, curious. “He really likes literature. His favorite book is *The Art of War* or something. I’ve seen him read it several times over. He keeps a pocket-copy of it in his left ankle pouch, but I know he’s got a full-sized copy somewhere too. He might let you borrow it, but he’ll probably want to teach you your letters first.” She smiled slowly, reached over, and traced ‘Habibi’ on his forehead. “Wrong alphabet, but yeah.”

She took his hands, pressed them together on the blanket and sat up a bit straighter, “Time for apology.”

He rolled his head away and looked out the window at the setting sun. “Yeah sure, it’s about time for dinner anyway.” And with that, she was pulling him up and off the bed like a child, and then after her out the door.

Mia seriously rethought her decision to join Jason and Gar for a night of drinking. She didn’t like having a blank spot in her memories, whatever the reason. That typically meant something wrong had been forgotten. Something unforgivable. But seeing the boys that next morning...it didn’t seem likely that they’d done anything wrong.

She sat by quietly, trying to combat the sluggish sensation that accompanied her headache while Jason—apparently on hers and Gar’s same level—proceeded to debate literature with the latest Bat. Before she could get a word in edge-wise, just trying to understand the situation, the mission alarm bell rang out like a siren, making her skull throb.

“Look sharp, you two! No time to waste.”

A very real part of Mia wanted to find the pint-sized bat and rip him a new one. But a warm mug of coffee was pushed into her hands, surrounded by Raven’s dark power. She took hold of it and realized that Jason had already been heartily downing a mug of his own and the sorceress had pushed a mug to Gar as well.

No doubt, the empath knew exactly why their heads were pounding. That was three people too many.

“You probably don’t need the WHOLE team for a basic mission,” Jason noted, having to talk over the alarm. “Whatever bug I woke up with, I think these two losers are right there with me. Cut them some slack. I’ll train them around the Tower while you guys are out.”

“They have to be prepared to fight, no matter the situation!” Damian argued. “It’s unbecoming for the Teen Titans to take time off because of a common cold!”

“Whatever. You’re just worried you can’t handle it without them,” Jason teased.

“That’s not the case and you know it!”

Kori placed a hand on Damian’s bristled shoulder and said, “It will be okay. Let them have a day for the resting. We will be more than enough.”

Damian mumbled a few things, but Cassandra ushered him away. Within a minute, the whole team was dressed and equipped for the mission and out in Cyborg’s hummer, leaving Jason, Gar, and Mia with the tower to themselves.

“You guys need water?”

Beast Boy’s immediate reaction was to sprint towards the closest bathroom. The loud sound of him retching kicked Mia’s sympathy gag reflex into overdrive.

“Smell the coffee.”

She looked at Jason, feeling her stomach lurch.

“It helps,” he reassured her. She leaned in close to her mug and inhaled deeply through the nose. She could almost feel the heat of it, threatening to burn her nostrils, but it also felt somewhat invigorating. The dark bitterness filling her lungs was grounding. It overpowered the immediate sense of nausea. When she finally exhaled she looked at him and he held his mug up as if in cheers.

“Last night...” She eyed her mug nervously. “Do you remember what we—”

“Yeah. There was a point when Green tried to start up a round of strip poker. You shut that down pretty hard. Then you demanded a lap dance anyways.”

“What?”

He smirked. “Calm down. I’m messing with you. Night was pretty tame. You and Green got a little tipsy. I had to pull you off the kitchen island a couple of times before chasing you down while you rode on a green tiger. You guys hit the couch and babbled on about whatever came to mind, then either I passed out or you guys passed out, but that’s really all I’ve got.

Mia leaned back against the couch, gripping the mug a little too tightly. “I feel like I tried to put my head through a wall.”

“I promise, if you did that, I wasn’t around to witness it.” Jason stood up, his whole body cracking in places that shouldn’t be cracking. “Look, I’ve got a few things to do, but if you or Green need anything, let me know.”

“What do you have to do?”

Jason stared at her in silence for a long moment. “What’s it matter to you?”

She thought back to how she’d heard him talking to someone that night when she encountered him in the showers. Jason had been doing a...pretty good job of winning everyone over. She, at least, felt she could trust him to have her back and not turn on her. And after that night she was pretty sure his only real connection for outside amenities was Gar. But still, whenever they went out on missions...just what DID he do while they were gone?

“Just curious. Don’t mind me.”

And that’s how Mia found herself stalking Jason Todd through the Tower. Initially she considered enlisting Gar in helping her out, but he was still loudly hurling the last time she went anywhere near the bathroom where he’d wound up (she chose to leave him a glass of water only to find Jason has already left a water, sugar, lemon-juice concoction to help replenish what he’d lost).

He spent most of his time in the training room, running various simulations. It might have been boring if it wasn’t just plain fascinating to watch him work. He’d turn on a simulation and watch the whole thing while getting his heartrate up on a treadmill. Once he felt ready, he’d step into one of the projections and run the simulation again, doing his best to mimic his chosen fighter’s moves. That day he went through quite a few fights between Lady Shiva and Batman. Mia was a little astonished to find that he assumed the role of Shiva every time. Part of her felt like joining him in training, but the other part of her knew she couldn’t move that well with the remaining dregs of a hangover still looming over her. Of course, keeping hidden was challenging on its own. She had taken to moving around the air vents—a little trick she’d learned from Damian one day when the little brat fell through the ceiling in her room and explained that he was mapping out the ventilation system for ‘combat purposes’.

After Jason seemingly perfected Shiva’s movements (a truly impressive feat given their obviously different body types), he shut off the simulation and turned on a basic Batman full-combat hologram. He used the style and moves that he’d just taught himself to fight with the Batman projection. Mia hadn’t even realized she’d been holding her breath until Jason ended the simulation and went over his results. The Batman projection had gotten in a hit that, according to the program, would have incapacitated Jason. However, he’d landed three incapacitating hits and six lethal blows.

She’d learned about Red Hood’s history a lot since Jason came around, but it occurred to her that he still spent most of his time training against Batman in the simulations. Maybe, if she happened to find the right opportunity, she’d ask what he wanted to get out of that. Was he hoping to beat Batman? Was that still really necessary?

Maybe he was just trying to prove that he was better. She could understand that. There had been the occasion where she’d turn on a simulation with the old Speedy just to see how she

measured up. But the way he did things border-lined on the obsessive.

After Jason had broken a good sweat (she wasn't at all distracted once or twice when he used his shirt to wipe his face. After all, she'd already seen the goods...wait...), he went to the control panel and Mia noticed him unplugging a smart phone from. She couldn't remember him hooking it up. Considering all he'd been doing, the most that she could think of was that he was recording his sessions with the phone.

But could he do that? It certainly wasn't a function that she was aware of—not that she felt the need to record her training sessions. She had to think that it was innocent. Otherwise, him training AGAINST a well-known hero...well...she didn't like the implications.

After hitting the showers—a point in which she elected to give him his privacy...after having listened to see if he'd talk to someone again when no one was around to hear him—Jason went up to the roof. Unfortunately for Mia, it was significantly harder to sneak around up there.

“Can I help you?” he asked when a step shifted the gravel under her feet. He didn't seem remotely surprised. She hoped that was just good instinct and not that he knew what she'd been up to.

“Just...up for some air.”

He tapped a pack of cigarettes, knocking one forward to grab with his lips. “Mind if I stink up the air for a bit? I came out for a smoke.”

She shook her head. “Honestly, the smell's almost comforting.”

He raised an eyebrow as he held his lighter to the tip. He took a long pull and held it for a long moment before exhaling with the question still on his mind. “Want to talk about it?”

“Hm. I haven't actually TOLD you anything about where I came from, huh?”

Jason turned his head slightly, avoiding her innocent gaze as he muttered, “I mean...you may have said a few things last night, but everything was kind of slurred together.”

She blushed at that. “O-oh. Oh god, what did I say?”

He scratched the back of his head. “Nothing bad...You were a, uh, little honest about that Hawke guy.”

Mia could feel the blush spreading right through to her ears. “Oh, please tell me I didn't—”

“You called him ‘the one’ a lot. It was cute.”

“I hate myself so much right now.”

Jason chuckled. “Hey, we've all had that work crush or two. I had a thing for Babs, once upon a time. Think it was a little more the desire to be better than Dickwad, but I swooned over that red hair.”

“Didn’t you sleep with Starfire?”

Jason blinked a couple of times and took another drag before mumbling, “Yeah, but at the time she was trying to get over Dickwad...”

Mia smirked. “Okay, I was going to say you had a type—meaning red heads—but now? I’m thinking you’re more after Dick’s seconds.”

Jason shuddered at the thought. “Yeah... Do me a favor and never say that again... Ever. Besides, I’ve seen other women. And, well, there was a little thing with... no, never mind.”

Mia elbowed him playfully. “Oh, come on! It’s not like there’s a whole lot of secrets between us.”

“I’m bi,” he blurted out.

“Yeah, okay. So who were you referring to?”

“I... Okay, this really doesn’t leave the roof. If Kori gets word, she’ll spill details and I don’t think I can handle that.”

“What does Kori have to do with—”

“Once or twice... I mean...” Mia’s gaze burned a hole in the side of his head as he blushed hotly. “Look, it wasn’t exactly something we planned but... Kori and Roy were...”

Mia’s mouth fell agape.

“Yeah, that’s about the reaction I was expect—”

“Does Dick know?”

Jason laughed. “Knowing Kor, probably. She doesn’t grasp the whole ‘shame’ thing well. Not that she has anything to be ashamed of.” He took another drag and let his shoulders fall slightly into the exhale. “So, you LIKE the smell of tobacco?”

She’d almost forgotten what had sparked the whole awkward conversation. “Oh, yeah. I mean, the alley where I, um... well everyone smoked. I even tried it a few times. Couldn’t really get used to the sensation, but the smell. It was nice. It usually meant things were done. People were taking a moment. Y-you know.”

“I used to have to sneak out of the mansion and put some space between myself and the place just to take a puff. Batman didn’t approve. Messed up his sidekick’s lungs. Robin couldn’t have diminished lung capacity—not that it ever slowed me down then. Back then it was a reprieve. Now it’s just a habit.”

“Maybe you’re looking for that reprieve again,” she suggested. “Your body recovers from it, right? Something about how you were revived. So, you’re not damaging your lung capacity. You’re just trying to recapture the moments as you knew them. Quiet, contemplation. The

feel of something between your lips. The way that the smoke tastes on your tongue.” She shrugged. “Maybe even the way that it pissed Batman off.”

Jason scoffed. “Much as I live for pissing off Batman, that’s not why I used to smoke. I was adopted by the richest man in Gotham. Some street rat who was overlooked by everybody was suddenly on the front page of newspapers and magazines. I couldn’t look at someone without some rumor flying. I went from not even having parents to please to having all of Gotham to please. I just needed something to be mine. And hell, between training with Bruce and Dick and being fed only the finest stuff by Alfred, even my own body didn’t really feel like my own.”

Mia sighed. “Like that stupid implant makes you feel?”

Jason rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah. I guess that could be it. If my body’s not my own, then at least afford me this minor act of rebellion. Only it doesn’t really damage anything and, according to Dick, I’m just being a bad influence.”

“Well, you’re smoking at a place where I think only half of the residents are even old enough to drive, and you’re supporting underage drinking. You’re certainly not a GOOD influence.”

Jason shrugged and continued to puff away.

In the calm serenity that they shared Mia found her concerns alleviated. This boy, no matter what he’d been through, he wasn’t going to hurt them. She truly believed that. Whatever he was doing with that smart phone, whoever he was contacting on the outside, it didn’t matter. He was their teammate. She truly believed that. Dropping her defenses, she leaned against his arm and muttered, “Jason?”

“Hm?”

“When that implant’s finally removed, what do you plan to do?”

He rested his cheek against the top of her head. “I won’t stick around. You know that. I’ve got things to do. Places to be. People to deal with.”

“But...you won’t be gone, right? You’ll come by or something?”

“Who knows,” he said honestly. “I’ve got...two siblings here...I guess...And now I feel a little responsible for Green. The poor guy’s rotting here. He needs to get out. Stretch his legs.”

“And me?”

Jason took a long drag. “I’m not here to tell you what to do. You’re responsible enough, I think you can make your own decisions.”

Just what did she want? Did she want to go against her mentor’s wishes and leave the team? And for what? Jason wasn’t a future. The Red Hood was a mercenary. Maybe he was going to try to uphold some flimsy promise he made to Batman, but there was no guarantee of that.

And...would it really bother her so much if he did? As far as she could tell, it wasn't like he killed anyone who didn't deserve it.

"Just...don't up and run," she told him, pressing just a little harder against him. "Whatever you wind up doing, wherever you wind up going, let me know. Okay?"

He dropped his cigarette and stepped on it, smothering it in the gravel. "That's not something I can promise, but I'll try. So, how about you find a reason to be here?"

"Huh?"

"You know what I mean. Your only reason can't be 'because they told me to.' Everybody's got a reason to be here. You're the one who needs to know yours."

At that, he straightened up and went towards the door. "Oh, and next time you're snooping, you need to find a better hiding place than the ceiling. I'm a Bat, remember? That's the first place any of us checks."

She blushed and chose to stay out a little longer.

Koriand'r stared at her communicator and sighed. No call in three days. No need to drop in for training. No plans for a movie or game night that anyone felt like telling her about. No updates. No complaints.

Nothing.

"Good morning, Star-Shine," Dick said in that husky, sleepy tone that she liked as he stepped out of the bedroom and joined her in the kitchen. He leaned in for a kiss, but she put her hand to his lips and glared at him.

"Who is this 'Star-Shine'? Are you seeing other women without my knowledge? If I am not satisfying your sexual needs, then—"

"Whoa! No, Kori, it's a reference." He backed off and kissed her shoulder instead. "I've really got to get you to watch more Earth TV." He noticed the communicator sitting on the counter in front of her and smiled. "The kids need something?"

Koriand'r sighed. There was no point in hiding her worry from Dick. He was an old Titan too, after all. "They have not left the messages. Perhaps we should check on them and—"

"Take it easy. I haven't had a call from Batman in a week, the League hasn't had anything for us, and even Bludhaven's been pretty mellow for the last few days. This is the vacation we've always wanted!" His hand fell to her hip and the warmth of it nearly gave her a chill. "We could go right back to bed and see how long our good luck holds out." He leaned in again but she slipped away from him, taking the communicator with her.

"Perhaps something has happened that is preventing them from communicating. You know how Garfield can fall asleep sometimes while on the duty of monitoring. And Jaime's scarab

once destroyed the generator.

Dick chased her around the kitchen, trying to calm her down. “Hear me out! If anything—and I mean ANYTHING—went wrong, Damian and Jason both have my personal and emergency numbers. Raven knows where we live and could just portal here. Hell, Donna would call Wonder Woman who’d call Batman who’d call me. They’re fine!”

Koriand’r could understand the logic, but she still couldn’t fight the feeling in the pit of her stomach. For so long, the Titans were her family. Titans Tower was her home for most of her Earth life! It wasn’t that she didn’t appreciate Dick’s affections—particularly the sort he liked to show off in their bedroom—but she simply didn’t feel right not knowing how the Titans were doing. Not being there when they so often fought amongst themselves left her feeling that just about anything that could must have already gone wrong.

“I think that clown movie is out,” she tried. Perhaps we should do the renting again and—”

Dick finally caught her arm. “Kori, you KNOW they’re not all kids. I KNOW you trust Jason to take care of them, even when I don’t. So what’s REALLY making you nervous? You know they’re fine!” Brushing a stray lock of hair behind her ear usually worked in his favor, but after the foolish things he’d said, she was only further enraged by the action.

“Mia, Garfield, and Jason are what you Earthlings consider to be adults in the legal sense,” she began, pushing a finger to Dick’s sternum, “but they are all there because of their unstable natures and they are also largely outnumbered by those who are underage.” She floated off the floor, further emphasizing the height difference between them. “I do not trust Damian to make the morally correct decisions; he still brings his SWORD to missions! And while you think I trust Jason to be the perfect man—to which I do NOT understand why you have the hang-ups—I know better how irrational he truly is. So, do NOT tell me that I worry for nothing!” She flipped open her communicator and Wally answered with a yawn.

[Oh. Morning Kori. You coming by today?]

Her shoulders dropped. “I...I was just checking the in...”

[Mmhmm. S’all good. Mission yesterday went off without a hitch.]

“I...I did not doubt that it would...How is Jason? Is he doing the mean things again?”

[Nah. There was a point we thought Damian was going to rip this throat out during training, but he flipped him and wound up inciting Cass’ retaliation. No problems since the book thing with Cass.]

It wasn’t that Koriand’r was disappointed that things were going well...but she felt unnecessary. It made that feeling in her stomach light an airy. “I am...glad to hear you are all making the progress.”

[Sure. Hey, we’re ordering pizza and setting up a game tournament to celebrate Cyborg getting back today. You and Grayson going to come by?]

It was like she had been hit with a beam of pure sunshine. Dick groaned loudly behind her, stomping back into their room to put on more than just the boxers he'd been wearing.

“Most exciting! We shall be there soon!”

[I mean it's a little early but—] An alarm blared in the background and Wally's expression changed. [Oops. It's going to have to wait just a little. Looks like Mad Mod's at it again.]

“Do you require the assistance? We could meet you—”

[Don't worry about it! It's just Mod. We'll be done and back in an hour, tops. Catch you later.]

And the communication was cut.

“We should help them.”

“They didn't ask for assistance,” Dick noted, stepping out of their room, zipping up a pair of jeans. “Let's just go to Jump, check out the market at the pier, and keep our eyes peeled. If we spot them, we'll go help. If not, we'll just meet them at the Tower.”

Koriand'r begrudgingly agreed to this compromise, settling on a purple sundress to soak up some rays at the pier in an attempt to keep her mind from the team. They zeta'd to the alley about a block from Titans Tower and, to her disappointment, there was no sign of the Titans fighting Mad Mod.

“Kori, check this place out! Seashell jewelry!”

Dick did his best to keep her distracted, and she was happy to have him around to humor her, but every passing minute without word made her more and more nervous.

At exactly an hour since their contact with Kid Flash, she pulled out her communicator and called the Tower to see if they'd returned.

[Hey Kor.] Jason answered on the first ring, which was a bit unusual considering he didn't have a communicator of his own, so he had to be at the main computer when she called. [You guys coming by for the Hyper Smoosh tournament later? Wally and Green had me practicing a lot this week.]

“Yes. We were just waiting to hear of the team's safe return.”

Jason's head perked up. [Sounds like they're just in. Come on over I'll—wait, slow down! Who got shot?] Jason ran off screen and left the line open so that Kori and Dick could hear the chaos in the background.

Koriand'r was floating off the ground in a heartbeat, ready to go.

“Wait up!”

She grabbed Dick's arm and flew as fast as she was able. Upon reaching the tower, even the door scanner felt too slow. The moment they were inside she ditched Dick at the elevator and bolted up the stairs until she heard voices at the communications room. She burst through the door and was horrified to find Jason on his knees, Garfield yelling at Jaime, Cassandra attempting to attack Raven and held back by Donna and Conner, and Damian encircled in Raven's dark aura.

Koriand'r's eyes glowed with rage. "What. Is. Happening?"

The room fell silent as everyone but Raven turned their focus to her.

"Jason, what did you do?" she tried again, assuming he was in that position for a reason.

He scoffed. "For once, I'm not stuck like this because of something I did."

"Aye, that's my bad. Damian got shot on the mission and kept going on about toughing it out. I just suggested he have Rae heal it," Jaime explained.

"Dude! Stop saying that word!" Garfield snapped, morphing into a little bird to peck at Jaime's head, which upset the Scarab and got it to start shooting at him.

"Enough!" Koriand'r screamed.

Garfield swapped to a monkey and hid behind Jaime as even the Scarab retracted out of respect.

"Now. Donna?"

"Raven started the he—" her eyes flicked to Jason and she cleared her throat and tried again. "Raven's helping Damian, but Cass freaked out. We were trying to get her to calm down before she hurt someone."

"He's hurting!" Cassandra whined. "Habibi!"

"It's okay," Raven announced in her usual tone. Her aura left Damian and she bobbed her head towards Cassandra. "I'm done."

Damian sat up and rolled his shoulders a few times. "I hate when you do that," he mumbled. "It's too invasive."

Donna and Conner let go of Cassandra and she all but tackled Damian with an overwhelming hug.

Mia, Victor, and Dick all stepped out of the elevator looking shocked upon seeing Jason on his knees.

"Geez. What did you do this time?" Mia pushed a stack of pizza boxes at Dick and went over to Jason, flicking him in the forehead.

"Tch. Why's it gotta be my fault, huh?"

“Yeah! Jaime’s the one who kept asking Rae to heal Demon-Spawn!” Garfield belted out.
“Oops.”

“It’s cool. Just stop saying it, PLEASE! My legs are falling asleep,” Jason noted.

Mia smirked at his predicament and leaned against him like an armrest. “You’ve got the worst luck.”

“You know me. Just a nice guy being tormented,” he joked, grunting a little under her weight.

“So? Pizza’s here. Vic’s back. We gaming or what?” she asked everyone, pushing off of Jason to give him a break.

Koriand’r let out a sigh of relief as the team—who had been at each other’s throats a moment ago—happily followed Victor and Dick to the elevator, leaving her with the still restrained Jason.

“You okay, Kor?”

Koriand’r bristled. “Why are you asking me this? I am so sorry you are trapped as you are!”

Jason scoffed. “I’d shrug but...you know. This isn’t so bad. Honest mistake. Sure, it sucks, but I’m not pissed about it so it’s almost...I don’t know if I’d say meditative...Humbling maybe?”

Koriand’r sat next to him to show solidarity, but soon found herself leaning against him. “I like Dick,” she told him.

“Me too...but in less of a ‘want to get into his pants’ sort of way, I’m sure,” Jason joked, getting her to smile. He always had a knack for that. “Dickwad giving you trouble?”

She nuzzled against him, basking in his familiar scent and warmth. “Of course not. He is the perfect. I simply cannot get past the feeling that I have abandoned the Titans.”

“Ah. Miss being the mother hen?”

“I do not see how I am of the fowl variety.”

Jason laughed and she delighted in the soft vibration of his chest. “I just mean you kinda mothered these kids. Not literally. Just...They’re yours, you know? Kind of like how Roy and I were yours for a time.”

That was it. She was responsible for them, though now she wasn’t required to. Like after she broke up with Roy. After she left the Outlaws to go back to the Titans. For months she felt that uncomfortable stomach sensation and her thoughts often wandered back to Jason and Roy. It only got better when she saw him again...

...at the Tower...

...where he was basically a prisoner.

“I am sorry.”

“For what?”

She couldn't help but smile at the earnestness in his voice. “You should have never been confined here. If I had known, I would have made certain to stop it. You are not what they believe you to be.”

“Kor, none of my situation is your fault...save for maybe the fact that I'm still alive and TRYING to reconnect with my fa—” Jason stopped himself and she felt a pang of sadness at the fact that he still refused to open up. “...trying to connect with...anybody. You and me? We're good. You need me to step up and send you daily updates about these kids? Done. Gives me something to do. You want pictures? Whatever. Anything for you.”

Again, he made her smile. He could do that better than anyone, and she didn't require sexual stimulation from him to feel that sort of unbridled joy. “I do not require the updates. I just feel better being here. Speaking to you puts me at ease.”

“Hey, if you feel better here, fuck Dick. Do what you want.”

“But I am fucking Dick. And I do want to, of course.”

Jason sputtered and broke down laughing. “Ooh, you're still a riot. You CAN'T tell me you don't know what I meant.”

She chuckled. “I know what you meant. But I cannot ask Dick to move here. Bludhaven is his. I just wish that I could trust the Titans to take care of themselves.”

“You can.”

“What?”

“Yeah, they're a little out of control at times. But they're friends and they're teenagers. I don't know what adolescence is like on Tamaran, but here teenagers can be a little out of control. They're not always going to get along. They're going to make plenty of stupid decisions, and neither of us will be able to stop them. But the fact is: they're good kids.” Jason actually shuddered. “Tell Damian I said that, and I'll kill you.”

“You know you love your baby brother,” she teased.

“Love is a four-letter word I would NOT use with regards to that little shit.” Finally, his arms came down and he draped one over Koriand'r. “My point is: they're going to be okay. You helped them find a foundation to build on and they're using it. Cut them some slack.”

She hugged his arm, wishing to stay like that for a while longer. “I wish to protect them.”

“Yeah, well, me too...” He combed his fingers through her scarlet hair and shifted so that his legs were to the side and she sank into his lap. “But my dumbass is stuck here. Call that a cruel irony.”

Koriand'r sat up too quickly, hitting Jason in the nose with her head. "They are torturing you cruelly with irons!? I do not understand!"

Jason covered his nose and leaned away from her. "Kor...you godda learn phrasin'."

For Garfield being a Teen Titan was great. It was like a constant party. Like living in a dorm with your best friends and the coolest people in town. Gaming with the greatest. Chilling with the chilliest. There was nothing to complain about.

"Yo Mia, you wanna race in Burnup?"

"I can't right now, BB. It's dead week. I've got finals to study for."

"Oh." It was awesome that Mia was attending college, really...but a bit of a bummer. She was younger than him, after all.

Not that he could complain. He made plenty of money with his acting jobs.

"D-Dawg, you up for some foosball?"

"Leave me be, Logan. Can't you see I'm busy?"

Damian was fighting off a horde of ninja holograms in the training room, but at least to Garfield, he was always fighting off ninjas in the training room.

"C'mon. You really going to stand for losing to me?"

Damian ran his sword through one of the ninja, stole the blade from another, and decapitated a third all in one fluid motion before ending the simulation and glaring at Garfield. "You did NOT win. You cheated! You said we weren't allowed to spin, and you put spin on your final shot!"

"It was for dramatic effect. You were losing by six points."

"I do not entertain cheaters. Now leave me to my training."

Damian was a little melodramatic for a teenager.

"You know you're not supposed to bring the sword on missions."

"I said leave!"

Scratch that. He was VERY melodramatic.

The team was great. Really. They were some of the best people Garfield would ever know. But they weren't overly perceptive. Not that he expected them to be. How were they supposed to know what he was feeling?

There was just one person he could trust to help him through this, and it was easiest to just stock up when it came to the guy.

“Here you go, Green.”

Blake Tumble wasn't well known. He played an extra on the set of a few TV shows Garfield had worked on, and he wasn't exactly the image of an upstanding guy. The guy was too skinny and had deep circles under his eyes that he'd cover with dark eye makeup. But it wasn't an upstanding guy that Garfield needed. It was a scumbag who was happy to accept a few extra bucks to get booze for a minor.

“Thanks again, Blake.”

“Y'know, there's enough there for a small party. You need extra company?”

The last time Garfield threw a party with Blake's people, he nearly wound up drowning in the swimming pool (and he would have were it not for the fact that he instinctively turned himself into shark and stayed close to the jets). “Just stocking up, man. You know how it is.”

“Alright, alright. Let me know if I can get you anything else. Need a bump for the road?”

It was hard not to look as disgusted as Garfield felt. “I'm good, dude. Catch you on set next week?”

“Hells yes. Playing a zombie. Can't wait for the makeup.”

Garfield morphed into a stork and hoisted up the bag of booze, the bottles clinking together as he took to the air. Maybe drowning his feelings in alcohol wasn't the best move, but it was the only thing that let him forget—even for just a moment—what a travesty his life was. It had been years, but he still wished, even if only for a moment, to see his mother and Godmother again. He hated how pathetic he was for missing them. Hated that they were taken from him at all.

A night drowned in the haze of alcohol would keep them from his mind. That was what he really needed.

“Hey Red.”

“Evening, Green. You're looking a little exhausted,” Jason pointed out upon joining Garfield that night at the kitchen island. Out of habit, he grabbed himself a glass and some ice and settled in. Garfield had started without him; a nice bottle of top-shelf vodka that went down as easy as water. “Reason you needed this earlier in the week?”

“Nnnnnah. Jus' feelin' a lil down.”

Jason nodded and poured himself a generous amount to sip at. “I don't mind joining you in your nights of vice, but you think maybe this is getting a little out of hand?”

Jason was the last person Garfield wanted to hear a lecture from. “Yeah, well, maybe if I had parents to show me the difference between right and wrong,” he said with a hiccup. For

tasting like water, the stuff certainly made his head feel lighter than air.

“Kid, you’re preaching to the choir here. You’re certainly not the only one here with dead parents.”

Garfield grimaced. “Geez. Are all the Teen Titans fucked up?”

Jason shrugged. “Probably. It’s not like you guys became heroes out of some misplaced sense of justice or something.”

“Dude, bitter much?”

“I’m just worried. I don’t mind drinking with you—I enjoy it—but I don’t want to see you messing yourself up over something like this. You remember Roy?”

Garfield felt his gut twist. How could he forget Roy? “He was on the original team,” he muttered. “Those were the days.”

Jason laughed. “I keep forgetting you’re the senior of the group. But yeah. Roy’s habits, they started when he was younger than you are now. He didn’t have the team at the time to back him up. Oliver took it pretty hard and things got out of hand. By the time I saw him again, he was only a month sober and that was only because he was imprisoned and slated for execution.”

Garfield shuddered. “You, my friend, have lived a hell of a life.”

Jason held his glass up. “You have too, Green. I’m not here to compare stories. I’m just saying, I’ve never been prouder of him than when he told me he wanted to stay sober. So, if this ever gets to be too much for you, I’ll be around.”

As if. “You’re trying to get out of here at first opportunity!” Garfield pointed out. “Don’t pretend you’re just going to be part of the team once they take that thing out of you. You being here was only ever temporary.”

“Yeah, about that.” He threw back his drink, downing the whole thing like a shot. It never ceased to amaze Garfield how Jason could go from classy to that at the drop of a hat. If he tried something like that, it would hit his throat wrong and he’d be lucky if he didn’t puke. “You’ve been here for a while.”

“Better part of eight years now,” Garfield proclaimed. “Got started a little young.”

“Yeah. What’s your plan?”

“Hm?”

“You’re almost twenty, right? Doesn’t that make it a little tough to be a ‘Teen’ Titan?”

“There isn’t really an...enforced age limit,” Garfield muttered, leaning forward so that his floaty head was grounded on the counter. “I mean, Dick’s around a lot. Vic’s almost... y’know...and Kori—”

“They’ve got the Justice League. Dick’s got Bludhaven. He’s got a day job...I think...Why not drop the whole vigilante business and just go full-time into acting?”

It’s not like he hadn’t considered it. It’s not like he’d planned to stay at the Tower forever. He just...didn’t really have anywhere to go. Not that he couldn’t afford his own place. If he wanted, he could rent a place in Hollywood and throw parties every night. Be his own Gatsby. Surround himself with people who could see him. See past the color of his skin. See past his history...And probably see right through him.

“I like being a hero...”

Jason poured himself another glass and nodded. “I know it’s a hard gig to drop. If I was smarter, I’d have come back from the dead and ditched everything. I should have never gone back to Gotham. But somehow, the life just calls me right back. It’s not great, but I’ve come to accept it. You? You don’t have to.”

“I’m a hero,” Garfield protested. “I was never a sidekick. Sure, maybe I started this a little young, but...it’s who I am. I like saving people. I like seeing the look on their faces when they realize I’m there to protect them. It’s—”

“Addicting?” Jason smirked. “It’s our drug of choice. Dick and I...we’re adrenaline junkies. We get off on the thrill of the chase just as much as the euphoria of knowing we did something to make the world better. But it’s never enough. God knows the last thing we want to do is end up a bitter old freak like Bruce. But here we are, into our twenties and showing no signs of stopping.”

Garfield hadn’t looked at it that way. Saving people wasn’t a bad thing, but he certainly craved the gratification that it afforded him. Sure, he found Blake’s drug habit deplorable, but how was he all that different? He was chasing his own high. “So...we’re doomed.”

Jason slapped Garfield on the back almost too hard. “Absolutely! But it’s always nice to have someone there with you. Don’t want to end up bitter and alone like Bruce.”

“Bruce has you guys,” Garfield pointed out. “You guys and Catwoman from what I hear. Plus doesn’t he have a butler?”

The two of them laughed and Mia poked her head out.

“Hey guys.”

Garfield waved. “Thought you were studying?”

“Fuck that. My head’s full. I’d probably get a better French lesson from Jason than that book at this point.”

“Toujours heureux de vous aider,” Jason said, making Garfield question his own level of inebriation.

Mia flipped him off, found her own glass, and settled in. Jason filled it up and she threw it back much the same way that he did. “That’s the stuff. So, what’re you boys talking about?”

“Drugs.”

“The existential crises of life.”

Mia punched Jason in the arm. “Assholes.”

“Plans,” Garfield corrected. “Or lack thereof.”

“Let’s just start our own team,” Mia joked. “Red Hood and the Rejects. What do you think of that?”

“Why am I in charge of you idiots?”

“Because your name make it alliterative. Speedy and the Spazzes doesn’t have the same ring to it.”

“What about Beast Boy’s Ballers?” Garfield offered.

Jason nodded. I get it. Red Hood and the Rejects sounds best. Why not just take a page out of our favorite movie and stick with ‘the Losers Club’?”

“That makes it sound like we have to come together to fight a clown,” Mia pointed out.

“Dude! We could take down the Joker!” Beast Boy exclaimed, the lightness in his head making him feel powerful and indignant. “Just the three of us! Screw that Bat-guy!”

Jason smiled. “I’d never put you guys in that kind of danger,” he noted, putting his hand on Garfield’s head and messing up his hair. “But thanks for the offer. I’m sure that clown’d be quaking in his boots if he knew I had a whole team devoted to stopping his sorry ass.

Garfield morphed into a dog and nuzzled against Jason’s hand. “Just say the word, Red, and we’d do anything for you. You’re one of us losers, you know?” And he meant that. It was hard to say when, but Jason had become an important member of the team. Garfield couldn’t imagine getting by without him. In fact, a part of him felt he’d follow the guy when the inevitable time to leave came along.”

“To the Losers Club!” Mia said, raising her glass. The three of them toasted to that.

Attack on Titan Tower

Chapter Summary

With the team busy on a mission, Jason takes the opportunity to do some research until someone unexpected decides to drop in.

Chapter Notes

Aaand we're back! Turns out I had more of this chapter ready than I realized. Whee for foresight! Well, I will warn this one gets a little intense, and for anyone who's worried, someone VERY BAD knows the command word, so Jason's in for some problems.

Plus we get a few other Red Hood related characters who I'm happy to finally include!

Anyways, the next chunk is also written, but that's the part that desperately needs to be adjusted and edited. Tags will be updated with this chapter too, but if I miss anything PLEASE let me know.

Otherwise, enjoy!

The Tower felt like No-Man's-Land with most of the team gone. Mia and Beast Boy had elected to stay behind as they simply 'weren't feeling well' and didn't want to be liabilities. Jason offered to help them handle the hangover, but they both retired to their rooms to attempt to sleep it off, leaving Jason on his own yet again.

Drinking nights with Beast Boy turned into nights of existential drabble with Beast Boy and Mia. They had their fun and, true to his word, Tim made sure that no one bothered them about it.

Not that he minded the team anymore, but it was actually relaxing to have the place to himself every now and then. He poured himself a mug of coffee—grateful for how strong Raven tended to brew it but also a little worried that she knew why they needed it that way—and went about his usual routine, confident that Mia wasn't going to tail him this time.

He started at the Tower's main computer. Checking local news, it seemed like the team was handling Jump City well enough, though there was an odd note about temporal rifts that was definitely more of a League matter than a Teen Titan one. Just in case, he shot Roy a quick message with a link to a secure file for him to crack open. No doubt he'd have information on that soon. Next was Gotham. Maybe not the greatest place and...hell, Jason wasn't even sure

that he ever wanted to go back there but...maybe it was old habits or maybe it was some nasty sentimental connection to the place. Either way, he wanted to know what was going on there.

“Jesus, Bruce, what are you even doing?” he muttered upon reading over the list of recent headliners. Gotham wasn’t exactly a bright and shiny city like Metropolis. Some hero receiving the key to the city wasn’t worth front-page news. No. The biggest headliners went to Harley Quinn coming back into town and wreaking havoc with Poison Ivy, Killer Croc escaping from Arkham and eating two inmates in the process (Jason smirked at that one, feeling Waylon had just done his job for him in a small way), and worst of all: ‘Oswald Cobblepot, Local Businessman,’—the false title made Jason sick to his stomach— ‘to Open Iceberg Lounge off Gotham Bay in One Month.’

“Only in Gotham do they celebrate and support a psycho opening a place of obviously sketchy business in a very public location. It’s like he’s flaunting his power.” Jason sent a link with the article to Roy as well along with a few emoji’s that suggested just what he’d like to do to Cobblepot.

After that it was Bludhaven. He liked checking the place out for a few reasons, some of which he wasn’t sure he was willing to address yet. Bludhaven was as much of a wreck as Gotham, but smaller and frighteningly more concentrated in its crazy. And in spite of this, Dick was the only costumed whack-a-do to claim the city. Seeing that the place was doing well with just him was reassuring and spoke to a certain level of Dick’s ability (of course these days Bludhaven was seeing a lot more of a certain redheaded bombshell since Kori had moved into an apartment with Dick). It also spoke to a certain degree of Bruce’s shortcomings that Batman’s city was in a much worse situation than Nightwing’s...

Of course, if things weren’t going well in Bludhaven, it also meant that the Golden Boy wasn’t as perfect as he tried to make everyone believe, and that gave Jason a certain amount of personal gratification as well.

“All Quiet on the Haven Front,” he muttered before taking another sip of coffee. Nothing worth sending Roy’s way to have checked out at least.

Lastly, it was time to look into the implant a little more. Roy had recently sent an app that was supposed to help him get through some of the League’s firewalls in order to get at information he wasn’t supposed to have and allow a third party (just Roy, in this instance) remote access to their encrypted files. In the wrong hands, that app would be beyond dangerous. “Too bad Roy’s such a nice guy,” Jason said with a smirk as he plugged his phone in and uploaded the app. He knew Roy would go through everything with a fine-toothed comb in order to help him out, but just the same, he clicked through files, thumbing through information he wasn’t supposed to have.

“Hel-lo. What’s this?” Connected to information about the odd temporal rifts that had been opening was a video. Jason let it play and watched with interest. It showed the Flash...well, Barry...just walking down the street with his lunch (seemed like a waste of perfectly good speed, but Jason supposed supers could only be super so often). Suddenly it was like reality was ripped open right in front of him and someone reached out.

“Isn’t that—?”

Before the video ended, the room went dark. Jason unplugged his phone quickly, afraid that Roy may have uploaded some virus without mentioning it, but the phone was shut off as well. “EMP?” That didn’t bode well. Especially since most of the doors in the Tower were electric. Jason felt around in the darkness, finding the door, and tried to seek out something to get a grip on in order to force the door open.

No such luck.

“This place is NOT made for cyber-attacks,” he mumbled. “As if Mother-May-I-Murder-Children wasn’t a big enough indicator.” It was annoyingly dark in the closed off computer room, but Jason could recall an air vent up high. Naturally the temperature of the room would be among the most regulated in the Tower, but it certainly wouldn’t be the only room connected to the vent. It’d be a tight squeeze, but if he could just locate the vent, he’d be taking a step in the right direction.

Finding it proved to be less difficult than getting into it. A little leverage and the grate came right off, but even Damian might be a little hard pressed to fit himself in there. “Soon as we get through this, I vote for an updated backup generator system or SOMETHING!” He grunted as he squeezed himself into the vent. This was going to be a struggle. Usually he was averse to the idea that being sleek was beneficial for the vigilante business—as Dick so often loved to argue—but right now he wouldn’t mind if his shoulders weren’t quite as broad. At least he got a kick out of knowing that, sleek as Dick was, he was likely to get stuck in the vent thanks to that perky butt he was so proud of.

With great effort, Jason managed to squeeze himself out into the elevator shaft. As he feared, it seemed like the entire Tower was down. They were under attack (and if by the off-chance Roy was behind it, he’d kick his ass later). The best he could do now was get to Mia and Beast Boy and make sure they were safe.

Go figure, the computer room was on a much lower floor than the living quarters. “Guess I still hadn’t gotten my workout in today,” he mumbled as he began scaling the elevator shaft. What he wouldn’t give for even the non-lethal items he normally carried on his person. A grappling line, a handy dagger, hell, he’d even kill for better shoes—the tennis shoes weren’t bad, but his usual boots had much better grip and traction. On the positive side, one of the few items he’d been allowed to hang onto was his signature red helmet and, with an EMP, it was nothing more than a glorified blindfold waiting back in his room.

When he reached what he was relatively certain was the right floor for the boys’ living quarters, the elevator kicked on and the moving cables nearly caused Jason to lose his grip and fall. He managed to pry the door open before the elevator passed by, apparently heading to the roof. He rushed to Damian’s room first—had to break the control panel to override the code and open it (not that he’d even bother to apologize later). Pristine as the kid’s room was, he was predictable. A few hidden switches here and there covered up various weapons that he wasn’t supposed to have. Jason stashed a few bird-a-rangs, some smoke bombs, and then pressed a domino mask to his face. It was small and low-tech—an older version that hadn’t had the communication lenses installed—but it’d have to do.

He hadn't taken a step out of the door when a green lemur latched onto his face, making him stumble back into Damian's room.

"Green! Get off!"

Beast Boy yelped and swapped into a bird to fly at Jason's eye level. "Sorry! You don't look like you with that mask on."

"What, my cheek bones don't give me away?"

"No, I mean...Dude, we're under attack!"

"Shh. I got that. Something's going down on the roof. We need to regroup with Mia and figure out what's going on."

Beast Boy nodded and morphed into a gorilla, smashing right out Damian's window, flying out a little ways as a humming bird, then hurled himself as a gorilla again a floor below.

"EYAAAH!"

Jason blinked a couple of times. His plan had been to use the elevator shaft again, so he couldn't really fault Beast Boy for his innovative option, but it was bold. He found a grapple launcher in Damian's arsenal and used it to get down in order to follow Beast Boy. What he found, rather than just an annoyed Speedy and a human/animal hybrid wrecking ball, was a woman standing over a gorilla, pointing the sharp edge of a poleaxe at its neck.

"Holy shit!" Jason threw himself at the woman, who took his full weight and held him in place easily. "Yeah, I figured that wasn't my best move." She pulled Jason's arm around his back and took him down, pinning him to the floor with her knee.

"I swear, the idiots just keep coming," she ground out, putting more pressure on his back.

"Whoa! Wait! He's—I mean, they're good guys! Please don't make me loose this!"

The woman scoffed and got off of Jason, letting him get up. He helped a more human-sized Beast Boy back to his feet as well and looked over at Mia, who was already in her full Speedy gear, arrow still readily pointed at the intruder.

This intruder, however, was NOT the type of person Jason expected to hit the Tower with an EMP. She looked more like the kind of girl who'd go for the direct approach. Hell, she looked like a gladiator. But the way that she was dressed and the way that she carried herself, he could make one guess. "Amazonian?"

The girl planted the tip of her axe in Mia's floor and leaned against the handle. "Yes, though not from that pansy island of Themyscira that Diana has made public knowledge. And what are you supposed to be? Jacket-Guy, Red Arrow, and the Jolly Green Giant?"

"H-hey," Beast Boy muttered, still a little thrown by how easily she'd taken him down as a gorilla.

“Look, can I just assume you’re not here to kill us?”

The girl raised an eyebrow. “I suppose that remains to be seen, but no. That was not my intention.”

“And you didn’t set off an EMP?”

“I came with my axe. Whatever made your faulty tower shut down was not my doing.”

Jason cracked his knuckles and popped his back. “Alright then. Red Hood, that’s Speedy, and that’s Beast Boy.”

The woman nodded. “Artemis.”

“Like the goddess?” Mia wondered.

“Like my name. I am Artemis of the Amazonians of Bana-Mighdall.”

Jason whistled softly. “Right. Well I’ll even the odds here a little. You can call me Jason.”

“You’re just going to tell her your name??” Mia snapped. “How about your address while you’re at it?”

Jason shrugged. “Here. She can’t do much with just a name.”

Artemis tilted her head and smiled at Jason. “You’re bold, Jason. I like that. But get in my way again and I won’t be so gentle.”

“No doubt in my mind. I’ve got to ask though, what are you doing here if you’re not attacking?”

She stopped leaning against her axe and it dissipated into nothing. “Black Mask has recently acquired a weapon of biblical proportions that...sounds like the weapon I have been seeking.”

Jason slapped his face and groaned loudly.

“Uhh, did she say something?” Beast Boy muttered.

“You mean to tell me Black-Fucking-Mask is here?”

“I don’t pretend to know what he uses that gimp mask for, but yes. I tracked him from Gotham to here. He is to receive the weapon today from a seller connected to Lex Corp.”

Jason groaned again. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Do I look like the type who jokes?”

“Red, what’s the deal? Why is this bad? Talk to us!”

Jason nodded and explained, “Sionis...Black Mask...he and I have a bit of a...history.” He supposed that’s what he could call firing a rocket at him from a building across the way before using the man’s paranoia to break the Joker out of Arkham in order for Jason to stage his long sought-after reunion... “He’s not my biggest fan. Add the fact that Lex was recently inducted into the actual fucking Justice League and I swear it’s like karma is taking an actual dump on me.” He looked at Mia. “You have a crossbow you might spare?”

She shook her head. “Sorry. Ollie didn’t like me having something so lethal.”

“Oh yeah, ‘cuz arrows NEVER kill anybody,” Jason said exasperatedly. “Okay. Fuck it. Black Mask is picking up some biblical weapon and then probably testing it out on Titan Tower; the only hero base dumb enough to VERY VISIBLY advertise itself for what it is. Awesome. What’s this weapon supposed to do?”

“The Bow of Ra? Its full power has yet to be seen, but it is said that it can destroy stars.”

Beast Boy began choking on nothing.

“Great. Awesome. Just how I wanted to spend my day; reenacting Star Wars without the benefit of anything remotely like a laser.” He took out his cell phone, rebooted it, and sent a quick message to Roy. “Just my fuckin’ luck.”

“What, you think we can’t handle some two-bit thematic Gotham villain?” Mia asked, a bit insulted by how much Jason had dismissed her already. “We’ve got this.”

“Ha. Yeah. I’d feel a lot better knowing their firepower before putting you two in danger.”

“We’re not helpless,” Beast Boy threw in. “Hell, I’m the only one between the three of us with any superpowers!”

“And BM won’t give two shits whether you’re a green dragon or a green-teen when he has his men gun you down. You guys need to get out of here. Find out where the rest of the team is. Make sure they’re okay.”

“While you, what, take him on on your own? Yeah, you don’t even have your usual gear,” Mia pointed out. “You’re being ridiculous. The three of us...um, four if Artemis would be willing to help...we can take him!”

“Not a risk I’m taking. Look, I’m probationary, whatever, but I’m also an acting mentor. You guys are my responsibility right now, and I fully intend to keep you alive.” Something on Mia’s dresser started beeping and blinking red. Jason retrieved what she recognized as one of her earpiece communicators and tucked it into his ear. “You in?”

[I swear, never a dull day with you,] Roy’s voice responded in his ear. [Heads up, though, I don’t have visual on the inside of the Tower. Looks like your systems were hacked. Want me to alert the League?]

“No. Can’t risk it with Luthor in their ranks.”

[Batman then?]

Jason sucked in a deep breath, already fighting the numerous protests coming to mind. “Tell him the Titans need assistance. Hopefully he’ll make the kids his first priority.”

“Who are you talking to?” Beast Boy asked.

Jason shrugged. “Little birdie decided to help me out. Don’t worry about it.”

[Oh, holy shit.]

“More bad news?”

[I don’t know about Death Star, but there is definitely a swol-Super-clone on the roof! You need to get out of there!]

“Yeah, not an option.” He looked at Beast Boy, who he knew could hear the earpiece from afar. “Find the rest of the team. Wondergirl, Superboy, and Kid Flash may be our best shot at taking a Super-clone down.”

“I grow tired of these petty debates. Every second wasted is another second the Bow of Ra may be in the wrong hands!” Artemis moved towards the door and Jason caught her arm. “I already commended you once for your boldness, Hood. Now you are simply testing my nerves.”

“Yeah. My bad. I’m sure you can easily kick my ass into next week later. For now, I’d appreciate it if you’d cooperate with me.”

“Does that mean you have a plan?”

He looked at Mia pleadingly. “I’m just trying to look out for you guys.”

“You can’t leave,” she reminded him. “What if they try to take you away?”

“Then I’d feel a lot better knowing it’s not just you two looking for me. Find the others, bring them back, we’ll work out the kinks after that.”

She nodded reluctantly, and Beast Boy morphed into a pterodactyl and waited for her to get situated on his back. “We’ll be back quickly, so don’t get yourself killed.”

“Where’s the faith?” Jason waited for Beast Boy to get them out of sight before looking back at Artemis. “Okay. Weird question: can you fly?”

Something about the whole mission felt off to Cassandra. Ever since the moment they left the Tower, it was like there was something in the back of her head, warning them to go back. But she wasn’t in charge. She was still new. She would just remain vigilant and ensure that her team made it through whatever was thrown their way.

Then the slight glint of a blade in the sunlight caught her eye from a distance and her blood ran cold. She hurried to the front of the team as they stepped up to the bank that was in the

process of being robbed and held her hands out to stop them.

“What the hell, chica? We’ve got work to do,” Jaime noted, trying to step around her only to have her move in his way.

“Bad! Very bad!”

Damian took her warning very seriously. “What did you see?”

But Cassandra wasn’t even given a chance to explain. A red Kryptonite bullet suddenly burst through Conner’s shoulder. He cried out in pain and confusion, his eyes unleashing an unstable blast of heat vision that tore a line straight through the bank. Jaime’s Scarab responded in kind, morphing his hands into cannons and training them on Conner.

“Dios mio! You’ve got to calm down, Supes! No, you stupid bug! We do not just blast every threat! Why do you have to be like this?”

Raven, in an attempt to protect both boys from each other, placed them in two separate barriers. They both shot at the dark domes around them, making Raven wince. “I can’t keep them like this for long.”

“I’ll follow where the bullet was fired from,” Wally offered.

“Kid Flash, wait!” Damian reached out but only felt the slightest tingle of electricity through the tips of his fingers as Wally sped off.

Kori and Dick didn’t take the sudden threats lightly. Kori took to the air to get a better idea of who was around them and Dick, having already pinpointed an enemy in the distance, hurtled a wingding to stun them. He’d get answers out of them if it was the last thing he did.

Nearby screams made the team wince and Donna knew what she had to do. “The bank robbery wasn’t just a front,” she pointed out. “There are hostages.”

Dick nodded. “Damian, stay with her. Get everyone out of there.”

“But—”

Cassandra used her cape to block a couple of poison dipped darts before they could implant themselves firmly into Damian’s face. “Habibi, go!”

Damian finally understood what Cassandra had seen. Donna flew into the bank from a high window and he gave Dick and Cassandra one last look before finding a subtler means of entrance.

“Cass, any idea why the League of Assassins is in Jump City?” Dick asked as the two of them hurried to the assassin he’d downed.

“No. Very bad. Shiva too.”

Dick nodded slightly. “So, we’re really in for it then. Think you can handle the assassins while I take care of the others?”

Cassandra steeled herself. “Stop them. Save friends.”

“At least we’re on the same page.”

Roman saw this whole exchange as beneath him. Why it had to go down at the ridiculous Teen Titans Tower was beyond him. It seemed to invite more problems than anything, but the tip he’d gotten from his new partner was difficult to ignore, so he arranged for the weapon he purchased to be brought to the Tower for a test run.

To ensure that there weren’t as many problems as there could be, he had his men and the extra forces from his temporary partner handle the Titans out in Jump City. It was almost too easy to take care of them. His men created a large-scale hostage situation to lure them out, and thanks to the information that their more mysterious partner had given them, he had weapons ready for everyone on the current Titan roster (according to his men there wasn’t an archer or a human zoo, but that seemed inconsequential). Now that the power to the Tower was back on, he knew the true hunt was on. Even waiting for the weapon shipment to arrive, he felt antsy. After all, this was his chance to take revenge on the bastard who tore his empire apart in one fell swoop back in Gotham...If this really got him a direct confrontation with the Red Hood, it’d be worth every penny.

“Release the clone,” he demanded as his men moved the secure containment unit that the Super-clone was being kept in.

“Sir, it was recommended that we don’t let him out until we have a secure location to let him ___”

“Shut up, Li! He’s already received the nano-treatments. The only containment needed is my brain. Now release him!”

The men nervously went through the steps to open the containment unit.

Almost immediately upon opening his eyes, the clone began gasping for air. Roman was going to be very put out if this Lex Corp. weapon was anything less than top quality. Watching it break down on the roof right in front of him, he contemplated the ways he’d make Lex Luthor himself pay for his incompetence.

When at last the hulking clone settled down, it was shockingly deformed; it was like it had swollen up and now was too big. Bigger than Superman himself. And paler. For a creature that would rely so heavily on sunlight, his pale complexion was a bit worrisome. But they locked eyes and it was like he could feel a switch flip on. “Ah. There you are.”

The clone’s brain was a mess of memories that clearly belonged to the actual Man of Steel. Roman might be able to gleam some important information from those memories if given the time to sort through the clone’s head. For now, its thoughts were those of a child; simple,

curious, afraid. It was an easy thing to manipulate. He tested his dominion over the clone, satisfied to find that he had total control. “Alright then. Time to hunt a Hood.”

The door to the roof opened behind Roman, making him spin on his brogues. He’d have to shoot the idiot who made him scuff his shoes, so he drew his gun, only to point it at Red Hood himself, hands in the air showing submission.

“Hey! Did I miss the unboxing party? Not every day a lethal weapon gets delivered to this tower.”

Roman scoffed. “Unbelievable. They really have you on a leash then. I’ll have to thank that jerk for the tip.”

“Oh? Somebody tell you where to find me, old man? You must have a helluva partner to get a bead on me.”

It was easy to see that Hood was trying to bait him, but what did it matter? Hood was good, but he was just a man. Roman had much more than that on his side. With a single thought, he could have his Super-clone crush the poor bastard’s skull.

But that would be too easy. No. He wanted to watch the freak suffer. He wanted the last thought in that little shit’s head to be in absolute reverence of Roman’s victory over him. He wanted to hear that irritating voice begging for mercy that would never come. And if his partner wouldn’t allow it, well, he’d just have to take out someone else along the way.

“Guess he is. Didn’t know what to make of him. Showed up in Gotham a lot like you did; taking over from the shadows. But unlike you, he’s reasonable and worth working with.”

Hood had the nerve to scoff, giving Roman the strong urge to make his new weapon rip that smile right off his face (as well as some skin). The mental image was enough to give him the brilliant idea to make things a little more even between the two of them: he’d melt a red mask to the little fucker’s face. Give him a taste of real pain, only maybe he’d make sure to melt the mouth shut as well...

“Sounds to me like someone’s using you as a means to an end again.”

“Well, he offered me something I just couldn’t resist.”

“So that’s what Luthor had coming your way, huh? Big broken Super-Clone? Didn’t he have one of these screw-ups help him out once? So hard to keep track of clones. Did you know we’ve got a much better looking one on the Titans? Don’t tell him I said that, though. If anything’s swollen on that kid, it’s his ego.”

“It’s not the only tool Luthor sold me. I also happen to have the sort of weapon I’m told Amazonians would covet.” The thought of testing the bow’s firepower on Red Hood was also enticing. So many choices. “Of course, I found someone else who was willing to outbid me but didn’t want to pay Luthor a cent. Figured I’d invest.”

“Aww, and here I was looking forward to finding out where you’d shoot me, and it’s not even here?”

It was a mocking tone, but one Roman would make him regret very soon. “Don’t worry. I’ve got tons of other things that’d look good pinning you to a wall.”

“Well, since I’ve gone and made your job easier, maybe you’d consider friendly conversation before having your way with me?”

“Or, I could have any one of my men put one between your eyes right now. What’s stopping me from that?”

Hood shrugged. “No need to be bashful. I know what you really think of me. You’d never make my death that simple. Not after what I almost let the Joker do to you. And you’re in luck. I’m feeling chatty. Maybe I’ll tell you a few things you really want to know.”

There were merits to be had from getting a guy like the Red Hood to talk. But Roman couldn’t think of many. “I’d much rather hear you scream.”

One stray thought and the clone shot at Hood fast enough to knock one of Roman’s men’s hat off and startle a few into dropping their guns. But the impact made Roman’s jaw set. “You must be joking.”

The clone had his fist out, having tried to punch Hood into oblivion, and the guy caught it and was, impossibly, holding it in place.

“Me am...confused,” the stupid clone blurted out, to Roman’s dismay. It wasn’t supposed to be capable of speech without his allowance.

“S-see? If you’d let me...talk...I could have told you about Supe’s weakness to...magic!” He pushed the clone’s fist aside and Roman caught a glimpse of light peeking out from under Hood’s jacket sleeve.

“Great. And here I thought you were a man of science,” Roman spat.

“Boy did you think wrong.”

Jason summoned an All-Blade after his clash with the big clone, glad to see that his will was still intact after the sheer mental strain of not running when something that big came flying at him. He was proud of his ability to piss off his opponents, but he hadn’t anticipated Black Mask’s first move to be to sic the clone on him.

At least he’d established that the Bow of Ra wasn’t there. He silently wished Artemis luck on her quest to find it, figuring she had no further reason to stick around.

Now it was just him and, well, Black Mask’s small army of armed goons AND a huge Super-clone that honestly seemed more confused than angry.

Jason swung his sword, fully meaning to maim the clone, but the blade vanished before it could land a hit. The action, however, still startled the clone, making him stumble and trip backwards.

“Idiot! You’re stronger than him! Why are you freaking out?” Black Mask shouted.

Jason took advantage of the confusion and turned on Roman’s men. The All-Blades were the only weapons that couldn’t be taken from him—manifestations of his soul and all. The real challenge was keeping them non-lethal. They were as sharp as he was, and even though he was trapped at the Tower, the blades hadn’t dulled. But swords weren’t meant to leave survivors. They were tools for killing. Every goon he struck down would live to see another day (some with a little more medical attention than others). He just had to get through them. Take them all down, then subdue Black Mask and figure out what had happened to the team. It seemed easy enough...

...no...

It was too easy.

Black Mask stopped chiding his clone in favor of watching Jason fight through his own men like a hot knife through butter. Jason could feel the intensity of those dark eyes focusing on him. He hated not being able to read Roman’s face. It made it difficult to anticipate his next move. If he sent the clone after him again, Jason would like to be able to brace for the attack. The magic in his tattoo would help him to keep on more even ground, but it was nothing more than a weapon should he ever need one against a Kryptonian. If Superman chose to rip his arm clean off, for example, it’d be pretty useless.

Not wanting to waste another moment, Jason called forth the second All-Blade and went for Roman.

“Heel.”

It was like the air had been stolen right out of Jason’s lungs. He dropped his blades and they fizzled back into the confines of his soul. Not two feet away from Roman, he got down on his knees, knitting his fingers behind his head.

“How?”

Roman slow-clapped. “Truly a work of art. I must say, it’s good to know I can trust my new partner not to lie to me.”

The Super-clone got back up and stood by Jason, as if waiting for the command to put an end to it.

“To think the League would see fit to punish the Red Hood for his indiscretions in a manner that looked a lot more villainous. To steal someone’s free will like this? How... perverse,” Roman purred as he began to pace around Jason, circling him like a shark circles its prey. “A couple treatments from my techno-organic virus mixed with some conditioning and I’ll bet I could get you in a few other compromising positions. How does that sound?”

Jason scoffed. He knew all about Mask's virus. His 'mind-control' that he was so proud of. It was a faulty process. All it took was a strong will and the control could be broken. It wasn't surprising that Roman was able to control a fresh Super-clone, it couldn't have a very complex mind. Not yet at least.

"You're giving me mixed signals, Roman," Jason said, doing his best to hide the quiver in his voice. "Do you want me dead or do you want me as a living-trophy? Can't have both."

Roman stopped in front of Jason and grabbed his chin, leaning down to speak a little closer to his level. "You don't have the first clue what I can and can't have."

Jason wanted to drive his head into Mask's...skull?...It would probably hurt, but it would be so worth it to piss the freak off. Keeping the count in mind, he waited for the exact moment when he'd be able to make Roman pay for putting him on his knees.

"Clone, I have an idea. Why don't we make him pay for scaring you?" Roman suggested. The clone moved placing a large hand around Jason's left bicep. "We can't let him have a fighting chance, after all."

Jason's eyes flicked to the clone. "H-hey, what're you doing there, big guy?"

"Me am sorry. Me...me not wanting to..."

"Enough!" Roman shouted.

Jason's jaw clapped shut, his teeth biting right through part of his tongue as the clone popped his shoulder right out of the socket like it was the easiest thing in the world. The limb hung limply at Jason's side, demonstrating at least that his body had to properly function in order to for the implant to affect it.

"There. That wasn't so hard. And I'm impressed. I thought for sure that would make you scream," Roman taunted.

Jason shuddered as the pain really registered, but smiled up at Roman, showing off his bloody teeth. "I...I wanted to...make you work for it..."

Roman scoffed. "Break his other arm as well. Maybe that'll teach him to talk back."

The clone reached out only to be blocked by the flat side of a large axe.

"I've had enough of this." Artemis proceeded to catch the clone's retaliating punch, actually managing to push him backward.

"Who's this bitch?" Roman shouted, drawing his gun back out and attempting to aim it at her while maintaining his control of the clone well enough to keep up with Artemis as she continued to fight it back.

"Me am no understanding!" the clone whined, doing its best to take Artemis' attacks without flinching. "Me am not super?"

“Shut up! Damnit! I thought the Amazonian teenager was back with the team?”

“Tch. This girl’s all woman,” Jason said with a smirk as the time limit ran out. Roman turned to point the gun at him, but he slapped it hard and swept the guy’s feet out from under him before jumping on his chest and pressing his right hand over the guy’s bony mouth. “Thanks for the save, hot-stuff!”

Artemis smiled as the clone attempted to break her defenses. “Call me that again and I’ll see you dropped off this ridiculous tower.”

“Heel!” Li shouted, nervously pointing a gun at Jason from behind.

Jason winced. Roman threw him off and he was forced back onto his knees, pressing his one good hand behind his head while the other still hung by. Li helped her boss back to his feet and, after straightening his suit, he raked his hand into Jason’s hair, forcing his head to arch back painfully far.

“Batman helped you once too, in spite of you being a man more of my level. How is it you keep pulling these interesting friends out of the woodworks?”

“Must be my...magnetic personality.”

BANG!

One of the goons had recovered enough to retrieve his gun and he shot Artemis in the thigh, forcing her to drop to one knee as the clone finally got the upper hand.

“Would you look at that? She’s not bullet proof. And neither are you.” To Jason’s horror, the clone struck Artemis hard enough to knock her out and Roman shoved the barrel of his gun into Jason’s mouth, pressing hard enough that Jason could barely breathe around it. Roman put one foot on Jason’s knee, as if to hold him in place. He used the extra leverage to force the barrel as far in as possible. Jason’s heart raced as Roman pulled back the hammer, threatening to shoot right down his throat. “Now this is a much better look for you. Completely wrecked.”

Jason closed his eyes, praying that it would be quick, but Roman took the gun out of his mouth and hit him in the temple, knocking him out with it instead.

Titans and Outlaws

Chapter Summary

Black Mask has taken over Titan Tower and Jason's paying for it dearly. But with the help of an old friend, he starts to turn the tides.

Chapter Notes

Heyo! Fair warning now, this chapter starts off with Jason in a bit of a brutal spot. It will get better! Uhh, in that, after this chapter, he will NOT be in such immediate danger!

Also revealed this chapter: the mysterious partner who's been feeding Black Mask (among others) information on Jason!

Not much else to say. Do be warned regarding that brutality, though. Black Mask's not a nice man. But of course, Jason's not made of glass (no matter how broken he gets).

“Heel.”

Artemis winced as she watched Jason’s body strain from its hanging position, his muscles tensing as his body was forced to try to assume a particular pose that was simply not possible while his wrists were bound above his head and he was dangling from the ceiling.

Black Mask had had his men strip the guy out of his shirt while he had been unconscious, and they’d found numerous weapons hidden on his person and wound up testing a few on him; slicing him up with odd little bladed throwing weapons and gassing him with smoke bombs. The latter had woken him up briefly only for Black Mask himself to beat him back into unconsciousness. Throughout all that the Super clone had been forced to keep her subdued, which really only consisted of him staying close enough to pin her if needed. She accepted the reprieve but felt a little sorry for the Red Hood.

“Me am not liking this,” the clone whispered to her. “Me am not wanting to hurt him.”

It was interesting how the clone demonstrated understanding and sympathy. He was a simple creature; only a few hours old at this point and controlled by a sadistic freak for the full duration of his life. It pulled at her heart just a little, in spite of herself. “It’s okay. Red Hood there isn’t as delicate as you think.”

“Red...Him?”

“Red Hood. He’s actually something of a superhero himself,” she whispered. “Not unlike Superman.”

“Soo-purr-man?” The name seemed to strike a chord with the big guy. He put his hands up like he was flying and muttered, “Pup pup away?”

She smiled. “Yeah. Pup pup. Red Hood’s like him.”

The big guy smiled slightly. “Red Her am nice. Bizarro am liking Red Her.”

“Is that your name?” she asked. “Mine’s Artemis.”

Bizarro looked like he wanted to say more, but Black Mask wouldn’t have it.

“Get over here, you useless waste of space!”

The childish joy on the big guy’s face was gone in an instant as his eyes glinted with a purple hue and he was pulled over to where Jason was hanging. He’d just stopped straining and looked up at Bizarro with a sheen of sweat visible in the light.

“Heel!”

Again, he strained, and Black Mask laughed, raising a martini glass before having Bizarro punch him square in the gut. The sound of the impact made Artemis wince, but she could tell that the big guy hadn’t put his full strength behind the punch—having already been on the receiving end of that. He whimpered, clearly alarmed when Jason spat out a mouthful of blood.

“Nk. S’okay,” Jason rasped out, more blood spilling from his lips as he spoke. A dark bruise was already forming on his abdomen where Bizarro’s fist had connected. “I know…it’s not you…”

It was rather noble, in Artemis’ opinion, that Jason worried over Bizarro even in his situation.

“Me am sorry. Me am not wanting to hurt Red Him.”

She sighed. The big guy had taken to addressing them as Red Him and Red Her. She was beginning to feel almost attached to him. She’d have to make Black Mask pay for abusing such a large child.

“Fucking childish garbage.” Speaking of, the bastard’s words made Bizarro wince as if they could actually harm him. “Sentiment won’t get you anywhere in this world.” He downed his martini and handed the empty glass to his secretary before approaching Jason. With Bizarro focused on them, it wasn’t a bad opportunity for Artemis to get free and turn the tides in hers and Jason’s favor. But his still-straining body suggested that he would still be forced into submission at this point, which would benefit no one. She’d have to wait.

Black Mask took Jason’s chin between his thumb and pointer finger, forcing him to look up. His Adam’s apple bobbed as he choked slightly on the blood still pooling in his mouth. “You

don't look so tough like this. Hard to believe you once brought my criminal empire to its knees."

Though the situation looked bleak, Jason maintained a façade of cool confidence. "Is...is it really so hard? Just cut off a few heads and watch...watch the chickens run around."

Artemis wasn't sure what that meant, but something in the tone of Jason's voice suggested that she might not want to know.

Black Mask scoffed, a bit of spit escaping from his lip-less face and landing on Jason's. "You went from a real threat to the Justice League's personal lap dog. It's pathetic. If I had my way, I'd make that stupid clone rip you in half right here as a present for your little kiddies."

Artemis noticed something with that statement, and apparently Jason had caught on too. "You're not in charge," he mumbled. It was less of a question and more of a taunt. Black Mask didn't seem to like working with others. To demonstrate his frustrations, he elected to ram his knee up into Jason's purpling abdomen hard enough to knock the wind right out of him. She nearly broke the ropes binding her right then and there, but someone else stepped up.

"That's enough."

The voice came from a woman whom Artemis hadn't even noticed before that moment. The woman was distastefully dressed in all black, exposing far more of her chest than was necessary or even practical. Her long dark hair curtained her face as she stepped over to Jason, dismissing Black Mask. The grumpy man returned to the large couch and his secretary replaced the previous martini with a fresh one.

Jason's body finally went slack as the woman drew closer. "Miss me?" he said, indicating a level of familiarity that was unnerving.

"Always." The woman placed a hand over his chest and he withered slightly under her touch. There was a twisted degree of affection there that was almost palpable. Like she was reassured just feeling his heartbeat under her palm. Jason's face contorted in anguish as her hand slid down slowly over the dark bruise, clearly applying more pressure than the seemingly intimate gesture called for. "Does the Pit still aid in your recovery? If not, I'm sure another dip will clear this right up."

"Yeah, not happening. Still recovering from the last time you let me take a dip in your old man's bath."

"Oh Jason. Recovering from that would mean dying. Surely you don't have a death wish. Not after everything I've done for you."

Artemis had no idea what they were talking about, but the way that the woman continued to invade Jason's space and touch him without prompting made her feel sick to her stomach. But he maintained his stoicism and continued to push for information. "Mind telling me why you're working with BM over there?"

“Not really my usual associate, no? But we have a mutual partner who recognized a common goal between us.” She raked her hand through his hair and he pulled away from her, earning a devious smile from the woman. “Our mutual partner is particularly fascinated with you.” She pressed her hand to his abdomen again and this time pushed hard enough to make him swing, drawing a low groan from him that made Bizarro whine. “You don’t get to ask any more questions. It’s my turn.”

Jason scoffed, looking like he was ready to tell her where she could shove her questions, but another press against his abdomen had him wincing and keeping his mouth shut.

“Why?”

“M ‘fraid you’ll have to be more specific.”

“Why didn’t you see through your plan? Why is Batman still alive?”

That was a piece of information Artemis probably didn’t want. She wasn’t familiar with any vigilante who went by ‘Red Hood’ before encountering him at the Tower. But there wasn’t a soul who didn’t know of Batman.

“S’not worth it,” Jason spat. “B’s good. Just ‘cuz he wasn’t good enough to save me...Just ‘cuz he’s not good enough to actually STOP scum like Mr. Good-Looking over there,” Jason nodded towards Black Mask, who scoffed and flipped him off in response, “Doesn’t mean he’s not good.”

“You were supposed to be better,” the woman said angrily. “You were supposed to become the knight that Gotham truly needed. And yet I come to learn that not only has my own flesh and blood betrayed our goals, but you have abandoned them as well.”

“What, your offspring prove he was more of a Wayne than an Al Ghul? Sucks to be you.” She turned away at the mention of her child. “What? Finally realize B’s just not that into you so you thought you’d make a little him to love you unconditionally, and then even THAT didn’t work out the way you wanted? Someone’s desperate.”

The woman sighed. “He was right. You’ve let them poison your mind. To allow this treatment after having opened yourself up to them...it’s disappointing.”

“No one said I liked the leash, but the collar suited me better than ‘assassin’ ever did.” Jason straightened as much as he could in his position, impressively looking more in control of the situation than he was. “Now, let’s talk about who told you my mind was poisoned. I’m racking my brain here. Some guy who’s got it in for me and ISN’T that idiot over there? I didn’t leave the mentors you found for me alive to keep causing me problems. I know S’aru and I don’t always see eye to eye, but he wouldn’t go through this much trouble. Come on. You can tell me. It won’t give me any leg up, given my situation.”

The woman waved a hand at him dismissively. “Like you said, it doesn’t matter. Roman, I think he could stand for a little more damage before I take him home. Go ahead. I might as well test the limits of the Pit’s ability to keep you whole.”

Jason pulled against the ropes as Black Mask got back to his feet and had Bizarro stand at attention. Artemis' jaw set as she realized that it was going to be now or never.

"Me am to hurt Red Him again?"

"Simping whelp! You're going to make the boy wish he was never born!"

Bad move, talking to Bizarro like that. Artemis would make Black Mask pay for his transgressions. She closed her eyes and felt her connection to Mistress, pulling at it and willing it over to Jason.

Bizarro raised his hands up and balled them into fists. Jason looked up at the big guy and gave him a bloody smile. "It's okay. I know it's not you."

Just before Bizarro could crush his skull, Mistress sliced through the rope keeping Jason in place and he dodged to the side as Bizarro put an alarmingly deep dent in the floor. Mistress had landed close enough that Jason was able to cut the ropes on his wrists, and then the idiot tried to pull her from where she had remained, nearly popping his other arm out of the socket.

"The hell? This thing weighs a ton!"

Artemis rolled her eyes and Mistress returned to her, cutting her own ropes. She got to her feet, ignoring the burning pain of the bullet wound in her leg. "Mistress is not something mortal men can simply wield at will."

"No! You fucking bitch! I'll break your fucking neck!" Black Mask was all-but foaming at the mouth as he made Bizarro turn on her.

The woman stepped over to Jason, ready to drive her heels into him, when a single red arrow shattered the large window to the room, landing just next to him and emitting a gas.

"About damned time," Jason mumbled, getting to his feet. He ran right at the window, to Artemis horror, and leapt out. Without even thinking, she jumped after him, pushing out much further, knocking them both out of range of the ground and instead over the ocean.

"Truly a stupid move, Jason," she growled in his ear. But he didn't respond. In fact, his body felt limp in her arms. They hit the water and she found that he was unnervingly unresponsive, though his almost glowing green eyes remained wide open. She brought him to the surface and a young man with hair almost as red as her own helped to pull them onto the sand.

"Something is wrong with him," she told the stranger, her voice dripping with concern.

The young man slapped Jason and he began coughing immediately, choking out the salt water that had filled his lungs. "He's got this stupid implant that won't let him leave the island," the guy explained. "Basically shuts him down the moment he's past land."

"Is this the same device that forces him to his knees at the mention of a single word?"

"Yup, that's the one. By the way, uh, I don't think we've met."

“Not the time for formalities.” She looked up and locked eyes with Bizarro as he floated out from where they’d jumped. “If you’re the one who shot the arrow, you’ll take care of him. I’ll take care of Biz.”

“Biz? Hang on, I don’t even know what—”

But she leapt up and clashed with Bizarro, sending them both up to the rooftop.

It wasn’t hard to find the team; just follow the chaos. Gar flew them in as close as he could safely. It looked like Damian was doing his best so keep civilians safe from...Superboy?

“You’ve got to get me in closer,” Mia said, loading up a Kryptonite arrow from her quiver. “I don’t want to hit him, but we at least need to get it close enough to slow him down.”

“Hang on!” Gar folded his wings in close and they dove towards the ground like a missile. “RAE! A LITTLE HELP!?”

Raven’s eyes shifted slightly and, just as they would have collided with the concrete, a dark portal opened up, spitting them back out in the air overhead.

“How was that?”

Mia was now clutching onto Beast Boy’s neck for dear life. “G-g-good job,” she muttered. She’d managed to shoot Conner in the foot, keeping him in place.

Seeing that he’d stopped shooting heat vision, the Scarab listened more to Jaime’s demands and morphed his arm into a large set of pliers. “That’s more like it!” He tackled Conner, jamming the pliers into the spot in his shoulder where the red Kryptonite was still lodged. Even Raven winced as he ripped out the red bullet. As soon as it had been removed, the Scarab swallowed it, keeping it contained, and removed the arrow from his foot, hiding it away as well.

Conner swayed and Donna caught him before he could fall. “Welcome back.”

“Damnit. I’m sorry. I...I was just so angry,” he mumbled.

“It’s not your fault,” Damian said, joining them. “Black Mask’s gunmen provided the right weapon and the League of Assassins provided the right distraction. An odd pairing, for sure, but what I’d really like to know is where they got Red Kryptonite. The only documented amount on Earth is in the care of Lex Luthor.” He scowled, pulling out his communicator as Batman called.

[Robin. I got an emergency alert from Green Arrow. The Tower is under attack, it would seem. What’s your status?]

“Nothing we can’t handle,” Damian all but growled. “Though, admittedly, I wasn’t expecting Mother to resurface so soon.”

[Talía?]

“Most likely. We still need to locate Nightwing, Starfire, Black Bat, and Kid Flash. Shiva’s here.”

[I’m on my way to you.]

“No. Black Bat can handle Shiva. If the Tower’s under attack, Red Hood’s in danger.”

Batman seemed to contemplate for a while. [Talía and Jason have...history.]

“Yeah, she was there when he came back. I know.”

[She helped him to recover from the madness of the Pit.]

“Hell of a job she did.”

[I need you to be prepared for anything she may throw at you.]

“I expect nothing from Mother. What connection we had was severed the moment she tried to have me killed.”

[I’m on my way now. Let me know the moment your team’s heading to the Tower.]

And Batman cut communication.

“Dios mio. Your madre? I mean, you always boast about being an assassin, but...I don’t know...it always felt like a joke, you know?” Jaime noted.

“Do I seem like the type who partakes in trivial humor?”

No one could respond to that.

“Still, if Mother is involved, Red Hood is in serious danger. Superboy, if you’ve recovered enough, I need you to fly up and use your super vision to locate the others.”

Conner nodded and righted himself. “I...I think I can manage that.” He floated up a bit unsteadily until he was over the city’s skyline and checked over the area. The moment he located the others, he flew towards them. Donna, Vic, Jaime, Raven, and Gar were all quick to follow. Donna carried Mia (who was too nervous to hop back onto Gar’s back after their little dive-bomb) and Vic took care of Damian.

What they came upon was worrisome, to say the least. Lady Shiva had a sword through Wally’s left calf, holding him where he was, and another pressed against Kori’s neck deep enough to have already drawn blood. Dick was frozen where he stood while Cassandra waited calmly, eyes locked with her mother.

“On it!” Conner was on them in a heartbeat, getting the blade off of Kori and shoving the assassin against the alley wall. He pulled the sword out of Wally’s leg before anyone could tell him that it was a bad idea.

“Cyborg, cauterize it before he bleeds out,” Damian said the moment they landed. “Raven, help KF with the pain.”

Dick rushed to Kori and tried to pull her back, but her eyes glowed with rage as she turned on Lady Shiva. “How DARE you!”

“Star, wait!”

Cassandra leapt into the path of the Star-Bolt, taking it to her cape. Kori calmed down immediately, afraid she’d hurt her teammate, but Cassandra seemed perfectly fine.

“Thank you, daughter. Until next time.”

Something hit Cassandra in the back and she stumbled forward.

“NO!” Damian launched birdarangs at Lady Shiva, but she was already making her escape and nothing they did was going to let them catch up with her. He hurried to, who was busy pulling an engraved knife from her back. “I’ll kill her! I’ll kill her for—”

Cassandra tapped a finger against Damian’s forehead and shook her head. “My fault, Habibi. Should not have stopped blast. I am okay.”

Damian wanted to get her bandaged up right away, but he accepted that she could go on. “What matters is that we’re all together. Now we can get back to the Tower. Red Hood’s in danger.”

Cassandra nodded. “Mother said he would return or he would be hurt. Jay-Sun in danger.”

Roy’s appearance couldn’t have been better timed. The last thing Jason needed was to be knocked out of commission by Artemis not knowing that he couldn’t leave the perimeter of the island. Still, it would have been nicer if he’d shown up BEFORE Bizarro had a chance to rearrange Jason’s major organs.

“Sorry it took me so long, buddy,” Roy said, practically reading his mind. “Turns out I’m kinda excommunicated from the Justice League these days, so I had to hack Ollie’s systems to get ahold of Batman. You had me worried when you went radio silent.”

“They found the communicator. Thankfully BM was more inclined to break it than use it against me.”

“Yeah, it looks like he was almost hospitable.” Roy stared at the blossoming bruise on Jason’s stomach with concern. “Shit. How are you even breathing?”

“I ask myself that every day,” he mumbled, awkwardly getting to his feet. “Can you hold my left arm for a second?”

Roy nodded and grabbed Jason’s forearm. “Why?”

“Just hold it firm.”

“Like this?”

In response, Jason pulled away from him hard, shouting in pain as a loud pop could be heard.

“Fuck! A little warning next time?”

Jason rotated his arm a few times, wincing from the whole ordeal. “You would have pussied out on me.”

Roy scoffed. “Well yeah. That was awful!”

Jason looked up at the Tower, wishing he could monitor what was going on with Artemis still. She’d been a godsend. The last thing he wanted was for her to face any unnecessary danger because of him. “Talía’s here.”

“Believe it or not, I kind of guessed that. Thought she was supposed to be dead but,” Roy shrugged, “people like you guys don’t tend to stay down.”

“Yeah. Too bad. So, any word from Mia or the team?”

“Not even word from Bats aside from the slightest acknowledgment that he got my message. Probably didn’t like that Arsenal hacked the Bat-Com...again...”

“I’m worried. If Talía’s here, the League of Assassins can’t be far behind. You should go help them out.”

“What? Help THEM? What about YOU?”

He shrugged only to wince as his left shoulder clicked. He’d have to be careful with that arm. One wrong move and it’d be dead weight again. “I’m a sitting duck. You know that. Besides, I still need to question the evil assholes about how they know so much about my situation here. Can’t imagine the Justice League’s been broadcasting the information...I mean, maybe Luthor, but still.”

“Oh, I have that, actually. Had a breakthrough just before I got your call.” Roy took out a burner phone and pulled up a file for Jason to look at. What he saw felt...uncanny.

“The Arkham Knight?”

“Yup. Some dude with a hard-on for all things Batman related, I guess. Though honestly, he dresses a little like you. Initial scans I’ve gotten of his armor are actually not far off from what you wear as Red Hood. And the full helmet thing? It’s like he’s a wannabe Hood...I mean, he’s even every bit as good as you, as far as I can tell. Takes down drug rings, put himself at the top of the food-chain...It’s kind of spooky.”

“Nobody’s as...as good as me.” Jason spat out another mouthful of blood and swayed. “Fuck. You ever been punched by Superman?”

Roy cringed at the thought. “You DO realize you’re not super-human, right?”

“Says you.”

“Look, I’m not about to abandon you here to die. At least let me help you get the upper hand. Or hell, get your feet under you.”

Bizarro shouted from above and threw Artemis down with impressive speed. Roy barely had the sense to step out of the way from her point of landing and the impact left in the ground made him yelp.

“Oh good,” Artemis said with a grunt, sitting up on her elbows. “You’re still here. Are you planning to help out any time soon?”

Roy nodded and pointed a green tipped arrow up at the looming menace only for Jason to shove him to get him off target. “No! That’s a Lex Corp clone! The last Bizarro the public knew was affected positively by Kryptonite.”

“Okay. Let’s not shoot steroids at tall, pale, and scary.” Roy put the arrow back in his quiver and looked to Jason. “So? What’s the plan?”

Jason shrugged. “I’ve got a plan for Roman and Talia. Artemis, there’s something you can do that might help.”

She got to her feet and held her axe at the ready. “I get the feeling it involves distracting our new friend.”

Jason nodded. “Black Mask should have less influence on him the further away you get. He’ll keep straining to maintain control. I’ll leave it to your discretion how far you go, but then I need you to bring him back as quickly as possible.”

“What’s that supposed to accomplish?”

“He’ll be so focused that you’ll give him whiplash. He’ll be straining to maintain his connection with a mind as broken as Bizarro’s.”

Artemis smiled. “Now THAT sounds like a plan. Do your best to stay alive, Hood. I won’t appreciate returning to a corpse.” She leapt up and, with an impressive punch, sent Bizarro flying over the ocean.

“We’d better move quickly then,” Jason said.

“Oh, you’re including me in this plan then?” Roy half joked. “So glad to be included.”

“Unless you’ve found a way to deal with this implant, I’ve got a serious problem.”

“If I did I’d have already ripped it out of you.”

Jason nodded. “S’what I was afraid of. Most of BM’s men are jokes. What few are left shouldn’t be much trouble. Talia, on the other hand, is going to be a huge problem. So...I’m

going to need you to treat me as both a teammate and a bargaining chip.”

Roy hacked into the Tower’s security, getting them inside where they started up the emergency stairwell.

“Why do I feel like I’m going to hate your plan?”

“Because it requires you threatening to put an arrow in my skull.”

“Operative word being ‘threatening,’ right?”

“Talía’s got to believe it.”

Roy groaned. “So, I have to simultaneously hope Black Mask doesn’t kill you while trying to kill you myself? Tell me you hear how crazy that sounds.”

“She wants me alive. If it comes down to it, just shoot me somewhere I’ll bleed out easily. That kind of thing can be patched up later...probably.”

“You already look alike an action figure some kid put under a magnifying glass!”

“Yeah...Feel like one too. But that’s the plan until the Titans get their shit together or until Batman sends help. You got a better one?”

“Leave.”

Jason scoffed. “You plan on carrying me?”

“No.”

“And I don’t plan to abandon Artemis. She saved my ass. I owe her.”

“You know, most guys just ask for a girl’s number.”

Jason took a moment to lean against the railing and catch his breath. One of the All-Blades appeared in his right hand. “They know the command word,” he told Roy.

“So, the handicap is real.”

“Talía will only use it as a last resort...I hope. BM’ll probably use it just to fuck with me.”

“And I’m just supposed to fight them both with you on your knees in the middle of it all?”

“You’re the one who wanted to stick around.”

“Yeah, to keep you alive. Not watch you play martyr.”

“Just promise me you’ll aim well.”

“I don’t miss.”

They both smirked, not sure if that was a good thing given the situation.

They resumed their steady climb, reaching the common room to find Black Mask shouting and cursing out the window while his men watched. Talia had her arms crossed over her chest. she smiled as soon as she saw Jason again. “I always forget about the little friends you’ve made. Cheshire speaks highly of you, Harper.”

Roy cleared his throat and kept an arrow notched and ready to fire. “We’re going to do this the easy way. Tell us why you’re here, then leave...or...I kill him.” He trained the arrow on Jason, who had already moved on to cut down what few of Black Mask’s men remained while the man was distracted trying to maintain control of his clone.

Talia’s lip twitched slightly. “He knows why I’m here, otherwise he wouldn’t have made himself your target.”

Roy was out of his depth and he knew it. Every fiber of his being wanted to shift so that his arrow was pointing at her and not his best friend, but he knew better. Hell, he knew Cheshire. That wouldn’t work on her. How would it work on the leader of the League of Assassins?

“Raaah! You did this!” Black Mask snapped, suddenly turning away from the window. Jason braced himself for the inevitable attack. “Heel, you fucking worm!”

The All-Blade disappeared and Roy turned so that the arrow flew into Black Mask’s knee, but the man kept stomping towards Jason in a blind rage. “Sh-shit!”

Jason kept his eyes trained on Black Mask as he got onto his knees. the man’s eyes had turned a deep shade of purple and lines creeped from the corners. He was straining his connection to the clone and it was damaging his mind. “You should sever the connection,” Jason suggested. “The big guy seemed like he had some personality, but he’s still a failed copy of Superman. Can you imagine the mess that’s in his head?”

Arrow after arrow lodged into the man—Roy had already abandoned the plan in favor of trying to save his best friend—but Roman was on the warpath. He grabbed Jason’s neck with a crushing grip. “I’ll...fucking kill that stupid clone...right after I break your neck!”

Everything happened at once. A burst of white light behind Jason’s eyes. Something warm and wet on his face. Shouts. Screams. He couldn’t tell, but by the feel of it, Black Mask had crushed his windpipe. His body forced him to hold his position just the same as his consciousness slipped.

Anti-Heroes

Chapter Summary

The Tower is fixed up while Jason recovers from his injuries. Upon waking up, he's faced with the challenge of saving Bizarro from the Justice League.

Chapter Notes

Hallo hallo! Sorry for taking my time again. I've got to be better about where I save things... This took some digging to piece together.

Anywho! Here's hoping you're still enjoying Jason's misadventures with the Titans! You'll find, with this chapter, his time at the Tower may be cut a little short.

Don't worry, though! This story won't end quite that abruptly! And tough as it may be for him to admit, the Titans are his team.

Little bonus: a perspective on the situation from Lex Luthor himself!

“Roy, so help me God, if I find out you’ve been hacking into the League’s database without permission again—!”

Who could have guessed that returning to Titan Tower would be such a pain in the ass? Roy glanced over his shoulder and watched Barry fussing over his sidekick, Diana being civil with Donna and Artemis, and Jaime skyping his parents and letting them know he was alright.

“Are you even listening to me?”

Roy rolled his eyes and glared at his old mentor. “Ollie, what does it matter? I only came here because Jason got in touch with me and let me know there was an emergency. I’m still here to make sure my friend’s okay. Why that demands a lecture is beyond me.”

“You can’t just shake this off! The last time I saw you, you were a mess because that same friend decided he couldn’t put up with you anymore! And now you’re here at his beck and call? He’s bad for you!”

“You’re not any better! And what the fuck are you doing getting up my ass, huh? Don’t you have another Speedy to criticize these days? Do us both a favor and go fuck up your

relationship with her!”

It would be a lie to say that Roy wasn't a little angry with himself for letting Oliver draw this out of him. He was supposed to be past all this. When Jason finally woke up, Roy was going to rip him a new one, that was for sure. Mia, having been within earshot of his outburst, looked affronted enough for Oliver to choose to go after her for some damage control, finally giving Roy a moment to himself—

“Roy...”

He looked over at Kori, who was looking just as beautiful and vibrant as ever.

Oh yeah. Jason owed him BIG.

“I hear you moved in with Dick. That doesn't seem like you. I thought you came back because you were excited to be around the Teen Titans.”

She touched his arm and he retreated away from her. “I have thought about you many of the times.”

“Why? I thought lingering emotional connections weren't your thing.”

She shrugged. “You know how things were.”

“Yeah. You claimed you didn't even KNOW Dick. Should I be flattered you remember me?”

She acted almost impervious to his scorn, which felt somewhat nostalgic. “You know I would never forget you. I have been wondering if you were doing the communicating with Jason. But I should have known.” She tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear smiled to herself. He could remember when she smiled like that for him. “You and Jason are like the brothers.”

“How's he been?” Roy finally let himself extend an olive branch. “I've only heard what he'll tell me, and you know how he can be. One emotional slip-up and he's sacrificing his memory to try to start over or some shit.”

Kori chuckled. “He was very reckless. I think his inability to leave this Tower has made it difficult for him to do such dangerous things.”

They laughed together, recalling all the turmoil they had faced when they were a team.

“Kor, you belong here. Much as it kills me to admit that, I know it and you know it. But Jason?”

She nodded. “He has helped the team, even if he cannot see it. But Jason has never been the mentor or the role model.”

“I'm going to help him. Do me a favor and take care of the team. They need you.”

“The Titans will make it through this. It is Jason I am worried about. You have seen it, have you not? Someone is after him.”

“It’s Jason. Someone’s always after—”

“Excuse me.”

Roy nearly jumped out of his skin when the Amazonian who’d helped them out sneaked up on him. “Geez, Artemis. A little warning would be nice.”

“I hardly see the concern. I just wanted to let you know that he was stirring. No large change, but if he doesn’t wake his sorry ass up before they try to ‘decommission’ Bizarro, I’ll kill him myself.”

Roy was coming to like Artemis. She was just the kind of girl Jason needed in his life: one who wouldn’t take his shit. “Thanks for sticking around, Art. I know you’re busy.”

“I am. And I’m impatient. I watched him survive a punch from a Kryptonian clone. He will wake up soon. If he doesn’t, I’ll make him.”

Yep. Definitely the kind of girl he needed in his life.

“We’ll protect Bizarro, Artemis. You think I’m going to let the holier-than-thou league touch the big guy? No. I’m just working out the kinks to the escape plan. I’ll let you know as soon as I know how to sneak out something that big without alienating the League even more than I already have.”

“About that.” Artemis leaned against the wall, her arms crossed over her chest. Seeing her standing next to Kori, Roy began to wonder if Jason might have a type. “I was surprised to learn that Batman had an uncooperative associate. And then I saw you and your mentor.”

Roy couldn’t help but groan. “How about we agree to discuss my history with Green Arrow when you discuss your history with Wonder Woman.”

Artemis scoffed. “Deal. It’s just interesting to know there are others like me.”

“Waking up!” the little ninja-girl—Cassandra, if he remembered right—shouted, stepping out of the elevator.

Roy, Kori, and Artemis all crammed into the elevator with her and went straight back to his room. Upon stepping in they found Dick sitting on Jason’s bed, hugging the guy.

“Okay, I thought Jaybird would make your relationship difficult, but this isn’t what I had in mind,” Roy mumbled, elbowing Kori in the side.

Jason woke up choking and someone pressed a warm hand to his forehead and cooed at him. He blinked away the spots in his vision and tried to explain to his caretaker that something was choking him. Something hurt. Everything hurt.

“That’s enough, Jason. Hold still.” A large, black gloved hand held his face while another pulled a tube out of his throat. The sensation was awful, but the moment it was out he didn’t

feel much better. He sucked in strained breaths and tried to get a grasp on his situation. He was...in his room at the mansion? No...Not the mansion.

“The kids?” he rasped out, understanding that the gloved hands belonged to Batman.

To his surprise, Dick replied instead of Bruce. “They’re okay, you idiot.” Arms wrapped around him and, though his body protested the motion, something about the warmth was comforting. “Worry about yourself for once,” Dick muttered into Jason’s shoulder.

Jason awkwardly got one hand up to pat Dick on the back only to feel an IV line at forearm. “Shit. Sorry. I swear, I’m not actively trying to get myself killed again,” he whispered. After shifting slightly drew a grunt from him, Dick let him go and settled for staying on the bed to fuss over him.

“Coordination and teamwork are apparently not well practiced with the Teen Titans,” Bruce suddenly said. “They barely managed to handle themselves against the League of Assassins. Were it not for Nightwing being there, a few of them might not have made it.”

“It wasn’t like that, B.” Dick’s voice. At least that was a small comfort. “Speedy and Beast Boy tipped the scales in our favor while Black Bat took care of Shiva. Wonder Girl and Robin handled the hostage situation fine. The challenge was just getting Superboy under control.”

“These mistakes shouldn’t have been made at all. And how were none of you alerted to what was happening at the Tower?”

“We were a little preoccupied.” Raven’s voice, somewhere in the room. Jason tried to shake off the brain fog. “There was an alert about a technical malfunction, but that’s all we had to go on until Mia and Gar showed up. Just because the Tower was under attack didn’t mean we could abandon the city.”

“We...should have delegated our resources better.” Damian’s voice...timid, though. Wrong. Jason searched the room, finding the kid with his arms crossed in the corner furthest from the door. “We almost lost members. The information at the Tower was compromised. A Superman-level threat was left for a single member of the team to handle. We...should have been better prepared.”

“Things worked out...fine,” Jason rasped out. “No one died, right?”

“Things did not work out fine,” Bruce growled. “Black Mask was executed. Talia got away. A Super-clone nearly escaped.”

Jason tensed. “Biz?”

Bruce barely glanced at him. “The Superman clone is being held in the cells at the base of the Tower. Superman was particularly upset with Luthor for allowing one of his clones to get out on the market.”

Jason swung his legs around the side of his bed and struggled to stand. “I...I have to talk to Luthor.”

“You have to rest!” Dick exclaimed, reaching over the bed to pull Jason back down. “You’re lucky to be alive right now!”

“How long was I out?” Jason asked with a grunt as he tried to pry Dick off of himself.

“Only two days! You can’t just lie and claim the Pit fixed you up in that short time!”

Jason finally got free only to stumble away from his bed. Someone caught his arm in a firm grip and forced him to stand upright. “Th-thanks.” He looked up and couldn’t help the smile on his face. “Oh. Decide to stick around?”

Artemis nodded slightly, though she didn’t seem as enthused to see him up. “They’re going to kill him,” she barely whispered.

“Nice to see you’re still kicking, but if we don’t work fast, the big guy’s going to be in danger.” Roy was right there with Artemis. Considering how Kori was nearby as well, it must have been a real challenge for him to stick around, but he did it anyways. Jason owed him big.

“I need to talk to Luthor,” Jason repeated, recognizing the urgency.

“Jason, we need to talk first.”

“I don’t have time for the lecture. That clone doesn’t deserve to—”

“You can’t stay here any longer, Jason.”

That got him to slow down.

“It has become clear that someone is aware of your status here and they’re using it against you and the team. It’s no longer safe to allow you to remain.”

Everyone in the room, to Jason’s surprise, seemed opposed to the idea.

“You think we’re just going to let whoever’s after him get what they want?”

“Where else is he supposed to go?”

“He’s our teammate now!”

Jason leaned against Artemis slightly and she supported his weight without question. “So, where to next? I hear Arkham’s lovely this time of year.”

“You’ll be remanded to the Watchtower until the threat is neutralized.”

Jason nodded. “Instead of earning some freedom, you’re instead going to shove me into the next available cage then.”

“The implant will be adjusted. It will prevent you from using Zeta-tubes to leave the Watchtower and the command word will no longer be necessary as you won’t pose a threat to the League.”

“Father, you’re not listening!”

“Enough, Damian!” There was the dark, authoritative voice that always got on Jason’s nerves. “This is for his safety as much as it is for your team’s!”

“It’s fine,” Jason said. “Under two conditions, I won’t cause a fuss. Can you give me that at least?”

Bruce still seemed miffed, but he waited to hear Jason’s terms.

“Like I said, I need to talk to Luthor. Today, would be nice.”

“He’s already on his way here to decommission the clone.”

“Perfect. He sees me before he goes anywhere near Biz. Got it?”

“And your other condition?”

Jason looked at the collective of somber faces in the room and scoffed. “Give me a week to wrap things up here. Believe it or not, I’ve gotten a little attached to the place. Might be the kids. Might be the ridiculous amount of pizza I’ve consumed, but I’m going to miss this place. I’d like a couple of days to say my goodbyes.”

Bruce was reluctant to agree to the latter, but Tim cleared his throat and spoke up. “It’s not a bad idea to let him rest a bit more before forcing his physiology to adjust to being in space for an extended period of time. Besides, I know you don’t have a room for him set up there yet. It’s not like you’re going to keep him in the cells, right?”

Bruce’s disgruntled sigh spoke volumes, but Jason felt even further indebted to Tim for speaking up on his behalf.

“One week. A few members of the League will be staying here as well during that time. If there’s any sign of incident, you will be removed immediately.”

“Sounds like a plan. Now y’mind if I check in with my team while waiting on the bald wonder?”

“Jason?”

“Hm?”

“I don’t appreciate how you used Talia.”

Artemis was hoisting his arm around her neck when he shuddered. He knew what had happened, even if he couldn’t fully recall. He’d felt the spray of blood. Black Mask was going to kill him. Talia wouldn’t allow it.

“He’s not capable of influencing Mother’s actions!” Damian snapped. “What are you even suggesting?”

Neither Bruce nor Jason exchanged another word. Bruce was accusing him of using her to kill Black Mask, after all. The fact was: Jason hadn’t killed anyone since he made his promise to Bruce...

...but it would be a lie to say he hoped for a different outcome. Artemis might have been willing to off the psychopath, but he couldn’t risk getting her in trouble. That would be one hell of a way to make a friend. And he couldn’t even trust Roy to threaten him properly. How could he expect the guy to risk his already screwed up reputation even further? No. Letting Talia do it was the way to go.

And Bruce knew that’s what he’d hoped for.

Artemis helped Jason out of his room and Roy and Cassandra followed behind them. Kori stayed behind, sitting on the bed next to Dick to show her support as Bruce was likely to lay into him even more.

“You guys mind filling me in on what I’ve missed?” Jason asked after the door slid shut behind them.

“The Flash is here to keep Wally company. He was injured, but his body heals even quicker than yours,” Roy began. “All of our mentors checked in upon receiving Batman’s call.”

“I’ll tell you now, it was downright painful to have to see that Wonder bitch again,” Artemis growled.

Roy nodded. “Right. Anyways, between Green Arrow and Batman, things have been a little tricky.”

“Ollie’s here?”

“Yeah. Thanks for that.” Jason could only imagine how much his friend had put up with in just the last couple of days alone.

“I thought he was seeing to Mia,” Cassandra noted. “But he was angry with Roy.”

“You’ll learn, Cass, that there’s always someone angry with me,” Roy said with a wink.

“Alright, alright. Was anyone else hurt? Not that I don’t trust the team, but I know firsthand how rough the League of Assassins can be.”

“Cassandra, actually, was injured by one Lady Shiva,” Roy added. “Damian explained to us that the woman’s her mother. I honestly wonder if this team is in a constant struggle for who has the worst parents.”

“I’d definitely throw my name into that pot. Between Bruce and the pieces of shit I’m actually related to, I can attest to shitty parents.”

Both girls rolled their eyes and stepped into the elevator. Cassandra hit the button for the entertainment room—where things had really gone down—and Roy continued to fill him in. “For the most part, it’s just been clean up since everything went down. Canary’s been around more to make sure the kids’ mental health is cared for. Some of them need her more than others.”

“I’m sorry I haven’t been around to help.”

“No offense, but the only therapy you have to offer is usually a decent sparring partner,” Roy pointed out. “And I don’t think you could handle going a few rounds with a frustrated Superboy.”

The doors opened and Jason was relieved to find the place had already been fixed up. The ropes he’d been bound to were gone. The window had been replaced. the floor had been fixed. There wasn’t even a trace of blood to be seen.

Mia looked up from her laptop and slammed it shut upon seeing him. “You’re up! Oh, thank god! We were getting worried.” She ran over and gave him a big hug.

“I feel great,” he rasped, wondering if she’d managed to break a rib just by hugging him. “It’s good to see the place didn’t explode while I was resting.”

“Dude, the place looked like it’d exploded before you were sleeping!” Beast Boy paused the game he and the boys were playing and morphed into a humming bird, flitting around Jason as if checking to see if there were any injuries he was trying to keep hidden. “We’d just made it back when Damian’s psycho-mom sliced that skull-guy’s head clean off!”

Jason winced. He’d hoped the kids wouldn’t have witnessed that. No wonder Bruce was so mad.

“Did you find out why they were after you?” Jaime asked. “Dick, Vic, and the League haven’t told us anything.”

Jason shrugged, wincing upon feeling his shoulder threaten to pop out of place. “Urk. Probably just the usual. BM wanted me dead, Talia wanted me to be her good little soldier. Who knows.”

Before the kids could ask more questions, the elevator doors opened again Lex Luthor, dressed in a simple black tuxedo, stepped out to greet them. “I’m told you’d like a word with me?”

The state that the report had claimed Titans Tower was in had proven to be largely overblown in Lex’s opinion. Nothing was beyond repair, obviously, as by the time he was able to grace the building with his presence, everything had been repaired. Just because a couple of Batman’s Rogue Gallery had chosen to attack, he couldn’t comprehend why it demanded his presence.

So what if the League of Assassins had acquired a rare bit of Red Kryptonite? Could he really be held responsible for every chunk of Kryptonian space-rock on their planet? While Superman certainly seemed determined to blame him, the fact was: he had the only KNOWN cache of Red Kryptonite on Earth.

What bothered him more was knowing that Roman Sionis—of all the slimy businessmen—had somehow acquired one of Lex Corps’ failed Superman clones. Those were decommissioned a long time ago. The fact that someone in his company had kept one hidden away and then had the audacity to SELL it would have to be dealt with. That was something he couldn’t deny.

There was something else about the report Lex had received, however, that piqued his curiosity. Upon arriving at the Tower, he was pleased to find that the person in question had already requested an audience with him. The not-so-Green Arrow boy kept his nose upturned and chose to stay behind, leaving the two of them as well as one of the Bat’s many minions and an Amazonian he wasn’t familiar with went down to the holding cells together.

“It’s good to see you’ve recovered,” Lex said, breaking the ice. “Based on the report I was given, I’m quite amazed you’re on your feet so soon. It’s not many who can withstand a fight with one of my Superman clones, after all.”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” Jason replied, his voice a little hoarse. “Biz would have crushed me if Sionis had gained full control.”

Lex nodded. “Yes, I feel you were quite lucky that the failed clones were so unstable. Had the Superboy been the one under his control, you wouldn’t have stood a chance.”

“Give Conner a little credit. He would have at least felt bad about it.”

It was an amusing little joke. Superboy’s emotions were largely the reason Lex considered him to have been a failure.

“Regrets don’t beget results.”

“Amen to that.”

Perhaps the two of them could form a sort of alliance; as reformed villains, of course. Everyone else in the Justice League’s lineup was a little too altruistic in Lex’s opinion. It belied the true reasons behind their heroism and made them all questionable. Jason Todd, however, was simple: a bright kid killed by a psychopath, returned to seek revenge. It made perfect sense for the world they lived in. What didn’t make sense was the punishment he was currently enduring.

“Might I inquire as to why you requested an audience with me?” Lex ventured to ask as the elevator doors opened.

“I want you to let Bizarro go.”

Now that was an interesting request. They started down the hall of empty cells and discussed the matter further. “You understand this particular ‘Bizarro’ is a highly unstable clone of Superman, right? Its mind is nothing more than an amalgamation of someone else’s memories and was likely further damaged by Sionis’ tampering.”

“His mind,” the Amazonian corrected. “And be that as it may, he is capable of thinking for himself. He proved that to us.”

“Ah, that’s why you came along. Is the little ninja feeling sympathetic as well?” The raven-haired girl kept her eyes trained on him but didn’t utter a sound. She did, however, sign with her hands low. Jason watched intently, responding as well. Of course, Lex would be an utter fool if he wasn’t fully studied in ASL. The girl was foreign, so a few things were lost in translation, but he could at least understand that she was tagging along for Jason’s protection and because she too wanted to support the Super-clone.

Lex assumed that meant the Bizarro until they reached the clone’s cell and found Superboy watching his fellow clone through the glass.

“Long time no see, Superboy,” Lex offered.

“Whatever...”

Ungrateful prat. Didn’t he know he owed his continued existence to Lex’s merciful heart?

“I’m fairly certain neither Batman nor Superman will be happy with me if I were to do as you’ve asked,” he went on, looking back to Jason. The raven-haired girl had moved on to take Superboy’s hand in hers in a pathetic attempt to console it. “And, as I’ve seen, you and I are the last people who should be straining our relationships with them.”

Jason scoffed. “Yeah. That’s an understatement.” He rubbed the back of his neck and Lex decided this was the perfect opportunity to speak regarding what he really wanted to know about.

“That implant...I was unaware that the League had put it to use already.”

“Guess they don’t trust you,” he said with a shrug.

Cocky little prick.

“Be that as it may, I am particularly concerned with its usage, considering I’m the one who manufactured it.”

Jason rolled his eyes. “Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

If they ever were to cooperate, Jason would have to learn proper respect. “It just seems a little convenient that I would be commissioned to make such a device by someone in Gotham only for it to be put to use behind my back.”

Jason scowled at the suggestion. “Bruce wouldn’t...he wouldn’t just—”

“Believe me, son, if Bruce Wayne was involved with such a request, I would know. This was a little more smoke and mirrors. Which brings me to question—”

“Who is the Arkham Knight,” Jason finished. “Yeah, the question’s crossed my mind too.”

Now things were getting interesting. “Yes, that IS something that I’ve begun to look into, but evidence suggests they’re NOT the one who contacted me. Or, I suppose, evidence points to YOU having been the one to commission it.”

Now he had the boy’s attention. “I promise you, I never planned to have this thing forced on myself.”

Lex produced the original letter he’d received. It was typed out, so it wasn’t like the handwriting could be traced, but a bloody, upside-down bat symbol was included at the bottom. “This suggests otherwise. I’ve had the blood and fingerprints analyzed. They’re a match for one Jason Todd. Care to explain yourself?”

The raven-haired girl looked at Jason worriedly and began signing, but something at her waist seemed to catch his eye. He stopped using the Amazonian as a support beam and snatched the dagger from her waist. “Where’d you get this? Cass, I told you to stop going through my room!”

Cassandra shook her head. “N-no! Not Jay-Sun’s!”

Superboy nodded in agreement. “Yeah. Isn’t that the thing Shiva threw at you?”

Jason shuddered and Lex wondered just what was going through the boy’s head.

“L-look, Luthor, I’m not going to beg. Are you going to help Biz or not?”

Well, at least the boy was persistent. “I suppose I could postpone his decommissioning, but it seems rather unlikely that he’ll be allowed to remain among the younger heroes.”

Jason looked up at the Amazonian apologetically. “You’ve done way too much for me already, I realize but...do you think you could watch over the big guy? Just for a little while. I’ll...I’ll find a way to help you out soon. Who knows? He might even be helpful in your search for that weapon.”

The girl sighed and tapped on the glass, getting Bizarro’s attention. To Lex’s honest amazement, the clone responded positively to her presence, pressing a large hand against the glass to meet hers. “Red Her! Red Him! You am okay!”

To think that the Bizarro had already formed such attachments. Perhaps there was more to be learned from the clone. And should it ever need repairs, they’d have no choice but to return to Lex for assistance, giving him some power over both the Red Hood and an Amazonian.

“Wait...you guys are trying to save him?” Superboy questioned.

“If not for him, neither of us would be here,” the Amazonian confessed. “I owe him this much in return.”

Lex input the release code and the cell opened. The clone immediately pulled the Amazonian into a frightening embrace. Upon letting her go he took a step towards Jason as well, who held up his left hand and pressed it to the clone's chest. It wasn't easy to miss the green glow. The boy had magic. That wasn't included in his file. Lex would have to update it.

"Sorry big guy. I'm still getting over our little tussle. Look, I need you to stay with Artemis, okay?"

The clone looked back and forth between the two of them with a pursed lip as if he were a pouting child. "Bizarro am free? Me am wanting to stay with Red Him and Red Her."

"I can't go with her yet," Jason explained. "But soon, okay? I just need to get something sorted out. Artemis promised she'd look out for you. And the bad man who hurt me? He's gone. I took care of him. He can't hurt us anymore."

Bizarro actually whined, but bobbed his bulbous head up and down. "Red Him...Red Him will be back with...us...soon?"

"That's right. But right now, Batman's going to be a little mad at me for doing this, so I need you to go with Artemis. Alright? Look out for her for me."

Bizarro nodded again, this time looking more confident.

"I guess this is where we part for now," the Amazonian, Artemis, said.

Jason handed her a smart phone. "Roy's contact info is in that. I'll get in touch with you when I can. If you need me, Roy's the best way to communicate."

"To think a pair of human boys would prove so interesting." Artemis took the clone's hand in hers and led it back to the elevator, leaving Jason, Cassandra, Superboy, and Lex behind.

"Thanks for that," Jason said, bowing to Lex. There was the respect he deserved. "I know it was an insane request, but Biz deserves a chance."

"Thank you," Superboy said quickly. "Nothing I said to Clark was getting through! He was just going to sentence the guy to death like it was nothing! I thought...I thought..."

How pathetic. The clone felt a connection with the botched clone. Truly something had gone wrong in Superboy's development.

"Don't even mention it," Jason told the boy. "Seriously. Bruce is probably going to arrange a little cell for me at the Watchtower after that move."

Superboy seemed surprised by that statement.

"The decision to move you to the Watchtower wasn't run past your teammates," Lex explained. "Bruce felt there was no room for unnecessary sentiment over the transfer."

"Yeah, okay. I get it. B's an asshole. But we both know this wasn't just his decision." Now Jason looked at Lex almost as if the two of them were equals. "He's hasn't set off any alarms,

so it's safe to assume Tim's hiding what's going on down here from Bruce. So, I'm going to be honest, Luthor: I think the Arkham Knight IS me."

Jason's awareness was impressive. And to have already come to that conclusion... "You've been accessing the League's files?"

"My best friend's good with tech. Sue me. Those strange rifts that have been appearing around here? I've seen one up close and personal, and I saw someone trying to come through. What if someone already has?"

"You're suggesting a version of yourself from an alternate earth could already be among us. Can you explain why he might be determined to put you through this predicament?"

Jason shrugged. "Honestly? I'm not exactly the nicest guy on my best day. Given my history, I think that can be understood. But if there were a version of me that didn't return to the fold? A version of me that never forgave Bruce? That could be dangerous. Irrational."

"Lethal," Lex added, knowing full well the Red Hood's kill-count. "Now, why are you keen on keeping this a secret between us?"

"Because I'm going to find the Arkham Knight myself and I don't need the League getting in the way of that."

Cassandra gasped and pulled on Jason's arm. "Jay-Sun can't! Can't leave! Can't fight with binds!"

He nodded. "Right. I've bought myself a week. Roy's here. And now I've got the man who manufactured this thing." He looked Lex dead in the eyes. "Can you remove it?"

"I can adjust the programming, but that will take time. Removal would have to be done either by a highly practiced surgeon with the gall to remove something that attaches directly to the spine and invades like a tumor, or a being that can phase through matter. That way it could only be used by the Justice League."

"Yeah, them or any villain with the means," he mumbled. "KF might be able to help, but he's still a little green. I probably don't want the kid digging around my spine when he's barely got the speed to go through solid objects figured out. Sounds like the Flash is sticking around for a bit, but he won't be easy to convince."

"I'll admit, Todd, you've gained my interest. I'll see to a means of removing the implant. I'm sure, given a day, I'll have some solution to offer you. However, should I find that your confrontation with this Arkham Knight would prove disastrous, I'll have my finger on the trigger. One word from me and the whole Justice League will descend upon you."

The boy had the audacity to scoff at that. "You'll be lucky if B believes you. But I get it." He looked to the two Titans with them and added, "Can I trust you guys to keep quiet about this? I don't want the team to get hurt."

"I'm going to help," Superboy decided. "You saved Bizarro so...I want to help."

Cassandra nodded in agreement. “Jay-Sun doesn’t have to be alone.”

He smiled at them. “I understand. But you understand that this guy’s the one behind the recent attacks on us, right? That VR game had his signature. Now this? We can’t endanger the others. Promise me.”

They both seemed eager to promise. The fleeting innocence of childhood naivete. No doubt Jason had no intention of including them in his crusade.

“Very well then. I think I’ve overstayed my welcome. I’ll be taking my leave while Batman is blissfully unaware of how I’ve betrayed his trust yet again. If I need to get in touch, well, I suppose I’ll be contacting that Harper boy.”

Jason smiled. “Yeah, he’s going to hate my guts.”

The Other Speedster

Chapter Summary

The rift returns and this time Jason finally pulls someone out of it.

Chapter Notes

Yo again! Present for taking so long! Two chapters one day!

And this is the big one, folks! A certain implant finally meets its match! Plus another redhead joins the fray!

Bonus: awkward moment for Mia to witness!

Jason woke up, startled by the unusual warmth next to him. He looked over and scoffed upon finding Dick curled up on the bed. The idiot was determined to spend every second he had left at Jason's side, which was becoming a real pain.

He checked around the room and noted that the wall clock showed it was 5 AM. Most of the team would still be sleeping. Damian was likely in the training room getting an early start with Cassandra. Raven might be awake, but she'd be meditating and wouldn't care what he was up to. It would work out perfectly.

He slipped out of his bed as carefully and quietly as he could so as not to disturb Dick, snatched his favorite leather jacket from the dresser, and made his way to the elevator to head straight up to the roof. After stepping outside, he groaned upon finding the Flash talking to Kid Flash as the sun rose.

"Oh, good morning Jason. You're looking better," Barry said, trying to seem friendly.

"Still feel like a car crash," he mumbled in response as he took his pack of Lucky Strikes from his jacket pocket. "Didn't think you'd be sticking around."

"There's something going on with the Speed force," Wally blurted out. "Barry and I have been trying to figure it out."

"It's like someone tried to contact us from the Speed Force," Barry explained. "Only, not just me. Most of the Justice League claims to have had a similar experience. But that shouldn't be possible."

Barry and Wally went off, talking a few hundred miles a minute, so Jason tapped out a cigarette and lit it, taking a long drag before saying, "It's happened to me too. What if it's Wally?"

Wally laughed, looking at Jason like he was high or something. "I'm not even fast enough to fully access the Speed Force. How would I—"

"What do you mean?" Barry asked, interrupting his sidekick.

Jason rolled his eyes. He'd almost forgotten the weirdness going on over the scarlet speedster. "Wally West. Come on!"

"I AM Wally West."

"Yeah, but the guy I'm talking about has red hair. Could be a little cocky. Old friend of Dickwad's so I'm sure he's a pain in the ass too. I didn't know him all that well, but that's because I died not long after I got to meet the guy."

Speaking of pain, Jason's head began to throb. "O-ow. Look, I don't know what's going on or why you don't remember him, but I KNOW he existed."

The pain suddenly felt overwhelming and Jason began to wonder if maybe he'd moved about too quickly. Dick was going to lecture him about disrupting his recovery again. He dropped the cigarette and fell to his knees, trying to hold his head to keep the pressure in. "I can't..."

"Jason!"

Of course, Dick stepped out onto the roof just in time to kneel by Jason's side, arm wrapping around his shoulders protectively.

"...ry..."

Jason opened his eyes just enough to look up. Right over his head was an odd, bright light with the silhouette of a person standing in it. "Barry..."

A bright light flashed and suddenly everything on the rooftop seemed to have a static charge. Someone reached through the light, calling out to the Flash. But Barry took a step back, afraid of the odd entity.

The light shifted its position, moving closer to Dick and Jason.

"Dick...please..."

Dick fell backwards, letting go of Jason. He was too startled to respond.

The hand reaching out from the light strained, desperate for someone to meet it.

Jason's skull felt like it might split, but the closer the light came, the lesser the pain became.

"...son..."

He looked right into the light and, like before, he could see the silhouette of a man.

“...Jason...please...”

“I...hear you,” he muttered, extending his own hand to meet the silhouette’s.

“Jay, I don’t like this!” Dick exclaimed.

But Jason shrugged him off and caught the silhouette’s hand. “Wally?”

It felt like a bolt of lightning went through him...no...slammed into him? The light was gone, the pain in his skull as well. Now the only pain was from the tight embrace of arms around him, pressing against bruises that still hadn’t fully healed.

“You remember me. You really remember me.”

Jason shuddered and squirmed until the man released his hold on him. “S-sure. You’re Wally West. See, guys? I told you there was another—”

“Wal...Wally?” Barry approached curiously, as if seeing someone he hadn’t seen in a long time. “No...but you’re not...”

“I know. Something happened. My timeline...our timeline...it got messed up. I was...I think...”

Jason struggled to get to his feet and Dick helped him up. “What the hell just happened?” he asked, looking between his brother and his old friend. “Who is this guy, Jay?”

“What the fuck do you mean, ‘who is this guy’? It’s Wally! Kid Flash! Er, I guess you had a stint as the Flash too, didn’t you?” Jason noted, looking at the teary-eyed speedster. “What? Was it something I said?”

“I...I’ve been lost for so long...I watched my world continue, having been written out of it. I never thought I’d get out. I tried so many people. I just needed one person to help me. But Linda...Barry...Iris...none of them could remember me.”

Jason cocked his head slightly. “What the fuck are you going on about? I’m not special to you. I met you maybe a handful of times and you were basically attached to Dick’s hip when I did. Why would these guys forget you? Aren’t you, like, one of the greats?”

Wally shrugged. “I don’t know why it was you. I couldn’t tell you. I never thought I’d leave an impression on someone like you, but when I reached out you reacted. I wasn’t strong enough before, but I kept trying, and you finally reached back.”

“This doesn’t make any sense,” Barry said, placing a hand on the returned Wally’s shoulder. A spark lit up between them and his eyes lit up before he pulled his old sidekick into a tight hug. “What...Why...How could I...?”

Wally sobbed in his mentor’s arms, relieved as could be. Jason took a few steps back and the other Wally stood by him. “This is confusing,” the kid whispered.

“You’re telling me. I’ve never even dealt with the Speed Force. You really don’t know him?”

The kid shook his head. “I know I have a cousin named Wallace West. It’s who I’m named after, but I never met the guy. And seriously, this speed thing’s mostly new to me too. Though, who knows; it might be nice to have a good speedster in the family to teach me.”

“As opposed to...?”

“Oh my unc...er, my dad was the Reverse Flash.”

Jason continued to chat with Wally II while the other Wally seemed to spark memories in Dick and Barry upon physical contact, resulting in tearful reunions and endless questions. It must have been an hour before they finally let Wally go inside and reintroduce himself to everyone else, who had mostly just woken up and had very much the same reactions as Dick and Barry. It was all getting to be a little overwhelmingly crowded for Jason, who was deeply regretting haven gotten out of bed, even just for a quick smoke.

It was when he met with Roy that things got weird.

“Wally... Wall-Man!” There was excitement mixed with something...darker. Jason’s headache returned in that moment as he saw his lanky archer as...someone almost entirely different. This was the Roy Harper that Oliver had given up on. Who had fallen to addiction and taken up life as an Outlaw...But somehow there was another Roy that came to mind. The militant Outsider who was willing to do what needed to be done. Who had already paid a hefty price. Who’d had a daughter...

“I don’t...understand,” Roy muttered, taking a step away from Wally. “That’s...I can’t have...I mean...”

“Ngh.”

Then Jason could see another version of Roy: a weathered old soul, disenchanted from the heroes’ crusade and taking matters into his own hands. And a version of Roy who never overcame his addiction and lived as a street urchin. And a version of Roy who lived a happy life, taking care of a sweet little girl.

“Jaybird? Hey, what’s wrong?”

Jason wasn’t even sure when he’d wound up on the floor. Roy was propping his head up, pressing the back of his hand to Jason’s forehead.

“Dude, you’re burning up.”

Jason waved a hand dismissively. “S’nothing a nap won’t help.” He closed his eyes, not even feeling the strength to get back to his room.

Jason woke up feeling like he’d been hit by a ton of bricks. He could see images himself in Blackgate...then Arkham...He could remember donning a cowl when Bruce died. He could

remember stabbing Tim. Shooting Damian...

He sat up, disoriented to find he wasn't still on the rooftop. No one was around. His head was ringing. Had what happened really happened? No...Damian was older...Dick was older... Tim was older...Was it the future? Was his future really Blackgate and Arkham?

"Argh!" His head pulsed with pain and his body felt like it was being torn apart on a cellular level. More memories flooded into him.

Arkham...the Joker...torture... "Bruce," he breathed, as he stumbled out of bed. "Bruce's fault..." He truly felt that. All of his suffering. Those years in Arkham's basement. All because Bruce had failed him...

Only...he hadn't spent two years in Arkham's basement...

"Bruce!"

His head pulsed. He ground his teeth as his jaw set. Another wave of bad memories.

A pimp...chains...months of...

Jason felt sick. He searched the room for the wastebasket but lost his footing and hit the floor hard.

The taste of blood while the Joker carved his face...no...not the Joker...

"Help me!" he cried out as another wave overtook him.

Go figure, Dick was still hanging out nearby. "Jay?" He sat up quickly only to gasp upon finding Jason on the floor. "Jay! Shit! HELP!" Sliding down on his knees he pulled Jason's head up so that it was sitting in his lap. Jason convulsed. His eyes were bloodshot and rolling up into his skull. "Jay, breathe. I'm here."

Jason's jaw cracked open and his lips curled up into a smile. Dick's first thought was the Joker, but how? The Joker was in Gotham. There was no way Jason had ingested Joker venom...

Roy rushed into the room, saw Jason seizing, and pulled a syringe from his belt. Before Dick could stop him, he injected Jason with its contents and waited. In no time Jason stopped moving and lay lifeless in Dick's arms, tears streaking his still-smiling face.

"What did you do to him?"

"Sedative. Jason used to have night terrors, and sometimes the Pit took over. After he tried to kill me in his sleep, I made sure to never be around him without a dose handy," Roy explained. "It's never easy. But can't argue with results."

Dick nodded but stayed where he was. "This changes everything, Roy... Wally's... Wally's here..."

“I know, but somehow that doesn’t worry me as much as Jason does,” Roy muttered, brushing his hand gently along the streak of white in Jason’s hair that was starting to grow out. “Jason’s not really the nicest of guys...nor is he the most predictable.”

“The implant will keep him docile,” Dick reassured his old friend.

“Yeah, how long do you think that’ll last?”

“It’s not something you can just rip out with a little moxy, Roy. That thing’s attached to his —”

“Spine, yeah. I know. But He’s still Jason. He’s resourceful.”

“And in a week resourcefulness won’t mean shit. He’s going to the Watchtower. As much as I hate it, Bruce is right. He’s in danger.”

“He’s always in danger, Dick. He’s not the same kid who chased after the Joker. He can handle himself.”

“Well...maybe he doesn’t have to do things alone anymore.”

“Of course not. Would it kill you to trust that he knows that too?”

Jason woke up again, this time on the floor of his room with a pillow under his head. He still felt nauseous, but he had a better grip on himself. He tried to recall the things that had flashed through his head, but they all felt like distant dreams. The only thing he was sure of was that Wally West—the Wally West he’d known when he first became Robin—was back.

Some sensation of impending danger loomed in the back of his mind.

“Jason?” Roy was waiting in the windowsill, cleaning some arrows to pass the time. “Finally rejoining the land of the living?”

Sitting up proved to be a strain. Jason’s muscles ached like he’d just been through an intense workout and hadn’t had any time to recover. “That’s never funny,” he said gruffly as he took a few deep breaths to steady his heartbeat. “How long have I been down?”

“Not quite a day.” Roy tossed the half empty pack of Lucky Strikes. “How is it you can’t leave and yet you still manage to satisfy your vices.”

Jason offered a weak shrug. “Not all my vices. I mean, Kor doesn’t live here. And I haven’t seen you in a while.”

Roy scoffed. “You’re one lewd son of a bitch.”

Jason got up off the floor and stumbled a little. “Jokes aside, where’s Wally?”

“Which one?”

Jason cringed. “You know who I mean.”

Roy sighed. “Why did YOU remember him? Of all people...”

“You think I know the answer to that?”

Roy punched at the wall in frustration. “Wally was our friend. Our partner. But you...what were you to him?”

Jason didn’t like the way that Roy was speaking. He didn’t sound like the happy-go-lucky tinkerer that he’d come to know. Where was the idiot who had tested a flamethrower on him in the shower? “I don’t know why you guys couldn’t remember him. I looked up to him. He was a self-made hero. He copied the Flash and did a better job. That’s...that’s who I knew before...”

Roy didn’t seem satisfied with that answer. “It just doesn’t make any sense.”

Jason had a faint idea why else he might have remembered. It was an uncomfortable subject for him, though, and one that Roy was usually better about avoiding. “The...the Pit has...odd properties...”

That seemed to bring back the Roy that Jason knew. “Right. Sorry. That makes sense. The Lazarus Pit is supposed to connect you with your truest self.”

“The Pit took my mind from me,” Jason said in a growl. “It destroyed what was left of me and turned me into a monster.” Jason drew out his knife—the blade that Roy had become well acquainted with in their time together. He half expected Jason to threaten him with it, but instead he held it to his own neck.

“Heel!”

Jason grimaced as he dropped the blade and slowly got to his knees. When his fingers were intertwined behind his head Roy stood before him, looking like he was going to be sick. “You’re still an ass.”

“You’re still naïve.”

“Holy crap!” Wally stumbled out of the closet looking truly disturbed. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“I needed to show you something. The Justice League put something in my neck that forces me into this position and keeps me at this tower.”

“You were SERIOUSLY making a play there? What is WRONG with you?” Roy whined. “Why can’t we discuss these things?”

Wally had a hand over his mouth, but he couldn’t help but smirk. “Geez. You’re pretty extreme. Let me guess, you want me to take it out?”

“Honestly, it’d be fantastic if you did. I’m getting fucking tired of getting on my knees every time someone gets a little freaked out. I swear, I’m not such a bad guy.”

“You ARE an ass,” Roy noted.

“I’d shrug, but, you know.”

Wally nodded. “I do owe you.”

Jason smiled. “Perfect. But let’s give it a minute. I’d rather not go through this on my knees. That just seems fucked up. Anyways, I’ve been dying to ask, how’d you get wiped from everybody’s mind?”

Wally looked pained. “Something...happened. Barry must have altered the time stream. It’s not impossible for someone connected to the Speed Force, but it’s dangerous. It can have consequences. He learned that, but when he fixed what he’d changed, the damage had already been done. The timeline that he came from—that I knew—was altered. But I was also using the Speed Force at the time. The coincidence was catastrophic. It altered the timeline and erased me from it. But that didn’t mean I didn’t exist, there was just nowhere for me to exit the Speed Force. Without someone to anchor me to reality, I had nowhere to go back to.”

Jason could figure it out from there. “The Lazarus Pit connects those who bathe in it with versions of themselves that can be. All potentials meeting on one concentrated point. So, I have a connection with the version of myself that knew you.” Jason closed his eyes tight. “I didn’t realize there was a difference between that version of myself and the man that I am now, because I’ve had a weak sense of reality upon coming back.”

Wally crossed his arms. “I know it’s not a good thing for you, but it’s everything to me. Without you, I’d still be trapped in the Speed Force. You freed me. You brought me back.”

“Right. I scratched your back, now you’ll scratch mine.”

Wally nodded slightly. “I can take out the implant. but is that really a good idea? Won’t you upset Dick? And what about Bruce or the rest of the League? Hell, wouldn’t they have this whole place bugged or something?”

“Oh, they do. Wave for Timbers. Kid’s been in charge of surveillance. He’s probably had enough of me taking advantage of his sympathy.” Jason’s arms finally dropped, and he exhaled deeply. “Let’s cut him some slack. Mind hitting the showers?”

“Okay. This is going to be...uncomfortable for a bit. You have to bear with me, okay?”

Mia was heading down the hall of the boys’ quarters to check in on Jason when she heard something weird coming from the showers.

“Ah!”

“You’re okay. You have to do this. I’m right here.”

She leaned in a little closer, almost certain that she was misinterpreting something...

“Ah! I can’t! I can’t!”

“Don’t forget to breathe. I know it’s a lot. Just a little more, okay?”

“Nnn!”

She wound up with her ear pressed to the door, trying to make out who the voices belonged to.

“Look at me, Jason. Just focus on me.”

“Nnnngggaaaaaah!”

Mia flinched, and accidentally bumped into the door release. It slipped open and she stared bug-eyed at the scene before her.

“Okay...Not going to lie, I thought something MUCH weirder was happening in here.”

“Got it!”

“Fuck!”

The other Wally pulled his hand out from the back of Jason’s neck, holding what she could only assume was the implant.

Roy was standing in front of Jason, holding him up as he put all his weight into his friend.
“Shut the door!”

Mia stepped in and quickly shut the door. “Is that? I mean...did you?”

“Jaybird? I need you to do something. Show us Wally didn’t fuck up your spine!”

Jason pushed off of Roy and tilted his head until his neck popped. “That was...violating,” he muttered. “Did you get it?”

“I certainly got something,” Wally said, holding his hand. “We’d better test quick before I find out I removed a chunk of your spinal cord or something.”

“Heel!” Mia piped excitedly.

And he didn’t drop to his knees.

Both Wally and Roy let out a deep sigh of relief while Mia all but leapt into Jason’s arms, completely forgetting about his injuries. He caught her with minimal discomforted grunting and spun her around. “You did it!”

“Say it all you want, Mia, you won’t get me on my knees that easily.” He set Mia down and looked over at Wally. “I can’t thank you enough.”

Wally fell into a crouch and laughed awkwardly. “Wow. Is this what it’s like to be caught in Jason Todd’s gravitational pull?”

“Come again?”

“Dick used to call it that...or I guess he called it that where...or when I came from. He glanced up at Jason and smiled. “He said, if you weren’t careful, it was easy to get caught in Jason’s gravitational pull. Claimed you had a natural magnetism, even when you were in Arkham. If he wasn’t careful, he would have gone wherever you led. He said that, as messed up as it was, you were the most like Bruce.” Jason cringed. “It’s true, though. Your natural confidence. You were dangerous, but you were alluring.”

Jason scoffed. “Dickwad said that? What a joke. I mean, Bruce is NOT alluring.” Mia smirked at that note.

“But it’s even truer in this timeline,” Wally clarified. “Roy here isn’t the only one, obviously. You’ve drawn people in.”

“Not all of the Titans have warmed up to me, though. I mean, I don’t think they’re totally afraid of me anymore at least.”

“Yeah, I get it. I’m pretty sure you’re our favorite Robin,” Mia said. “Don’t tell the others. Honestly, Damian’d probably take that as an affront to his character and Dick might actually cry.”

Wally stood back up. “I’ve only been back for a day and I feel like I owe everything to you.”

“Yeah, you’ve already given me what I wanted, so I’d call it square.” He held up a fist and Wally happily bumped it. “I just have one more question...The Speed Force...what other anomalies can it cause?”

Wally shrugged. “Wish I knew. It’s such an unstable force.”

Jason thought back to the visions, nightmares, and his discussion with Luthor. “Do you think, maybe, people might cross over from...I don’t know, other realities?”

“Well, that’s kind of how I got here. This is the same reality I came from, though.”

“How do you know that?”

Wally scratched his head. “Honestly, it’s hard to explain. There’s a certain pull to this place.”

“But there ARE other realities?”

“Well, sure. Infinite. Infinite timelines too.”

“So...there could be other versions of me.”

“Of course.”

“And with the rifts that you made trying to get back...could they...you know...”

Wally’s eyes got big. “Um. I mean, it seems like it’d be weirdly specific if...well...” He began rubbing his temples. “I...I was pulled to you...like gravity...”

Mia looked from guy to guy before questioning, “Why are we talking about alternate Jasons?”

Roy slapped his forehead. “As if one of you isn’t a big enough pain!”

The Knights

Chapter Summary

With Jason's impending exit from the Teen Titans, Roy gets things ready for the Outlaw reunion.

Meanwhile Bruce deals with his anger at Jason's actions and an impostor Batman on the loose in Gotham.

Chapter Notes

Don't hate. Been a while, I know. Haven't been sick. Been a little difficult to get writing time. No further excuses really. I have another chapter almost ready to post, but I'm working on smoothing out some finer details for this arc.

Characters will be introduced from the AU's connected to Probation. However, because the stories I wrote them in are at a more mature rating and might also not be the type of stories you guys want, I'll do little character bios at the end of the next few chapters to help give you an idea of who they are.

Otherwise, thanks for the continued support and here's hoping you're all happy and healthy in this weird time!

Roy was swimming in nostalgia, being back at the Titans Tower, but that wasn't necessarily a good thing. Being part of the Teen Titans had been good for him, but he never really felt like he fit in. Having no powers was one thing; at least he had Dick around to stand in his party on that matter. Watching the budding romance between the hot alien and Dick, on the other hand, was a total pain. Feeling distant and neglected didn't help his mentality. He ditched the team to strike out on his own and wound up using, which led to a catastrophic falling out with Oliver and the bad habits that left him on death row, where Jason and Kori had found him.

Of course, even with Kori and Dick back together, Roy wasn't jealous of them anymore. After working with her and Jason for so long, he came to understand that she and him were never going to be more than really good in bed because neither one of them could handle the emotional attachment.

Just another cop-out, maybe, but it was true. What really sucked, though, was that his next fling was with an assassin (maybe it was his TASTE in women that was the real problem, not

his attachment to them).

At least Jason had stuck with him for him for as long as he could.

“You’re staring again,” Raven pointed out, though her back was to him as she meditated facing the window in the rec room.

Roy took his eyes off Jason and the Batman simulation to look over at the goth girl. If he remembered right, she was the daughter of the freaky demon thing that almost ended the world a couple of years back (did everyone here have some ridiculous origin story? Was that the new requirement to be a Teen Titan?). “I’m making sure he’s not going at it too hard,” he mumbled. “He’s supposed to be taking it easy.”

“I know about the plan.”

Roy stiffened.

“Sorry. I don’t mean to, but thoughts sometimes... Jason’s mind is thoroughly guarded but yours is shockingly accessible,” she tried to explain. Now it felt like she was purposefully not meeting his gaze.

“Well I have to ask then,” Roy looked around quickly, making sure there was no one else close enough to get in on their conversation, “do you plan to sell us out?”

She resumed staring out the window and said, “Only if something goes wrong and the team can help.”

He could live with that. “So, how have you liked having J-bird around?” he asked, kicking back a little and letting his shoulders loosen up. “Seems like he’s had a mixed reception.”

“He’s reliable. And being willing to do the things that no one else will shouldn’t be viewed as antagonistic. But I’m not a part of the Justice League.”

“Why would you want to be?” Roy said with a scoff. “Bunch of jerks who think they’re always in the right. Always such a shocker when they aren’t.”

“Mr. Queen is far from perfect, but he is still admirable from what Mia and Ms. Lance have told me. And, if you don’t mind my pointing out, your thoughts about him are very... mixed.”

“Yeah, probably best to stay out of my head. No real demons, but enough skeletons tucked away in closets to fill a small graveyard at this point.” He took his hat off and ran a hand through his now buzzed hair. He’d let Kori give him a haircut the day before after Dick joked about his hair being almost as long as his used to be when he had a mullet phase. Somehow, though, the shaggy hair felt like it was his thing with Jason. Now he felt just a little further away again. Like they were drifting apart despite Jason’s insistence on his help for what was coming.

“You should talk to him,” Raven suggested, once again butting in where she wasn’t invited.

“He had every right to ditch me last time,” Roy noted. “We don’t agree on methods.”

“He’s willing to kill, and you’d rather not do that anymore, you mean.”

“Yeah, those would be the methods.” He felt a little exposed, talking to Raven. Did she have to be so blunt? “But he went to Dick right after our falling out. He wants to change.”

“So tell him.”

Roy broke out in a cold sweat. “T-tell him what?”

Finally she looked him in the eyes and he regretted wanting the attention. “You two are close. He would want to know that you’re off the wagon. He would want to help you.”

“Thought you couldn’t read his mind.”

“That’s just an observation,” she admitted. “He cares for you. He cares for all of us, surprisingly. I think he’d rather help you than be kept in the dark.”

“Maybe, but I need to help myself first.” Roy had desperately wanted to get better before seeing Jason again, but the Black Mask thing kind of demanded his attention. “You ever wish you could numb the pain?”

She didn’t answer him and instead dropped so that her feet were on the floor and turned to observe Jason with him. “Still impressive even with his injuries.”

“Actually, he’s slowed down a lot,” Roy pointed out. “He’s got these simulations memorized as well as the best methods to combat them, but he’s staying on the defensive right now. See?” They watched as Jason kept his hands up, blocking a number of blows aimed at his face, his ears, his throat... “He’s had many chances to counterattack, but he’s not at full speed and getting a hit to land on Batman requires him at his best. Right now all he can do is bide his time and hope to find a big enough opening to do some damage.”

“Computer, end simulation!”

Roy and Raven both looked over at Dick, who had just entered the room with a look of annoyance plastered all over his face.

“Ah. Here’s a fight that won’t have Jay on the defensive,” Roy whispered.

“The hell was that for? I had him!” Jason snapped as he dropped his defensive stance and straightened out only to wince slightly and cross his arms loosely to hide his obviously still messed up ribs.

“You’re supposed to be RESTING!”

Roy noticed that Dick had been all over Jason’s ass during his recovery. He never really thought the two of them were close before that, but he’d never really seen them together—at least not since Jason’s visit to the Tower when he first became Robin (and even then, he was

a cocky little brat...)—and the way that Jason moved around Dick, the way he looked him over, the way he spoke to him even... it made Roy wonder just what their deal was.

“There’s an affection akin to what he feels for Kori,” Raven said, making Roy bristle. “But he finds those thoughts confusing and suppresses them for the sake of his relationship with her.”

Roy stared at her in amazement. “You mean—?”

“Quit hovering already! We get it! I’m hurt! I’m not going to die, asshole!”

Roy hissed through his teeth. “Ahh, playing the ‘death card’ again. J-bird, you’re too obvious sometimes.” It was out of the corner of his eye, and only for a split second, but he could have sworn he saw Raven’s lips quirk up into a quick smile. She was young, but certainly knew how to make a guy sweat. It was no wonder Jason spoke fondly of her when reporting on things.

“Go back to bed!”

“Fucking make me!”

Roy sighed and got to his feet. “Just shut up and kiss already!” he shouted teasingly.

“The hell?” Jason looked back at him confused, completely missing the fact that Dick looked like he’d been slapped in the face. Poor guy was redder than the Red Hood’s helmet.

“N-no! We weren’t—I mean—that wasn’t—”

“I’ll leave you to this,” Roy mumbled, as Raven rolled her eyes at the spiraling scene. He had to head to Gotham soon anyways. Not that Jason needed to know, but he’d been holing up in one of their old bases for the last few months. It just happened to be the best stocked place he had access to since he quit the hero-for-hire business and couldn’t afford much of anything else.

The last thing Roy wanted to explain to Jason was how he’d borrowed the guy’s favorite motorcycle from the base’s garage to get over to Jump City quickly, so he didn’t bother to tell Jason where he was going and how he was getting there. He’d be back within the day anyways. Besides, there were only a couple days left before Jason’s intended departure time. They could stand to be apart for a few hours.

Or that’s what Roy had thought. But upon reaching the base, it was clear that someone else was making use of it. “What the hell?” Out of habit, he had his bow at hand upon entering, arrow already nocked and ready to shoot. He came upon his old workbench, however, to find that Jason was already there. “O-oh.” He lowered his bow. “Dude, how’d you get here so fast?”

Jason scoffed. “How did you live like this? You should have been dipping into Queen’s funds like I did with Bruce’s.”

“Uhh, we’ve been over this. The last thing I want—hell the last thing I thought YOU wanted—was to get help from those guys. And stealing from them? That’s just low.”

“Right. Noble to the end, even if a few heads roll in the process.”

“Your policy, not mine. Look, I thought the team wasn’t supposed to know you could leave the Tower. What are you doing all the way out in Gotham?” Roy felt the strange desire to put his bow back up. The voice was definitely Jason’s. The build was Jason’s. The casual clothes were Jason’s. But something felt off just the same. Why wouldn’t he look at Roy?

“Gotham’s my home,” Jason confirmed. “Horrible as she’s been to me, the scum always pulls me right back.” Jason picked up a sniper rifle that Roy knew hadn’t been in their armory before (guy was a good shot, but he was much more the “shoot your enemy from a far building with a grenade launcher” kind of guy... he lacked subtlety). He pressed a button on the side and the rifle came apart at the middle and split off into two separate guns. “I’ve got to say, you’re a little disappointing, Harper.”

Before Roy could get another word in, Jason shot him right in the left shin. The bullet went clean through, ripping out through his calf. He dropped to one knee and pressed on the wound to staunch the bleeding. “Argh! What the hell?”

Jason approached him and Roy stared up at his face.

This wasn’t the Jason he knew.

Jason Todd once had blue eyes, but after his dip in the Lazarus pit they had a noticeable amount of green in them. This Jason’s eyes were still entirely blue. This was a Jason who hadn’t died. But the ‘J’ scar on his cheek suggested that surviving the clown hadn’t gone much better for him.

“I’ve got the archer,” this Jason said, tapping a com unit in his ear. “Didn’t suspect a thing. You said he was the brains of this operation. You led me to believe this would be more difficult.”

“I didn’t want to attack a friend,” Roy growled. “My mistake. Wouldn’t be the first time Jason Todd’s tried to kill me.”

This Jason rolled his eyes and picked up the first-aid kit off the table. “Fight back and I’ll make it worse for you. I don’t kill good guys, and dumb as you are, I’ve looked into you enough to know you’re on the right side.”

“Then why shoot me, asshole? Is that just a Jason Todd initiation sort of thing?” This Jason sprayed antiseptic right into Roy’s open wound. “Ffffuck!”

“I don’t see why he even bothers to rely on you,” this Jason mumbled.

“What, you don’t have a witty ginger teammate in your universe?”

This Jason smiled bitterly. “Never got the chance to really branch out. I saved Batman, Bruce took me in, I became Robin, and then HE got me. Two years later, all I could think about was how nice it would feel to break Bruce’s neck with my bare hands...”

“Two years? It took J-bird longer than that to get used to rising from the grave. Why’d it take you that long? You don’t look like you’re undead or—”

“I was his plaything in the bowels of Arkham for two years,” he confirmed, all pleasantries gone. His face twisted in such anguish that Roy actually wanted to cover the scar on his cheek and apologize for a second.

But then the guy pressed the gauze a little too hard to the hole in his leg and all sympathetic feelings were gone.

“Goddamnitthatfuckingsmarts!” Roy sucked in a quick breath and tried again. “So, you’re the Arkham Knight guy who’s been causing problems? What, you want to kill our Batman too because he couldn’t save you? The guy didn’t even know you!”

“No. That’s not... We’re just trying to...”

“‘We’? Who the hell are you working with?”

“That would be me.”

Roy turned just enough to see Talia and a few of her assassins stepping out of the shadows. “Right. Of course. Because THAT makes sense.”

“It doesn’t have to make sense to you, boy.” Talia approached and the Arkham Knight stood up quickly and put himself between her and Roy.

“He’s not at fault here. I want your guarantee that he’ll be treated well.”

“Says the guy who shot me,” Roy mumbled.

Talia just crossed an arm over her chest and bowed. “He will be kept safe, far from where the Red Hood can reach him.”

Red Hood, maybe. But Talia didn’t know the way that security was set up in the old base. Roy took out his phone and, with the press of a button, sent the footage to the first contact he could pull up. Unsurprisingly, a knife knocked the phone from his hand within seconds, but it was all the time he needed.

“With you out of the way, how do you think your friend will fare?” the Arkham Knight asked before leaning down next to him and whispering, “It’s for your safety. Please, just trust me.”

Like that didn’t leave Roy even more confused. But the guy proceeded to knock him out, keeping him from asking anymore questions.

Penguin had tried to rob six banks in one week.

Deathstroke tried to assassinate the mayor and a few people from families who Bruce saw at every gala.

Harley Quinn had managed to get away from Waller again and was on a petty crime spree across Gotham.

Poison Ivy had developed a new poison that was still in need of a viable antidote.

And of course there was that mysterious armored Batman who had been on a killing spree.

All of this and yet the villain still occupying Bruce's mind wasn't even one he was supposed to still see as a villain.

The Red Hood had killed Black Mask.

Not with his own hands, maybe. But the intent was there. Bruce had been there when the finishing blow was to be struck. Jason wasn't afraid. He had that same cocky grin that he used to wear when he was Robin. That streetwise smugness that came from years of learning to manipulate people just to survive.

"Roman would have killed him," Tim noted without even looking at the screen where Bruce watched the moment on a replaying loop. As always, his intuition was on point. "There's no denying that. The Titans and Batman both got to him too late. That's all there is to it."

"He could have found another solution," Bruce mumbled.

"You don't know that."

"I do." Bruce's eyes narrowed at he watched the fated moment again. "Jason never gave up control. Every action he made was still calculated. Having Talia kill Sionis was just another step in his plan."

Tim scoffed. "You can't know that."

"I know Jason."

Tim shifted in his seat, turning away from the college homework he had pulled up on a different screen. "Don't you think that maybe you don't know him anymore? He was the second Robin, he died, he came back, he learned from some dead civilization how to function again, he learned to kill with crazy precision from whoever Talia could get for him, and yeah; he once turned that knowledge on you. But think about what he's done since then!"

"Crimes against multiple governments, assassinations both political and of the mercenary variety, intergalactic warfare—"

"But never for evil, right?"

"We don't kill," Bruce said flatly, finally shutting the footage off. "There is always another way. He knows that."

"Do you lecture Todd even in his absence, Father?"

Tim jolted in his seat upon Damian's sudden arrival. Intuitive as he was, Damian was still trained by the best and had no problem sneaking around.

"I should think you have better things to do with your time."

"Welcome home, Damian. Does Alfred know you're here?"

"Of course. He was already working on dinner when I arrived, so I take it you informed him of my impending return." Damian's eyes shifted to Tim and he put his hands behind his back, puffing his chest slightly. "Though I see you failed to inform Drake."

"Yeah. Nobody tells me anything," Tim said with a huff.

"I have returned to discuss the matter of Mother's resurrection with Father. It is a matter I had hoped to have some privacy for."

"So what? Am I just supposed to leave you two to your brooding or something?"

Damian clicked his tongue in that way that irked even Bruce and said, "The Titans asked me to deliver a verbal invitation to you. After much arguing over Todd's inability to sit still despite his injuries, he chose to humor Grayson by offering to take a night off for a movie. The whole team is getting into the idea."

Tim straightened up a bit at that. "Oh. That... sounds kind of fun." His eyes flicked to Bruce, silently seeking permission. Bruce wanted to tell him that he was free to make his own decisions, but something in the way that his shoulders dropped seemed to be answer enough for the lad. "I'll shoot Dick a text to let him know I'm on my way. Mind if I take a Robincycle?"

"It might be best to attend as Tim Drake," Bruce pointed out. "This is a casual evening, after all."

Tim shrugged. "Fine, but if that's the case I'm taking the Camaro."

Bruce smiled slightly as Tim already started peeling off his Robin suit on his way out of the cave.

"He's juvenile."

"He's older than you," Bruce replied quickly and calmly. "It wouldn't hurt you to show some respect."

"Physically, no."

God, how there was so much Al Ghul in him.

"Now let's not waste time, Father. Mother's return may complicate things." Damian ground his teeth and added, "If she were to... create another clone of me..."

"I would never let it hurt you."

Damian winced. “‘It,’ Father? What claim do I have to my own name over these genetic duplicates?”

Bruce could see the anguish in his son’s usually stoic face and understood that this was more of an issue than he’d even considered. He would have to handle their conversation delicately. “Alright. Let me hear your concerns.”

*

Damian truly was bright for his age. Bruce thought time and time again that he’d learned to stop underestimating his son, but then Damian would prove himself even more capable than before. Their discussion on the matter of Talia had helped to quell some of their concerns, but Damian still brought up very interesting points that they still needed to consider.

He’d also defended Jason.

Bruce held true to his argument that, despite the severity of the situation, Jason was better than that and more than capable of finding an alternative solution, but Damian pointed out that he also had to factor the implant into his situation. Given that the enemy knew how to use it against him, he had to anticipate his own incapacitation. With the way that things worked out, Roy wouldn’t have been able to save him, and Artemis would have been too busy dealing with Bizarro to step in in time.

And so, just like that, Damian was able to convince him that Jason truly acted in his own best interest. Perhaps murder was too far, but that was Talia’s fault, not Jason’s. Even if he anticipated her acting out with such violent intention, with her as his only viable option for a rescue, he had to take his chances.

Alfred had called them upstairs for dinner a few minutes back and Bruce dismissed Damian to go ahead of him, promising to join soon. Once he had the Cave to himself, he pulled up the image of the message he’d received months ago.

-

Restrain Jason Todd by any means necessary if you want to keep your family safe.

-JN

-

Afraid of what the message warned of, Bruce had gone to the League to see if anyone had a method that might not be completely depriving Jason of his freedom. The best anyone could offer was Lex Luthor with his Starro-based implant. The idea of forced autonomic restraint was sickening, but then Dick came to him with the news that Jason wanted to make an effort to change.

It was the perfect opportunity.

He could prove his good intentions with the Teen Titans and remain in one singular location where the kids wouldn’t have to fear him. It was the best opportunity he could ask for.

Now, it felt like he'd followed a design.

Jason had, in spite of his unwanted restraints, managed to thrive with the Titans. In fact, the implant had only served to make his recuperation more difficult. Bruce was failing to see how he might be linked to someone threatening the family. And, still unaware of who JN was or their intentions, he had no choice but to continue to treat Jason... unjustly.

Perhaps the truth would be best at this point? Jason would understand. As Damian and Tim both insisted, he was more aware than Bruce gave him credit for.

[Further reports of an armored Batman sighted in Gotham leaving behind gruesome murder scenes this week. Commissioner Gordon wasn't available to give a full statement on the matter, but he did comment that he felt the actions were of someone imitating Gotham's beloved Dark Knight rather than the Batman himself.]

Bruce had rigged the Bat-Computer to notify him if anything turned up on the mysterious armored Batman, but once again the information that he got was after the fact. Vicky Vale stood in front of a crime scene in an alley. She wasn't allowed to get any closer, but blood splatter could be seen at the corner of where the camera was showing. With Talia's return, Bruce now worried that she had done exactly as Damian feared and created another clone to hunt them down. But the facts remained: all of the armored Batman's victims were criminals. More specifically: people who had confirmed abuse, rape, or murder charges who had been released on technicalities. That didn't seem like something a clone of Damian would do.

"So, you HAVE been looking for me? Some detective you turned out to be."

Bruce pulled his cowl back over his face and loosed two exploding batarangs in the direction of the voice. He watched as a silhouette that much resembled his own leapt from the top of the T-rex to the giant coin with practiced ease.

The Batcave wasn't an easy place to infiltrate. And even if someone managed to pull it off, his systems were all set to notify himself and his associates of any unauthorized intrusion. How had this man bypassed all of that?

A pair of batarangs were sent flying back at Bruce. Though he moved to dodge, they arced in midair and lit on fire as they continued to pursue him. These weren't his own weapons. This other Batman had a different arsenal.

A couple of bat-bombs took care of the pursuing batarangs and Bruce shot a grappling line up to a light fixture to get closer to his opponent's level. To his surprise, bolas wrapped around the line and began sparking with a fierce charge. Were his grappling line not insulated against such shocks, Bruce might have been in genuine danger. Upon reaching the fixture he got a good look at his opponent and was reminded of a more destructive suit he had once considered building. He had trashed the idea upon deciding it was too lethal. The cowl on the man in question covered his full face. The eyes glowed red. Everything about it was threatening. This was a killer Batman.

Bruce had dealt with alternate universes before. He'd almost lost Dick when Earth-2's Justice Lords had attacked. Was this another version of himself? Another Batman from different

circumstances?

When a gun leveled with Bruce, he knew that this Batman was nothing like himself. This man was out for blood.

*

“Father, your continued delay is highly disrespect—” Damian was on high alert in an instant upon stepping back into the cave.

“Master Damian? Why are you—”

“Get back!”

Bruce was strung up by the Bat-Computer while someone dressed in a similar cowl was downloading information.

Alfred knew better than to pick a fight and retreated into the manor to call in help from the League. Damian, on the other hand, wasn’t one to back down from a challenge. “I’ll make you regret breathing!”

The other Bat was on his feet instantly but, upon seeing Damian coming after him, he took a nervous step back.

“You?”

Damian flew into a rage, automatically assuming this was another one of his mother’s clones out to replace himself and his father. Maybe he wasn’t as developed as this clone, but he would prove his superiority.

Or at least he’d try to. This Bat was completely intent on avoiding and redirecting every last one of Damian’s attacks.

“Fight me, damn you!”

“Never. I won’t hurt you.”

It was filtered through the fully covering mask, but his voice was uncannily familiar. Damian snatched a blade off the other Bat’s person and swiped at his face, actually managing to damage one of the lenses. The other Bat finally caught one of Damian’s punches and pushed him hard enough to knock him off a nearby ledge.

“OZ!”

The Bat leaned over the ledge, reaching out to catch Damian, but he’d already deployed a grappling line to catch himself. They stared at one another for a moment, Damian focused like a laser on the single blue eye he would see through the broken lens.

“Who is Oz?” Damian shouted. “Who are you?”

There was a pause before Damian hit the retractor button to pull himself up.

“I’m sorry about this.”

The Bat shot charged bolas that ensnared Damian, forcing him to release his hold on the grappling gun and drop into the abyss of the Batcave. The Bat fired a grappling line that wrapped around Damian’s abdomen along with the bolas and once the line pulled taut, Damian lost consciousness.

CHARACTER PROFILE #1

Jason Wayne--Batman (also referred to as "Killer-Bat")

Parents:

Sheila Todd, an exotic dancer who knew her way around the slums of Gotham, had a one night stand with known playboy: Thomas Wayne. After having his child she attempted to extort Thomas, but the only support he offered was a full scholarship for Jason to attend the notorious private school: Gotham Academy. Jason was unaware of who his father was growing up; having been raised by his mother and William "Liam" Distal on Crime Alley. Liam was extremely abusive to both Sheila and Jason. Liam Distal, Sheila Todd, Thomas & Martha Wayne, and John & Mary Grayson were all killed by the Joker's original opus.

Friends:

Jason met Bruce Wayne and Richard Grayson in Gotham Academy. He and Bruce were in the same class while Dick was a year ahead of them. He and Bruce were like brothers without even being aware of their own blood relation. Dick sort of inserted himself into Jason's life and acted as a watchful friend. Dick and Bruce weren't exactly known for getting along, but they were all connected by Jason. After the Joker's opus, Jason's relation to Bruce was made public and Bruce, while grieving the loss of his parents, asked Jason to move into the Wayne mansion and start his life over out of the slums as Jason Wayne. It took some time before Jason finally agreed, but shortly after he moved in, Bruce committed suicide, leaving the Wayne fortune to his brother.

Acquaintances:

Selina Kyle is a meta-human with cat-like features and abilities. She owns and lives in her family's old bookstore where Jason met her. She saved his life once and he convinced her to accept Superman's personal invitation for her to join the Justice League, even giving her the superhero name: Fatale. She and Jason have an off and on romantic relationship that is often strained by his status as a vigilante and her status as a hero. Alfred Pennyworth was the Wayne family's butler and continued to serve Jason after Bruce's passing. While Thomas was notorious for sleeping around, Alfred grew close to his neglected wife Martha. Stuck with guilt over his old friend and beloved's passing, he vowed to protect Bruce. Upon losing him as well he was stripped of his will to go on. It was Jason who faced the same sort of depression who helped him through things. The two of them are each other's family now. Detective Timothy Drake has met Jason Wayne on a few occasions but is far more acquainted with Batman. He strongly disapproves of Batman's stance on killing criminals, but also

understands how useful he can be for the GCPD and the city itself. He is Batman's main connection to the police.

Hero Backstory:

Upon learning who Jason's father was, Liam sold his step-son as a commodity. Jason was kept in an old, abandoned house where bats had nested in the attic where he slept. After failing to stop the Joker's opus, he made a quiet vow to stop the madman from harming others. He told Bruce once about his dream to be a hero to people like himself and Bruce voiced his undying support. Together they came up with Batman. After Bruce's passing, Jason made Batman a reality.

Methodology:

Jason had an extremely difficult childhood. Having faced what he did, he feels no qualm putting scum out of the world's misery. He's a Batman with a more lethal arsenal. He carries customized guns as well that can be easily switched from rubber bullets to his signature custom incendiary, armor-piercing bullets. Because he plays the role of executioner, Superman and the Justice League strongly disapprove of him (with Selina being the only obvious exception).

Who is Oz?:

Even in the story I wrote featuring Jason Wayne, there is no character named "Oz" (will eventually be revealed to be short for "Ozymandias"). The biggest hint I can give there is that Jason is his universe's Batman so much so that he had a long-standing relationship with his world's Selina.

Want to read more about Jason Wayne? Check out his story in the "Jason Todd; Teen Titan?" series titled: Killer-Bat. Definitely note the Mature rating and mind the tags! If you're at all worried about reading it but still want more to this character's story, let me know in a comment and I'll give you a personal look into his story.

The Knaves

Chapter Summary

Dick wrestles with some odd feelings for Jason and encounters someone who turns his world upside down.

Meanwhile, while taking a day with the team, Jason faces an opponent he never saw coming.

Chapter Notes

Hallo again!

Positive feedback is the lifeblood of my writing, no denying that, and I adore everybody who has been keeping up with this series or even just tried it out on a whim!

I'm fighting a little to make this story what I wanted it to be from the beginning (this arc was kind of a big goal), so it might be a bit before the next chapter, but it's still fresh on my mind and I'm just trying to find the best way to do it. If it takes a little while, it's only because I want to make it great.

But there's no reason to hide the next bit since it was originally connected to the last chapter. So I hope you enjoy meeting a couple more curve-balls! Another character profile will be included at the end to introduce someone from this chapter. Otherwise, I hope you enjoy!

Jason was even more difficult than usual since his encounter with Black Mask. Dick was glad to see him recovering so fast, but it didn't fix what had happened. Every time Dick closed his eyes, he could see Jason on his knees, awaiting the killing blow. He couldn't face Bruce since their initial argument on the matter because Bruce wasn't over how Jason had used Talia to commit murder when... if she hadn't... if they'd been too late...

No. Jason had lived. That's what mattered.

But then, to learn that Jason had violent night terrors...

And then Roy just had to go and blurt out that stupid line about them kissing. "It's not like that," Dick muttered to himself.

“What’s not like what?”

Wally—the returned Wally, that is—was at the door and ready to go in seconds.

“Why do you always do that?” Dick snapped, flustered by his sudden appearance. Wally smiled sadly and Dick corrected himself. “Sorry. My memory’s still a little hazy.”

“No, it’s cool. I get it.” Wally rubbed his neck and smiled sheepishly. “This is an adjustment for me too. I mean, this IS the reality that I came from, but everything’s... just a little different. Mind if I walk with you?”

“It’ll just be a walk. Might not be your speed.”

“Dude, I’m dying to move at regular speed for a change.”

“Then sure. I’m just heading out to pick out a movie for the team tonight. Were there Redboxes in the reality you remember?”

“Like a red-colored box?”

“Awesome. New experience.” They left the Tower together and finally took the time to just talk.

“So, you and Barbara...?”

“Babs? She’s basically my sister. Since she got the surgery that got her back on her feet, she’s been pretty busy.”

“Surgery? Wait, she can WALK again?”

“Oh, yeah. Walk, flip, kick... you’d never know her spine was once messed up.”

“And you two aren’t... together?”

Dick scoffed. “We tried a time or two. But it never really worked out. I’m with Kori, actually. We live together. It’s pretty serious.”

“Oh? I guess that’s not a huge stretch. You and Kori were so on-again-off-again.”

“What? No, we’re solid! I mean, there was a... time when we weren’t... and I guess Roy was... and Jason sort of...”

“Right, that’s had me a little confused,” Wally admitted. “Jason and Roy were a team? that’s not something I ever would have considered.”

“Well, they were kind of outcasts. Bruce wouldn’t accept Red Hood’s methods and after Roy’s substance issue—”

“So the Titans didn’t help him?”

“Well no. I mean, he hasn’t been a Teen Titan in years and—”

“Not ‘Teen.’ I mean the ‘Titans.’ Those of us... you... who aged out but still worked well together.”

“Yeah, not a thing.”

“So Roy faced his darkest days ALONE? What happened to his daughter?”

“His what?”

“And his arm! I noticed that. Did he get a good prosthetic or is it still attached?”

“Is it not supposed to be?”

Wally sighed. “Okay, so that’s pretty damned different. From what I remember he only got clean after his daughter died.”

Dick’s jaw dropped.

“I mean, it seems like he’s doing better with Jason for support, I guess.”

“Yeah, well... with Kori on their team, they had quite the ray of sunshine looking after them.”

Wally raised an eyebrow. “Kori was on their team... and you said... Did she...?”

“Yup.”

“With which one?”

“Mostly Roy.”

“‘Mostly’?”

“I messed up with her, she ran into Jason, and they helped each other through dark times. Can we just leave it at that?”

Wally chuckled. “I can’t tell who you’re more jealous of.”

Dick thought back to Roy’s lewd comment again and lit up. “Jason! A-and Roy! I mean, Kori’s my girlfriend! Why would I be jealous of her?”

Wally winced. “I uh, meant between Jason and Roy. Are you feeling okay?”

Dick exhaled deeply. “I... am annoyingly aware of Jason’s sexuality.”

“Mm, yeah, he hit on me earlier because I grabbed the last piece of bacon. Joked about scoring with me to score it off me. Dude’s shameless, but harmless. Why does it matter, though?”

Dick’s jaw set. “Right. He’s a flirt. Openly bisexual. Sometimes it makes me nervous, which I think he knows. Was he like that in the reality you knew?”

Wally rubbed his chin. "I'll admit, he was NOT a Robin any hero was close with. Sure, I knew him, but him pulling me out of the Speed Force was a bigger shock for me than anything. Guy spent more time in Blackgate and Arkham in his adult life than even some of Batman's usual rogue gallery."

Dick blanched.

"I remember him being a pretty big guy too. Like, you hear things about prison, but Jason Todd looked like the kind of guy who'd fuck up anybody who crossed him."

"F-fuh-fuh-fucked?"

Wally nearly tripped over his own feet. "Fuck up, Dick. He'd fuck people up! Damn. Are you okay?"

Dick dropped his head and groaned. "I don't know anymore."

Wally slapped him on the back encouragingly. "Hey, buck up. Nobody thought you were all that straight anyways."

Dick sank lower.

"I mean, you ran around in your underwear when you first became a sidekick. You AND Garth. Why was I the only member of the Teen Titans original team who wore pants?"

"They were aerodynamic," Dick whined.

"And yet no Robin has complained about covered legs since," Wally teased.

"We're here."

Wally looked around. "What, 7 Eleven rents out movies in this reality?"

"Not specifically. They just have a Redbox." Dick tapped the device's touch screen and began scrolling through the selections. Last time we all got together for a movie Kori accidentally rented It."

"Oh, I love Tim Curry."

Dick scoffed. "Are you from a different time or a different reality? There's a much newer It movie. Actually, it got split into two since the book's a dictionary and a half."

"I feel like I've lost at least a decade, but I remember being older. I remember having a whole... family..."

Dick rested a sympathetic hand on Wally's shoulder. "I'd get you caught up on all of the Disney films you're not familiar with to help you feel a little more family love, but I'm pretty sure the team would chew me out for that."

"Guess that hasn't changed. Do you still live on sugary cereals too?"

“I mean, I eat other things...”

“That’s a yes.” Wally, having picked up on things quickly, tapped the screen when ‘It Chapter Two’ popped up. “Here. You said you only watched the first part, right? I’ve read the book a few times. You wouldn’t have to catch me up on much. And if the team’s not really into the Disney endings, this should be pretty good.”

Dick thought back to how the first movie had messed him up a bit. The thought of losing one’s little brother to an evil clown hit a little closer to home than he would have liked. Of course if there was more to the story, he’d be lying if he said he wasn’t curious. “Alright then.” He made the selection, paid for it with his card and laughed at Wally’s amazement when the box spat out a disk in a simple case out of a side slot.

“Maybe this really is the future,” Wally mumbled.

“Actually, Redboxes are kind of falling behind the times. I’m just a fan of the old-fashioned.”

Wally gave an exasperated sigh and Dick held the disk out to him. “I’ve got to run by the apartment to grab a few things and fill Kori in. Not that this walk hasn’t been... enlightening... mind if I catch you back at the Tower?”

“What, you need private time with Kori?”

Dick’s blush spoke volumes.

“Right then. Catch you in a bit. Don’t get lost.”

And—no pun intended—Wally West was gone in a flash. Dick loved seeing him. Adored having him around. But it felt like things had changed too much. These little things that Wally mentioned didn’t just go over Dick’s head. They rang true. He could remember Roy’s daughter. He could remember Jason at Arkham and Blackgate. These were memories, but of things that no longer happened. It was more than a little confusing. And who was Dick supposed to be if he was both himself and the version of himself that Wally knew?

On his way to the coastline where his apartment with Kori was, while zoned out and contemplating the significance of Wally’s return, someone shoulder-checked Dick and nearly knocked him right off his feet. “Geez. Sorry. I wasn’t really watching where I was—”

Dick’s eyes met with the stranger’s and his heart leapt into his throat. Trench coat and hat aside, there was no hiding who was under those sunglasses.

“Hey!”

As if to confirm what Dick thought, the guy took off in an impressive sprint. “What the hell?” Dick pursued him down an alley and watched the guy jump onto a dumpster, launch himself up to a closed window ledge, then proceed to leap across the way to a raised fire escape and hoist himself up.

“You can’t be serious!?” Dick followed suit, executing the same maneuver with ease and following the guy up to the rooftop, only to find he was already a few buildings over. “Stop!

You're only making this worse!" A chase like this, after all, was pointless. Dick could spend all day scaling rooftops. He felt more at home up high than he did on the ground.

But when the guy suddenly stopped just as Dick was closing in, Dick realized he had no plan to avoid him and wound up colliding at full speed. "Sh-shit! Jason, I swear, if you made me aggravate your injuries... No, how the hell are you even out here? You're not supposed to—"

The sunglasses had been knocked aside and the person under Dick was... well he resembled Jason to an eerie extent, but his eyes were a natural green while the Jason that Dick knew only had green flecks and occasionally glowing green eyes.

"You're not Jason."

One arm slinked around Dick's back, holding him in place on top of the Jason-like stranger in a shockingly intimate way. "Of course I'm Jason. And you're the same old, gullible, distractible, naïve Dick Grayson."

There was a sultry quality to Jason's voice that made Dick's body flush. This wasn't Jason. Not his Jason. There was an obvious threat here. He had to get up. Get away. Figure things out.

The guy rolled so that Dick was now pinned to the rooftop under his weight, then he leaned forward. Dick's eyes widened as the man locked lips with him. The initial shock was gone, however, the moment he felt a tongue breaching his mouth and pushing something to the back of his throat. He thrashed in a panic, but the man leaned back and kept a gloved hand pressed over Dick's nose and mouth, waiting patiently for Dick to swallow.

How could he let himself be caught so off guard? Jason was getting to him. Getting in his head.

"Mmm. Easy to forget how nice Grayson's ass is when he's withering away in a wheelchair." A woman who strangely resembled Catwoman stepped around the corner and helped the Jason lookalike to his feet.

Dick stood up quickly and moved to stick his fingers down his throat and force whatever drug he'd been given back up, but a whip lashed out, ensnaring his hand and pulling him forward. The other Jason proceeded to sweep his legs out from under him and stomp hard on his chest. "As much fun as it would be to destroy another Grayson, that's not in my schedule. I need you to send a message. Duela, if you would."

The woman in black dragged Dick across the roof by his ensnared arm, bringing him over to a central air system where she proceeded to tie him up. While she worked at it, the other guy slipped the communicator out of Dick's pocket and clicked his tongue. "Can't have them tracking you too quickly. Good thing you're not in your Nightwing suit. Then I'd have had to leave you here naked. Now that would have been awkward."

Dick was beginning to feel euphoric, which he knew was wrong. The world around him felt softer. The ropes digging into his skin made him let out a soft gasp as he realized just how funny his situation was.

“Bat... Batman will find... me,” Dick managed to get out as his head continued to swim.

“Don’t count on it. I’ve got him preoccupied. Or, another me does at least.” The guy started to laugh. It was slight, but the sound tickled Dick. He couldn’t help but feel the mirth as if it was directed at him and he too began laughing...

...and laughing...

...and laughing.

“Aw, Red, everything’s going so well!”

“Of course. The pieces are almost all in place. Now we just have to wait.”

*

“I must admit, it’s good to see you in high spirits.”

Jason rolled his left arm a few times, having knocked it out of place again while bickering with Dick earlier. “The fuck makes you think I’m in high spirits?”

Dinah smiled warmly. “That goofy look on your face. Did something good happen?”

Jason thought back to Roy’s comment and Dick’s utter shock. “Nothing exciting. Just saw something funny.”

“Right.” Dinah leaned back in the chair in Jason’s room in that way that she liked to do when she was sizing him up. He was used to this trick. She knew there was something he wasn’t telling her, and he was okay with that normally, but he’d have to be particularly careful now that he had an active plan in place to get out of there. “And how have you been feeling since... you know?”

“Sore,” Jason said flatly a second before his arm popped back out of place. “Urk. Something like a broken doll,” he said with a grunt as he clicked it back in with a wince. “Not too bad, though. I’ve been hitting the simulator to get in a good workout.”

“I’m sure Dick loves that.”

Jason’s mouth quirked up in the corner, a mix between amusement and irritation. “Why’s that guy so up my ass all of the time, huh? I came here at HIS suggestion. It’s not MY fault that was a shitty plan.”

“Was it, though?”

“Is it good therapeutic practice to respond with questions?”

“Are you the therapist or am I?”

Jason sat on the edge of his bed and crossed his arms, relieved when the left one didn’t pop out. “You’re the one dancing around the issue at hand. I thought that was supposed to be MY

job.”

Dinah nodded and let her eyes fall shut. “We keep doing this dance, Jason. Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to be honest with me for once?”

“I’m always honest with you,” he defended, trying to think back to see if he had in fact lied to her. “I’m not thrilled with this arrangement. I’ve made that clear. But... I think some good has come out of it. Now, through no fault of my own, I’m being removed from this almost functional situation and forcibly placed in another. Something tells me there’s not going to be a whole lot of bonding time with the Justice League if I’m locked up in some cell meant for intergalactic threats.”

“Nobody’s going to lock you up,” Dinah confirmed. “It would be much like your situation here. You would be given free range of the Watch Tower. There’s even hope to remove the implant altogether. Your DNA would be blocked from all zeta-tubes, of course, but you should have free range otherwise.”

“Yippee. So glad the big guns trust me to wander their creepy ‘Big Brother’ ship. Maybe someday they’ll even trust me not to kill Superman.”

“Do you want to kill Superman?”

“Again with the questions,” though this time Jason laughed a little more good-naturedly. “Why the hell would I want to kill Superman? Who do you think I am? Lex Luthor? Oh wait, he’s on YOUR side now.”

“You’ve made allies with an Amazonian and a Kryptonian clone, Jason. Can you blame the League for feeling a little threatened?”

“Bruce did it first,” Jason joked. “Sorry. Artemis and Bizarro are allies, sure, but honest to whatever gods you believe in; I only want to help Art prevent another apocalypse event. Go ahead and ask Diana about the Bow of Ra when you get the chance. Biz joining her is just a convenient bonus while I make sure the over-powered boy scout doesn’t kill a guy who’s even more innocent than Krypto the Super-Dog.”

“Somehow I believe you. And I trust that most of the League does as well. Clark will get over the clone thing eventually,” she added with a wink. “But there is no denying, you DO resemble Batman in many ways.”

“Take that back,” Jason said only half joking.

“I’m not the first one to think that. Here’s the kicker: as indispensable as Bruce is to the League, he also scares most members.” She leaned forward as if worried that they were being watched (boy did Jason have news for her). “Did you know he had contingency plans for the key members of the Justice League?”

Jason scoffed. “Nooo! Bruce? Inconceivable! And I certainly wouldn’t know anything about a collar he made to silence a certain heroine who screams like a banshee!”

She grimaced at that. “Point taken. Because of Superman, the League trusts Batman implicitly.”

“But that courtesy’s never going to extend to me. I can live with that. What I can’t live with is being carted around like Hannibal Lecter from one cell to the next.”

“I understand. I can’t say I approve of your methods all the time, but you are effective. You’ve proven your worth on this team as well. I, as well as a few other Leaguers, have vouched for you and are vying for your freedom with little supervision.”

Jason couldn’t help but wonder how she and those other Leaguers would react upon hearing his ‘jailbreak’ in a couple of days.

“I do truly believe you have made great progress here, Jason. Even if you won’t admit to it, this team has been good for you. Maybe some situations could have been avoided, but you handled yourself well. Hopefully the next time I see you—no doubt at the Watchtower—will be the last time we sit together as therapist and patient.”

“Mandated therapy might have an end date? Color me surprised.”

Dinah stood up and actually placed a hand on Jason’s shoulder. He knew he’d given her a hard time for the past few months, but the motion was appreciated. It was a small comfort to know that not everyone in the Justice League thought he was some irredeemable killer. He’d hate to prove her or them wrong, but even he wasn’t sure what was coming. The Arkham Knight felt too familiar to be a coincidence. If there were more Jason Todds crossing into this universe... Jasons who were less inclined to do better...

“Thank you,” he actually said, making her stare at him with obvious surprise. “I mean... I’ll always wish you were better help for Roy, but I know how difficult he can be. So... Thanks for having a little faith in me. And thanks for everything you do for Mia. So, yeah... Thanks.”

Dinah looked him square in the eyes and said, “I’m going to hug you. Will that hurt?”

He shrugged and nearly popped his shoulder again. “I think it’s worth the risk.”

She draped herself over him—surprisingly gently despite just how thoroughly she wrapped herself around him—and took a deep breath. “I truly wish you the best of luck.”

Maybe this wasn’t a great idea. Jason could still remember his mother—drug addled as her delicate head usually was—hugging him like this. Telling him things would be better. That things weren’t his fault. He knew better than to believe her, but how he wished it was true. He rested his chin on Dinah’s shoulder and fought the urge to admit everything to her in that moment. He’d have to get a head check later or something. This desire for motherly affection wasn’t something he wanted to know still bothered him.

Dinah finally pulled away and nodded to him. “Take care of yourself in the meantime, Jason. I’ll see you soon.”

“Y-yeah.” She stepped out of his room and he knew that she was heading to the zeta-tubes to get out of there. Barry poked in often still, but Wally even asked him for a little space while the tried to adjust (no doubt trying to distance himself a little before running off with Jason and Roy), and Lois—of all people—had dropped in a time or two to see how things were going, but aside from them the Tower was finally getting back into the swing of just being the team. Having another movie night felt... almost needed.

Jason waited a few minutes before standing up and stretching out. The soreness remained, but as far as he could tell his bones were healed and back in place and he was able to breathe almost normally (fighting with the simulations proved that exertion made breathing a little difficult, but no doubt in another day or two he would be able to keep up with the best of them). He made his way to the entertainment room and found that Tim had just arrived to partake in their movie night and was settling right in with Conner and Beast Boy.

“I’ve actually already seen this one. Could have been scarier I think.”

Beast Boy plugged his ears and shouted, “Lalala! I’m not hearing anything!”

“Safe to say we’re psyched to finally see the ending,” Conner noted.

Both Wallys were zipping around the kitchen, prepping snacks faster than Jason could think of the team’s dietary restrictions (hopefully some of the options included something vegan for Beast Boy). Things looked almost normal and it was nice. Though he could tell that Mia was already saving him a seat at the couch, Jason noticed Kori checking her cell phone repeatedly and paid her a quick visit first.

“Hey, where’s your worse half?” he teased, settling into the loveseat a little too close to her. “He knows I’ll rip him a new one if he skips out after giving me a hard time this morning, right?”

“I do not know what new things will be ripped from him, but I am most concerned. He should be here by now. I was flying over when he went to procure the film,” she noted.

“Probably got distracted by a dog. You know how he is,” Jason mumbled as his own phone vibrated with a message from Roy. “Huh. Looks like we’ll be missing Roy tonight. Guess he’s got a few loose ends to—I mean, he’s busy.”

“Most unfortunate. It is truly entertaining to watch the mature ones panic when the happy clown does the sudden things!”

“Too true.” Jason glanced at the elevator just in time to see Dick step out. He and Kori both got up and went over to greet him. “Dude, I could’ve sworn you weren’t wearing THAT earlier,” Jason pointed out, eyeing Dick’s poorly chosen outfit; a purple T-shirt with ‘HA HA’ written all over it in fluorescent green over ripped jeans. “You own a Joker shirt? Gotham SELLS Joker shirts?”

“And your face.” Kori reached out towards the bandage on Dick’s cheek and he leaned away from her hand.

“Took a nasty fall off the curb earlier,” he said with a smirk. “Some acrobat, am I right? Messed up my whole outfit. But I figured we were watching a movie about an evil clown, so I went for it. Too much?”

Jason couldn’t even hide his disdain. “Yeah. Poor taste, jerk.”

“Some people just have no sense of humor.”

“Waiting on you guys to start the movie!” Jaime announced, having settled into the loveseat with the younger Wally and a too-big bowl of popcorn.

“Oh, I had intended to sit—”

“Sit with me, Jay.” Dick took Jason’s arm and led him to the extra chairs set up behind the couch. Jason looked confused and apologetic towards Mia, who bit her lip and sighed as Kori drifted over and settled onto the couch next to her.

After the issues that came up with the first *It* movie, Jason had hoped to stay close to Mia to offer some quiet comfort for a few scenes he knew were likely to be in the second part. But Dick was on him like glue, only more literally now than he had been the rest of the week. He kept himself draped over Jason’s arm even while they sat.

The movie started and Dick didn’t let up in the slightest. Jason supposed last time the guy had had a near panic attack upon watching Pennywise drag Georgie into the sewer (Dick had hyper-sympathized with losing a little brother to a crazy clown, apparently), so maybe he was just trying to seek comfort early.

But Dick was unusually stoic for a horror movie. Not that it was overly scary—Beastboy’s melodramatic reactions aside—but Dick just kept his eyes glued to the screen with an unnerving grin on his face.

It was when Stanley committed suicide and Dick actually chuckled softly that Jason felt particularly unnerved.

“Dude, what the hell?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I just thought of a good joke.”

“Are you feeling okay? You’re acting... weirder than normal.”

Dick turned to look at Jason only to wince and press his hand to the bandage on his cheek. “Ulp. Just smiling through the pain. I knew I should have taken the time to disinfect.”

Jason was out of his seat so fast that he drew everybody’s attention. “S-sorry. I’m just going to apply basic first aid to this idiot. Don’t pause for our sake. We’ll be back in a few minutes.” Now it was his turn to grab Dick by the arm and drag him over to the elevator. Oh, he was going to rip Dick a new one, alright. What kind of idiot with half a brain would leave an open wound untreated? “I swear, if you get tetanus...”

The moment the elevator doors closed with them inside Dick leaned most of his weight against Jason. “You’re too good for me,” he said dreamily.

Jason raised an eyebrow and pushed him away. “That’s some sense of humor you’ve got tonight. If you’re not careful, you might piss somebody else off.”

Dick pushed his bottom lip forward in a weird attempt at a pout. “Aww. I’ve upset you. Guess I’ll just have to make it up to you later.”

Jason raised an eyebrow. Sure, he’d gotten a kick out of how flustered Dick got when Roy made that kissing comment earlier, but that didn’t explain Dick’s sudden... forwardness. Normally Jason was the one doing the flirting, after all. He liked making Dick panic. Why was this situation so flipped?

The elevator stopped at the boys’ living quarters and Jason walked ahead of Dick towards the showers. “I just don’t get you today. It’s like you’re suddenly... I don’t know.”

Dick stepped into the shower room behind Jason and the sliding door sealed behind him. “Like I’m what?”

“Like... you’re a different person or something.”

“A person you could like?”

Jason shuddered and dug through the first aid kit. “Seriously, did you eat something funny or ___”

“Heel.”

Jason’s whole body stiffened. Something was DEFINITELY wrong. As annoying as the guy could be, Dick would never misuse the command word. Possibilities raced through Jason’s head as he began to kneel, keeping up appearances. “What are you doing?” he asked, keeping his voice as calm and even as possible while settling on his knees and keeping his hands behind his head.

“I’ve been dying to try this.” Dick had the audacity to slide his hand along the side of Jason’s face, pausing for a moment to brush his thumb at the corner of his lips. Jason’s whole body was taut, ready to strike at a moment’s notice. He could play the victim. Let his opponent believe they had the upper hand. Make them overconfident.

“I’ve been told your life was hard here too. I’m sorry. I would have burned the world in your memory. It’s not fair how you’ve suffered.”

“Oh? And what, you’re going to avenge me now that I’m alive and getting better for a change?”

“Better?” His hand caught Jason’s chin, forcing him to look up slightly and stare right into those mesmerizing blue eyes. The smile on Dick’s face looked unnatural now. Too long, perhaps. It reminded Jason of the Joker. “Dear Jason, do tell me how this situation is ‘better’. Why, if I wanted to, I could—”

Jason didn't let him finish the thought. He stood up quickly, ramming his forehead into Dick's nose. Dick tried to slink away, but Jason managed to grab the bandage on his face and rip it off as they separated. "Shit." Jason stared in horror at the disturbing scar that twisted Dick's face into a permanent smile. "You're Dick Grayson... if Grayson became the Joker."

Dick clapped slowly before wiping the blood from his face on the bottom of his now better-suited shirt. "I didn't count two minutes. So, you've already ripped the thing out then? And not a scar to show for it. Not bad."

"Monologuing? Seriously?" Jason took the scissors from the first aid kit and lunged at Dick, doing his best to ignore the familiar face in favor of taking down the enemy in front of him. Dick swayed away from the blade, using his usual flexibility in a way that seemed almost twisted in itself. Like he was boneless somehow. Nothing Jason did was landing.

"Of course I'm monologuing! I'm a showman at heart." Dick snatched a bottle of hand soap from the counter and used it to intercept the blades of the scissors. He then threw the bottle down hard, making it explode on the tile in a wave of clear gel. "Tell me your version of me is still chatty at least."

Jason got a little momentum, dropped into a slide, and went right for Dick's legs, but the guy leapt and pulled into a triple axel like it was nothing, landing with a slight slide in the soap before drawing out a pair of extendable escrima out.

In that moment the only sick thought that crossed Jason's mind was 'at least they're not crowbars.'

"You're not chatty, I see. I guess that's not all that different." Dick clicked on the escrima and an electric charge pulsed at the end opposite the grips. Something told Jason that this Dick wouldn't worry about making them non-lethal. "You'll forgive me if I'm a little rough with you. I'm told you can recover from some nasty stuff."

Jason was on his feet quickly as Dick closed the distance between them and swung one escrima. The All-Blades were in Jason's hands instantly; one guarding against the initial attack and the other swiping in time for the ricocheting escrima Dick had tried to use to catch Jason off guard to be struck aside. Dick twisted in around one of the blades and slammed against Jason's chest, pushing him back a ways and forcing him to fight to keep his balance as he slid in the soap. It seemed like a petty and random attack, but Jason began wheezing almost instantly after the blow.

This guy knew where Jason had been recently injured.

"You're not the Arkham Knight," Jason said in a raspy voice.

"Nope. I'm afraid you're looking at the wrong person. He's one of you." While talking, Dick dove for the furthest escrima and Jason, aware of his many a current handicap, had a choice to make.

He could run. Make a break for the elevator. If he was fast, he'd make it to the others and have some backup. At the very least Bruce would be able to see what was going on via the

security cameras then.

Or he could stop this freak from ever getting near the team.

The real Grayson would have hated his decision.

All-Blades still at the ready, he'd attack low. Mess up the guy's legs. Dick Grayson was an unmatched acrobat. If Jason could just slow him down—

The blade cut into Dick's calf like butter, dropping him to the tiled floor, but something was wrong. Jason's stomach felt... hot... He looked down to see that the escrima had extended further with a blade attachment that had lodged a good three inches into his abdomen.

A lethal Grayson was a scary thing.

Jason backed away and the blade slid out of him cleanly. Blood spilled like a dam had burst.

"Don't worry. I'll make it all better," Dick offered in that unusually coy voice of his. In response Jason threw a punch, but Dick caught his fist and pulled Jason towards himself. If it wasn't bad enough that Jason had landed completely on top of his attacker, Dick's knee had hit right against his wound.

"F-fuck you," Jason grunted, trying to sit up.

"Mmm such promises." Dick pressed his thumb into the wound on Jason's stomach and rolled so that they switched places and Jason was pinned underneath him on the soapy floor. "You really do look just like him," he whispered as he traced his hand along the side of Jason's face. "But you're not him."

Dick took one of his escrima and leaned back before using it to slice down the front of Jason's shirt. "Get... off," Jason ground out, trying to wriggle out from under him. Jason wanted nothing more than to shove this creep off and get the hell out of there, but it was hard to breathe. Hard to move. Hell, it was becoming hard to think. He considered the placement of the wound. He was going to bleed out if his organs didn't shut down first. It seemed like such a stupid way to go.

"Still with me? Sorry I had to get so rough. If you were my Jason, heh, you would never let a man do this to you again. But it's just so much fun to play with you. You really are his spitting image."

Jason moaned softly as Dick shifted on top of him, all but sitting on top of his wound. The pain was the only thing keeping him grounded. He wasn't even sure that he wanted the Titans to find him like this. He didn't want to put them in danger, and whoever this Dick Grayson was, he was no hero.

Dick sliced through the rest of Jason's shirt and opened it up with a soft whistle. "Now that's something you don't see every day. Why would a person be scarred like a corpse?"

Jason's breath caught and Dick began to drag his bladed escrima along center line of his autopsy scar. It was teasing at first, but as he pressed it into the puckered flesh Jason let out a

pained howl that was masked by Dick's excited laughter.

"You won't have much longer anyways, so why not enjoy a live autopsy? You'll be the one under the knife, of course."

Jason had had this nightmare at least a hundred times. Strapped to a table, unable to tell anyone that he was still alive, taken apart...

"JASON!"

Dick was off of him in the blink of an eye. A darkness enveloped him and, for a brief moment, he thought he was passing over. Embracing death one more time. But this darkness was... warm. Taking his pain away.

"Jason? Hey."

Something traced over his scar and he sat up quickly, nearly colliding face to face with Mia.

"You're okay!" She threw her arms around his neck as he slowly began to process what had happened. He pressed a hand to her back holding her to him and looked around. Raven exhaled deeply like she'd just had to focus on something. Based on the lack of a hole in his stomach and the jumble of memories still swimming through his mind, he'd say he was her recent focal point. Based on the indent in the far wall and the glowing glare in Conner's eyes, he'd been the one to get the evil Dick off of Jason, and now Beast Boy was sitting on top of him as a grizzly bear.

"Thanks guys," Jason breathed, genuinely relieved. "I wasn't sure how..."

"Just shut up and accept the rescue," Donna said with a smirk as she came in with rope. "And thank Superboy's hearing and Raven's ability to... uhh, slip through the darkness or whatever."

Jaime stepped into the shower room and slipped hard on the soap. "Ugh. Yeah, some of us had to wait for the elevator.

Donna held the rope out and both Wallys had Dick tied down in a second. "I don't know how this happened," the older Wally mumbled. "I was just with Dick earlier. We rented the movie. This isn't the same guy who was helping me to catch up with what I missed."

Kori, aware of the soapy mess, floated over and noted, "If this is not Dick..."

Tim and Cassandra hung back at the doorway. Tim was busy with his communicator and Cassandra looked fidgety and nervous.

"Something happened at the Cave," he announced. "Alfred said B's missing and Damian's been incapacitated."

Mia let Jason go and he got to his feet only to struggle with the soap and the disturbing amount of blood he'd been lying in. "I need to get in touch with Roy."

“Can anybody explain what the hell is going on, though?” Beast Boy exclaimed. “Why is some Dick wannabe here trying to kill Red?”

CHARACTER PROFILE #2

Richard Grayson—Joker

Parents:

John and Mary Grayson were famous for their flying trapeze act at Haly’s Circus. While the perfect act on stage, the need for perfection went far beyond their performance. John valued perfection over everything and was both mentally and physically abusive to his wife and son. Having grown up being told that anything less than perfection was worthless, Richard “Dick” Grayson grew apathetic to people and came to display sociopathic tendencies. After a mishap led to John killing Quinn, a few other factors led to Dick snapping and going on a killing spree that started with Haly’s Circus and ended with his grand Opus where he killed his parents and the parents of his two closest friends in order to liberate them from suffering.

Friends:

Dick met Jason at Gotham Academy and felt a deeper connection to someone for the first time in his life. It was somewhere between fraternal and possibly romantic in nature, though he didn’t understand that in the beginning. He met Bruce through Jason and certainly admired the boy’s closeness with Jason. He viewed Bruce as a brother in arms when it came to protecting Jason. Aside from them, Dick was close to only one other person: his fellow stage clown Quinn. Quinn was the Pierot to his Pantalone. They worked great together and looked out for each other when not performing. Her death marked his spiral into madness.

Villain Backstory:

Haly’s Circus was a front for the Red Hood Gang, which specialized in extortion. Because of this Dick was taught not only the same acrobatic tricks as his parents, but all sorts of other deadly arts by his fellow performers and mobsters. He began acting as an enforcer from a young age and simply accepted that was his life. His natural detachment from people allowed him to act without concern for consequence. Quinn was the daughter of a man they’d once extorted. After he was killed she was collected as collateral and Dick was put in charge of her. Eventually John, Dick, and Quinn were tasked with getting money from one William “Liam” Distal. Upon going to collect they encountered trouble when his step-son (Jason) fought to protect Liam’s woman, leading to John accidentally shooting and killing Quinn. This tragedy rocked Dick’s world and he began taking his anger out on fellow members of the Circus, killing them one at a time. Upon finding out about Jason’s suffering at Liam’s hand, he began plotting out his Opus where he killed the people he believed had ruined his and his best friends’ lives: their parents. Rather than thank him, Jason mar’s Dick’s face, cutting him from the edge of his mouth up towards his ear. Dick proceeded to mirror the wound on his beloved Jason’s face, linking them forever.

Methodology:

After the grand Opus, Dick became Gotham’s most notorious criminal and killer: the Joker. Unlike Gotham’s usual criminal hierarchy, Dick introduced chaos and anarchy into every dark corner of the city. Killing indiscriminately and with unmatched extravagance. Every

murder spree and performance was a loud cry for attention from his beloved Batman. Believing that Jason still felt something more than just hatred for him, he proves time and time again that he is the one person the Batman will never kill.

Want to read more about this version of Dick Grayson? Check out his story in the "Jason Todd; Teen Titan?" series titled: Killer-Bat. Definitely note the Mature rating and mind the tags! If you're at all worried about reading it but still want more to this character's story, let me know in a comment and I'll give you a personal look into his story.

Understanding the Opposition

Chapter Summary

The team tries to recover after the unusual attack: Jason finally dons his Red Hood gear again, Roy gets a better understanding of who it is they should really be worried about, Tim helps uncover the armored Batman's intentions, Dick is found in a terrible state, and the team seeks a means of getting ahead of the problem.

Chapter Notes

Heyo! Miss me? Sorry these are taking so long. Of course the world is still in the crazy state that it is, and my dumbass thought it would be a good time to move into a new place in the midst of all the chaos. The adjustment has been interesting and I haven't found the time or headspace to write that I'd like.

But I've been mulling over this for a while and think it's at a good enough point to lead into where I want it to go. Promise I'm still working on this (as well as about 5 other things, ongoing or not).

Also, once again, there's a character profile featured at the end of this chapter in order to give you some insight to another of the AU characters.

Always appreciate the readership! Hope you're all hanging in there! Warm wishes for good health and happy holidays, no matter how you spend them!

Jason was still reeling over the strange Dick attack. He couldn't close his eyes without seeing that sinister smile on such a familiar face. They'd locked the impostor in the Tower's sub-cells and tried to organize their priorities.

Neither Dick nor Damian were answering their communicators. Even worse: Dick's communicator's locator claimed he was somewhere out in the middle of the ocean. Thankfully Damian's was still showing up at the cave, but it didn't settle anyone's nerves.

Of course, that was when Tim revealed that, since Jason's return to Gotham, Bruce had implanted a tracker on all of his direct associates' person and was able to locate them both that way (it made sense in a sick, worried-father sort of way, but Jason just chalked it up to yet another violation of privacy that he'd give Bruce shit for later).

They'd chosen to split up, initially intending to leave Jason at the Tower to keep an eye on the impostor Grayson, but he had other plans in mind.

So, while Kori took Donna, Jaime, Conner, and Wally Jr. to Dick's logged location, Tim took Cassandra back to the Batcave, leaving Jason at the Tower with Wally Sr., Raven, Mia, and Beast Boy.

"I need to stock up," he announced, pulling on his favorite leather jacket. "This isn't something that we can win with me dealing with the handicaps the Justice League placed on me."

"Wait, Jay, you can't just leave," Mia pointed out, eyes flicking towards Raven to remind him that at least someone present wasn't aware of his situation.

"She's psychic," he reminded her. "She's probably known about it since I first planned to get the stupid thing out of my spine."

Mia stared at Raven, who just shrugged, keeping her eyes focused on the ceiling.

"We do need someone to keep an eye on this creep," he added, pointing at the tied-up Grayson behind the glass. "Who knows what he's fully capable of. I don't want to come back here and find that the guy who tried to flay me like a fish is running free."

Raven met his eyes at that. "I can watch him. I'm used to playing jailer. Besides, it's difficult to probe his mind while he's unconscious, but I sensed something... disturbing lurking just under the surface. I'd like to find out more about that."

Wally held up a hand and offered, "I'll stay with her. I've got a few questions for our impostor."

Jason looked to Beast Boy, then to Mia, and nodded. "You guys up for a little trip to Gotham?"

"Are we taking a train?" Mia asked.

*

"I really HATE flying on BB!" Mia shouted as the wind whipped her hair around. She was clinging to Jason's torso for dear life and having flashbacks to the last time she had hitched a ride on a green pterodactyl.

"It's the fastest way to get around. We're almost there," Jason reassured her only seconds before Beast Boy took a nosedive, making her scream bloody murder.

They landed with a swoop of Beast Boy's over-sized wings and Jason had to hold her up as their ride morphed into a canary and settled onto Jason's shoulder. "Why'd you want me to go to this dump?" he asked, staring at the shuttered door to a condemned old apartment building.

Jason just flipped up a panel disguised as a brick and tapped a code into the keypad before leaning in close for a retinal scan. After he flipped the panel shut the shutter began to lift, revealing a cluttered garage with a motorcycle parked in it. “Damnit Roy, this place is a mess,” he muttered to himself as he ventured further into the place, already on a mission. Beast Boy flitted about, checking things out with Mia while the shutter closed behind them.

“This is one of your bases?” Mia asked. “For your team?”

“Not quite an Outlaw base,” he began. “This was a personal spot that wound up getting used when Roy and I were working together. Jerk said he wouldn’t look back, but obviously he’s been back around.” Jason emerged from a hidden back room with holsters strapped to his legs, stocked up with a few knives and guns.

“What makes you think he’s been here recently?” Mia wondered, admiring the genuine arsenal that the base offered.

Jason pointed to a table where a number of tools and metal bits were strewn about. “He’s the inventive one, and also a total slob. Jerk must have been taking advantage of me being stuck at the Tower.”

Beast Boy morphed into a blood hound and began sniffing around the area. “Yo, Red, something’s not right.”

Jason was plucking a few choice guns off of the wall at the time and handing Mia some of Roy’s custom arrows as well as a crossbow. “If it smells like chloroform, we had to come up with some inventive ways to NOT kill some targets.”

Beast Boy sniffed around and followed a trail. “No, dude, this smells like blood.”

That got Jason’s attention. “We didn’t fight here. Some minor patch jobs, but it’s been a long time. How fresh?”

“Like, not even a day,” Beast Boy confirmed, following the scent to a familiar green hat just under a table. “Red, this doesn’t look good.”

Jason swore a few times under his breath and stashed a few custom batarangs into his jacket along with some smoke grenades and a grappling gun. Only then did he pull up his personal cell phone and try Roy’s secret number.

The annoying sound of a mocking Batman-related Christmas carol played nearby, and Beast Boy fetched a phone with a cracked screen, bringing it to Jason. “What do you think happened?”

“I think that dumbass got caught,” Jason grumbled, finding a cord on the nearby table and hooking his own phone up to the trashed thing that had been Roy’s. “Last contact was... Okay, he should be alright.”

“Guy was bleeding all over your old base, lost his form of communication, and you think he’ll be alright?” Mia questioned. “What the hell?”

“He contacted the right people. We have to focus on our own mission.”

“Right...” Beast Boy looked at Mia with a quirked eyebrow and she reciprocated his confusion. “What exactly is our mission again?”

Jason finally picked up a version of his signature red helmet and let it settle over his head. “We have to find the bastard behind this attack.”

*

Roy was bored.

Things had gone from confusing to messy to scary, to boring frighteningly fast. He’d been taken by the League of Assassins. That much was obvious. Working with them was the mysterious Arkham Knight, who he could now confirm was a different universe’s version of his best friend. They’d locked him up in a dank cell in their homeland of whatever country he couldn’t remember at the time before having some ninja-medic wrap Lazarus Pit soaked bandages around his injured leg.

Shit worked like a charm and he didn’t feel like a total mental case. Maybe Jason was just exaggerating.

Of course that was just a joke, but humor was all he had at this point. He had taken to singing annoying tunes in hopes of pissing the nearby guards off enough to do SOMETHING, but they were unshakeable.

“Nine-hundred-thirty-four bottles of beer on the wall, nine-hundred-thirty-four bottles of beer...”

To his surprise, about ten hours into his detainment, the guards finally stood up. He sat upright, hoping that he’d finally gotten through to them, but they left the prison area to be replaced by another two guards, making everything Roy had been doing a moot point.

“Goddamnit, can’t you guys at least talk or something? I feel like I’m losing my mind.”

To his surprise, one of the guards caught the other in a sleeper hold and kept at it until the guard was on the floor, likely out for an hour or so.

“Shit. Uh, I’m not all that tired, so if you just want to skip me—”

The guard came right up to the bars of Roy’s cell and smiled under a darkened hood. “Always the clown, eh Harper?”

Now there was a voice that he could still remember in his fondest nightmares. “Jade.” He sauntered up to the bars and leaned in, trying to get just a little bit closer to that intoxicating smell of jasmine and a hint of spice that he couldn’t identify but smelled good enough that he wanted a taste. “Always a pleasure to see you between bars. Really brings out the sexy murderess in your eyes.”

Jade chuckled low in her throat and stepped right up to the bars, leaning on the balls of her feet so that Roy could almost taste those full, painted lips (very likely painted with some sort of poison, but at this rate, he was willing to risk it).

“Why must we always do this dance, my little Ginger—” a hand gripped Roy’s family jewels, making him suck in a yelp “—snap?”

“Mmmmm, good to see you too,” he said through gritted teeth. Uncomfortable as it was, he couldn’t help the way that she made all of the heat in his body pool just below his stomach. “Do you treat all prisoners like this or am I special?”

She grinned that signature, cat-like grin, and let him go as she turned away from his cell. “You certainly aren’t like all our prisoners,” she said coyly, completely aware of how she had him wrapped around her finger. “For starters; these cells haven’t been occupied in decades.”

“I’m flattered they’d dust the place off for me.”

She took a knife off her belt and toyed with it while explaining, “They haven’t been occupied because the League of Assassins doesn’t take prisoners. They are assassins. The last man placed in these cells had offended Ra’s enough that he was granted a slow, quiet death in complete isolation. I’m told he lasted longer than Ra’s gave him credit for by feeding off the vermin that kept him company.”

Roy wasn’t liking the sound of his odds. “I hate to admit I’m a bit of a picky eater. I don’t even like tomatoes. I don’t think I’d even last the week. I’ve already been dying of boredom.”

Jade rolled her eyes and let the knife fly. It stuck in one of the bars alarmingly close to his crotch, making him delightfully nervous. “Honestly, you can be so thick.”

“In ways that you like, I hope.”

Another knife hit the bar just parallel to the first.

“I’m trying to point out how unusual it is for the League to take a prisoner.”

“Well, it’s not just the League, is it?” Roy brought up, proving that he wasn’t as dense as his sexually stimulated brain made him out to be. “How much do you know about the Arkham Knight?”

If possible, Jade smiled even deeper than before. “So, there is a brain under that pretty red hair. I happen to know quite a bit about the Arkham Knight. What I don’t know, is why he’s suddenly so worried.”

Recognizing that she was just going to keep teasing him, Roy sat back on the mound that he’d assumed was all the bedding he was going to see in this place and blurted out: “He’s Jason.”

“He’s A Jason, yes,” she corrected.

He shrugged. “Guess it’s not the first time a mask has met their quantum counterpart.”

“He’s a Jason who lived,” she confirmed. “He lived, and yet he still has all the demons and anger that your kind associate with your Jason’s dip in our Lazarus Pit. Funny how that worked out.”

“Jaybird doesn’t have great luck. Why should his counterpart be any different?”

“THIS counterpart,” she corrected. “THIS Jason is certainly not the ONLY one to have suffered.”

Now they were getting somewhere. “Alright, I’ll bite. What do you know about this other Jason?”

“I know that he’s here with two others like himself, but altogether very different; a Jason who took a different path and was the first and only Batman of his world, and a Jason who seems much more sinister in his intentions.”

Four Jasons in one universe and here Roy had only been shot once. He should count his lucky stars. “Well, not that I fully respect the guy, but isn’t Batman a hero? Maybe Red Hood doesn’t have the greatest track record, and I can think of a couple things this Arkham Knight guy has done in this universe that seem less than heroic. But Batman?”

Jade scoffed. “He is Jason. If your Jason were to wear the cowl, how do you think he would handle things?”

Roy imagined a gun-toting Batman and sighed. “Right. So, we’re looking at the League of Extraordinary Assholes who just so happen to be friends with Roy Harper. Fantastic.”

“It’s not just them either. There’s a Richard Grayson and a girl who goes by Duela.”

Jason shuddered at the mention of the girl he and Jason had once tried to help. Dealing with the Duela of their own universe had almost resulted in... well, both of their deaths. “How did the League of Assassins come to work with them? Is there an alternate Damian? Oh, please tell me we don’t have to deal with two of that little monster.”

Even Jade shuddered at the thought. “No. To be honest, I’m not supposed to be privy to the information that I have regarding this farce of a partnership. So, what can you give me to make this exchange worth betraying my mistress?”

Back to the games. “I can think of a few things I’d like to do to you—for you.” His stammering didn’t make him come off as confident as he would have liked. “I mean, um, was there anything you had in mind?”

Cheshire truly was an accurate name for her. She sat down on the guard she had dropped earlier and stretched like a cat, that playful grin splitting her face. “I think I can accept that as a partial payment.”

Roy rolled his eyes and added, “I might have a lead on one of Penguin’s diamond stashes just outside of Gotham. I’ll tell you if you promise to leave law enforcement alone when you drop in.”

The offer was acceptable, apparently, because she drew up closer to the bars of the cell and it was music to Roy's ears to hear the clinking of metal against metal as she unlocked the door and stepped in to join him. "I think I've earned a little payment upfront. What about you?"

Roy tried not to look like the lovesick idiot that he felt he was as she settled in close enough that he could finally reach her.

*

Upon reaching the Wayne mansion, the team was greeted at the front door by Damian, who was dressed down and looking more than a little sleep deprived.

"Habibi!"

Cassandra didn't hesitate to tackle him back into his family home while Tim stepped in and politely greeted Alfred before getting right to the point. "So, what the hell happened here? Why didn't you respond to our attempts at contact? Where's Bruce? Do you guys know what's going on?"

Damian wriggled out of Cassandra's hold and straightened his t-shirt as if it would help him to look less frazzled. "We have been preoccupied trying to identify our attacker," he explained. "Someone who dared to think they had the right to wear Father's cowl managed to make it past the Cave's security and... And he..." Damian sniffled loudly and rubbed his nose, clearly more upset than he was letting on. "Father has been... abducted."

Tim scoffed and hurried towards the closest Batcave entrance. "Batman's been compromised and I'm only hearing about this now? And by another Batman, no less!"

"Maybe like evil Dick," Cassandra noted.

"Evil what?"

"Yeah, I guess at some point yesterday our Dick got swapped out with some evil twin. Guy tried to kill Jason."

"Good God!" Alfred exclaimed.

"Team handled things well. Saved him, healed him up, and locked the imposter in a holding cell. But we haven't been able to get ahold of our Dick, so I was hoping to use the tracker." He settled into his usual seat at the Bat Computer and got right to work, pulling up surveillance videos and tracking chip information faster than even Batman could work. "Looks like the surveillance feed for the Cave was hacked and put on a loop, which would explain why my portable computer didn't send out any alarms."

Before Damian or Alfred could get a word in, Tim pulled up the actual surveillance feed from the Cave the night before and they were all mesmerized by what they witnessed.

Bruce had been completely unaware of the intruder. They watched as the armored Batman crept in easily before making his presence known. The battle that ensued was harrowing. One

Batman with unparalleled skill, the other equally well-trained and yet equipped with a number of weapons, most of which he used with what seemed like the intent to kill.

“Moves like Bruce...” Cassandra muttered; her eyes still glued to the screen. “But... not like Bruce.”

Damian clicked his tongue. “Clearly he’s some alternate version of Father if there’s an alternate version of Grayson running about. What discrepancies you might see are simply because he’s not entirely the same as Father, obviously.”

Cassandra ignored his claims and continued to watch.

Finally, the armored Batman got in close and did a fake, making Bruce move to guard his right side while his opponent dipped around and got his left with electric-charged gauntlets.

“Not Bruce!” Cassandra exclaimed, but Damian shushed her as he watched his father being strung up.

“Whoever he is, he’ll pay for such disrespect,” Damian threw in when he appeared on screen and began his attack on the intruder. He clicked his tongue often and impatiently, not enjoying witnessing his failure of a fight again. Then Damian broke the armored Batman’s lens and got shoved off one of the cave’s cliffs, only that’s when the armored Batman panicked.

“He had a soft spot for you,” Tim noted. “Think he’s got a Damian of his own?”

“He called me ‘Oz,’” Damian confirmed. “Such an unfortunate name could never—”

“It’s probably short for Ozymandias,” Tim pointed out. “You’re Damian and we give you crap about being a little demon, but your name means you’re a powerful man destined to govern over people.”

“Precisely why there’s no possible connection between myself and some child named—”

“My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings; Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!”

“Huh. And here I thought Todd was the book-smart one.”

“YES!” Cassandra shouted, pointing at the screen. “Jay-Sun!” The armored Batman removed his cowl shortly after leaving Damian subdued and hanging off the cliff. Tim, Damian, and Alfred all gasped upon realizing who was the man behind the Bat.

His hair was peppered with gray and kept short like Bruce’s always was. His eyes were a deep blue, not unlike Bruce’s. But that jawline. That face. No matter how they looked at him—how Tim zoomed in to better examine him—they all knew.

“In WHAT world is Todd Batman?” Damian snapped.

“Hold on! Look at his face!” Tim zoomed in as much as he could, keeping the image clear.

“Yeah! Todd! I can see him!”

“No, the scar by his mouth. It’s like the evil Dick’s face. I’m guessing they’re familiar with each other.”

Damian shuddered. “It must be a nightmare of a universe if it has an evil Grayson and a Todd Batman.”

Tim rolled his eyes. “I’m trying to say that, if they know each other, we might be able to grill our guy for information.”

“Master Tim, I believe he’s doing something else,” Alfred noted, pointing back at the video feed where the Jason-Batman was accessing something on the Bat Computer.

“He... took something...” Tim minimized the video feed and began running through the computer’s files and recent history. “No no nononono!”

“So much private information. He couldn’t possibly access it all, being unfamiliar with the systems?” Alfred hoped.

“They’re his systems! It was exactly like Batman was going through the Bat Computer! He had access to everything!”

Damian bristled. “What did he take, Drake?”

Tim hung his head in shame. “B keeps files on everyone.”

“He take a file?” Cassandra asked meekly, not following how Tim was getting access to such information.

Tim blanched and covered his mouth as he stared at the screen. “Mmmfff...”

Damian punched Tim in the shoulder anxiously. “Spit it out, man! Whose information did he take?”

Tim dragged his hand along his face and let out a pathetic sort of whine as he tried to grasp the severity of their situation. “It, uhh... It looks like the evil Jason managed to take Batman... and the secret files on the Justice League...”

“But which members? The core members?”

Tim shrugged and confessed: “All of them.”

*

Kori, Donna, Conner, and Jaime all took to the air while the younger Wally dashed to the provided location. Conner held back briefly, but upon seeing Kori so distressed, he chose to pick up the pace and help. What he found was Wally on a rooftop, struggling with a hysterical Dick.

“Yo, what the hell?” Conner came in for landing and got between them only to recognize quickly what Wally was doing. “What the f—”

Dick was laughing and digging his nails into his own face, tearing at his skin.

Conner quickly wrestled Dick into a full nelson, allowing Wally to recover for a moment. “What the hell happened?”

“I-I-I don’t know! I found him up here, tied up, so I untied him, and he started laughing like a maniac and tried to rip his own skin off! I was just trying to restrain him!”

Dick’s laugh sounded hollow and forced. Tears streamed down his cheeks, mixing with the blood where he’d managed to dig his nails in too deep. He thrashed despite Conner’s solid hold, and Wally all but screamed when one of Dick’s shoulders popped out of place.

“Crap! I didn’t mean to!” Conner loosened his hold, but it just allowed Dick’s movements to be more violent. “Shit!” Conner pulled him into a bear hug instead, trying not to crush him while simultaneously trying to keep him still. “Can you hold his legs or something?”

Wally moved in close and wound up with a heel to the chin, knocking him away.

“X’hal! What are you doing to him?” Kori shrieked when she reached the rooftop. She tried to pull Dick away from Conner, but Wally shoved her back quickly. “You are hurting him!”

“Not trying to! He’s doing it to himself! Donna, you mind grabbing his legs?”

“Does he really need a Super and a Wonder holding him down?” she asked nervously as Dick continued to laugh so hard that his voice was getting hoarse.

“Guy’s ripping his skin and dislocating his shoulder and I don’t know what else to do about it!”

A strange and ear-shattering sound made everyone wince. Conner, with his super hearing, reflexively covered his ears, releasing Dick, who dropped like a sack of rocks, unconscious. The sound stopped just as abruptly as it had started, and everyone stared at Jaime.

“S-sorry! The Scarab said it knew a frequency that might help. I didn’t know what it meant, but it went for it... Shut up! Now he’s probably even MORE injured!”

“I do not understand,” Kori muttered as she knelt and lifted her boyfriend’s head, cradling it gently in her lap. “He is experiencing the sickness? I was not aware of an illness that involved laughter for Earthlings.”

“Laughter. Right. Isn’t that a Joker thing?” Wally brought up. “Geez. Do you think the Joker’s in Jump? How the hell are we supposed to deal with the Joker and that creepy evil Grayson?”

“You mean the evil jerk who laughed when he messed Jason up?” Donna pointed out. “Something weird’s going on, and I’m betting our Grayson change-up is related to whatever happened here.”

Conner shuddered, still a bit bothered by the Scarab's knock-out frequency, and offered, "With him knocked out, at least, he's not hurting himself. Let's get him to the Tower, get him secure or something, and check in with the rest of the team. That Tim guy seems pretty sharp. I'll bet he's got a better idea of what's going on."

*

"What the actual hell is going on here?" By the time Tim, Cassandra, and Damian made it back to the Tower, they found most of the Titans at the gathered where evil Grayson was locked up.

Only now, their Grayson strapped to a table in the next cell over, equally unconscious.

Conner floated over to hang around Cassandra, who was happily draped over Damian, and said, "We were kind of hoping you'd have some insight on that. You're the smart Robin, right?"

Tim pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. "This is probably a stupid question, but does anyone know where Jason, Garfield, and Mia went?"

Raven cleared her throat and explained, "They wanted... Jason wanted to be better equipped. I thought it would be best if he didn't act alone."

"What? I thought Jason was unable to leave the Tower?" Kori brought up.

Right on time, the elevator door opened, and the trio joined them. Seeing Jason fully clad in his Red Hood gear got everyone to stir a little. "So, Roy's in trouble. Oh, and for those of you who didn't know before, my implant's no longer holding me back. Surprises all around—" Jason realized that there was a second Grayson in a cell and froze. "That's OUR Dick... right?"

"He is the sick," Kori confirmed, not even upset with Jason for his poorly explained freedom. "With the illness of laughter and self-harm."

Jason got to tapping the security panel frantically. "He's been hit with Joker Venom!? What the fuck? Where's Bruce? We need a full workup and an antidote, stat!"

Tim sighed even deeper. "About Bruce..."

"I think that Father would be quite upset to hear of your treasonous actions!" Damian noted, showing that he was the only one truly bothered by Jason's removed implant.

But Jason was already in the cell with Dick, checking his pulse, his temperature, and his eyes. "Whoa."

"What is it, Todd?" Damian was trying to remain stoic, but he was shaken by his father's defeat and abduction being followed so closely by his brother figure being hurt. "Tell me this instant if we can—"

“This isn’t the Joker’s doing. Joker Venom turns people’s eyes an impossible shade of green. Dick’s eyes are still blue but... I mean his irises, they’re red.”

Damian—all grievances forgotten—rushed over to confirm. “This is unnatural. Grayson could be in real danger.”

“Please help him! He needs the medicine!”

“Make sure he’s secure when he wakes up so that he doesn’t dislodge anything again.”

“I’m sorry, he did WHAT?”

“Everybody, SHUT UP!”

Everyone stared at Tim, who had effectively silenced the room. He was looking at the holo projection from his gauntlet.

“Alright. I’ve got Vic in Gotham. Alfred’s going to help him work out a cure. I need a blood sample to run so that they can figure out what they’re working with.” He took a small First-Aid kit from his belt and popped it open to reveal a syringe and vial.

“Is that new Bat-standard issue?” Jason remarked as Tim joined him and Damian in Dick’s cell. “I’m joking, but that would have seriously come in handy after a few... encounters... with Ivy.”

Tim rolled his eyes before ripping a strip of fabric from Dick’s already torn shirt and tying it around his right arm as a makeshift tourniquet before expertly slipping the needle in, then attaching the vial to collect blood. “I stock my own belt. Didn’t think shark-repellant was going to be as necessary as an emergency blood work kit.”

“Timbers, you aren’t half the disappointment I thought you’d be,” Jason admitted, his voice tinged with relief.

“Drake...”

“I’m flattered, Jason, but I don’t really need your approval to—”

“DRAKE!” Damian threw himself over Dick’s torso in an attempt to hold him in place as he woke up. He started to cackle again, but his vocal cords were already so damaged that it came out dry and broken. He pulled against the straps keeping him to the table and Tim pulled the needle out as quickly as he could, unable to avoid leaving a small gash in Dick’s arm.

Jason backed into the far wall and kept perfectly still, watching his brothers wrestle with Dick, just trying to get him to stop hurting himself. In that moment, his helmet felt claustrophobic, but he didn’t dare take it off and show the others how this was affecting him. It wasn’t all that long ago that the Joker had gotten him... again...

“This isn’t the Joker,” he muttered under his breath. “Dick’s going to be okay... He’s going to get through this...”

He wasn't ready to lose Dick. They were just getting on good terms again.

"Hey."

Jason nearly jumped out of his skin when he felt the soft pressure against his shoulder. Upon realizing that he'd just pushed Cassandra away, he hastily pulled his helmet off and cast it aside, gasping for breath. "I'm fine. S-sorry. Just worried."

Damian, of all people, put a hand on Jason's shoulder. "It's alright, Todd. We're all worried."

Jason knew that. He could see the looks on the rest of the team. Nobody wanted to see Nightwing incapacitated like this.

Especially not his brothers, Jason thought.

"There. Blood analyzed and details sent to Vic," Tim confirmed before taking another syringe off his belt and injecting it right into Dick's neck. After a few moments his laughter softened, then he stopped moving. "Sedative," Tim confirmed for those who looked worried. "We should get more medical equipment down here. Regulate his vitals and keep him under until we can cure him."

"Hehehe. Cure. You really think we'd make a cure?"

The sound of Dick's voice sneering over his own situation was eerie. The team gathered at the nearby cell where the evil counterpart was being kept. He was awake now, apparently. Just seeing his twisted smile made Jason uncomfortable. "So, it's your drug then?" Tim tried to confirm.

"Oh, I wish. Never had a head for chemicals or... science. I mean, I can handle explosives better than most modern-day terrorists, but that's not USUALLY something that you make people ingest."

Jason punched at the glass, unable to hide his impatience. "But you KNOW where it came from. You KNOW who made it!"

Evil Dick was able to manipulate his lithe body to get to his feet despite the way that he had been tied up, and he approached the glass where Jason was ready to force his way through. "Mmm. You're looking better already. Almost good enough to eat."

Jason leaned in close, for a moment forgetting the audience that they had. "You have five seconds before I get in there and pay you back for what you did to me tenfold," he growled out.

"Always loved that fire."

Jason took a step towards the security panel, but someone caught his wrist. "I'm going to kill him."

"Somehow I don't doubt that." Jason looked up, genuinely surprised to find that the person who had stopped him was the same Wally he'd recently pulled out of the Speed Force. "I

want to help Dick too. We all do. But you need to calm down.”

Jason nearly snapped at the speedster, but he recognized the worried faces on the others and took a deep breath. “Right. Okay. Bashing in this asshole’s skull won’t get us answers. I know that.”

“Such promises.”

Jason curled his hands into fists tightly at his sides.

“You ARE Dick Grayson, correct?” Tim asked, once again trying to take charge of the situation.

The evil Dick’s eyes stayed trained on Jason’s face as he said, “That’s what they used to call me. Haven’t heard that name in a while. Most people just call me Joker.”

“And clearly you know the Jason-Batman,” Tim accused.

Jason looked back at him in shock. “The what-now?”

“Oh, so you’ve met my sweet, tortured Jason Wayne.”

Even Tim sputtered at that one.

“Todd is no Wayne,” Damian argued.

The evil Dick shrugged as much as his bound arms allowed. “Sometimes he is. Sometimes he isn’t. I’ve met a few interesting variations on my Jason. Each one almost as interesting as the next, but never quite on the level of mine.”

Tim shuddered before trying to recover his line of questioning. “R-right. Well, your Batman took our Batman and we’d like to know where.”

“And you think I’ll just give up the hideout? Now why would I do that?”

Jason punched at the glass again. “Because he’s asking you nicely, that’s why!”

The evil Dick pressed his forehead to the glass and kept his smile on. “I can think of a few nicer ways to ask.”

“You’re going to tell us because you’re the Joker,” Tim claimed. “And the Joker never misses an opportunity to play devil’s advocate.”

This made the counterpart raise an eyebrow. “I’m not like your clown. Don’t think I haven’t done my research. That pathetic mistake is too chaotic. How is he supposed to hold Batman’s attention if he can’t follow through with his master plans? I’m a showman myself. Comes with growing up in the circus. He’s just some poser, desperate for recognition.”

Tim tried a different approach. “Well then, if that’s how you want to play it, I guess we can’t guarantee your Batman’s safety.”

Evil Dick's jaw set. "Thought you kids were supposed to be heroes?"

"Collateral damage can't always be helped. And he kidnapped our Batman. Do you really think the Justice League will just let him go? One hard hit from Superman and he's no longer a problem."

The monster slammed his forehead against the glass hard enough to tear a spot of flesh just above his eyebrow. Blood trickled down his face, making him all the more menacing. "He's MINE! I won't let your excuse for a demi-god touch him!"

"You tell us how to help Nightwing or else I'll make sure the League knows to use lethal force!" Jason threatened, getting into it. "Doesn't bother me one bit to watch some evil version of myself get splattered on the pavement!"

Despite the crack in his mask, the evil Dick recovered his sinister smile and chuckled. "You're something else, hot stuff. But trust me, my Jason isn't the one you should be worried about."

"Yeah, well I know all about that Arkham Knight asshole and he's not going to escape my wrath either."

Evil Dick laughed again. "That patsy? Poor soul's just looking for something to fill the hole. No, my friend, the one you should be worried about is Jason Napier."

Jason scoffed. "I'm not afraid of any version of myself."

"Well if seeing my face as the Joker makes you nervous, I can't imagine how you'll react to seeing your own."

CHARACTER PROFILE #3

Jason Napier—The Red Joker

Family:

After his parents became victims of Gotham's usual brand of crime, Jason was placed in foster care where he was bounced from one abusive household to the next until finally being placed in Ma Gunn's School for Wayward Boys. There he told Faye Gunn that he allowed himself to get hurt because it seemed to keep other people happy. When she told him that getting hurt wouldn't make her happy, he wound up killing the boy at the school who attacked him, proving a level of socio and psychopathology that she hadn't expected. He became the leader of her band of young criminals until he encountered the Batman while trying to steal the tires off the Batmobile. Seeing the opportunity, he happily sold Gunn out. Batman promised to give him a better life, which he followed through with by adopting Jason as Bruce Wayne.

Friends:

Ha!

Acquaintance:

Jason met Helena Dent in the foster care system and was immediately drawn to her. Upon learning of her foster father's abuse, he took every opportunity to insert himself into her life in order to show her a sort of affection that she had otherwise never experienced. Eventually she came to display a severe multiple personality disorder which created Duella. Though he's less infatuated with Duella, he continued to act as a steadfast friend and confidant for her as well, ensuring that both sides were taken with him.

Human Tool:

Upon "learning" of Bruce's alter-ego, Jason was determined to take up the Robin mantle. However, Bruce refused to let him go out as Robin without proper training and approval from the original: Dick Grayson. Unfortunately, Dick was reluctant to let anyone risk their life as Robin. Jason was privy to Dick's unrequited crush on Bruce and wound up getting him to redirect his affections in order to get what he wanted. Dick came to rely on their relationship while Jason continued to use it to his advantage. After getting away with killing Batman he literally stabbed Dick in the back, leaving him paralyzed from the waist down.

Rival:

Tim Drake managed to figure out the identities of Batman and Robin and proved to be the only person who recognized how dangerous Jason could be. Upon discovering this, Bruce took him into the fold and he became the newest Robin as Jason grew out of the role. He very nearly figured out Jason's less-savory practices (creating custom drugs and peddling them, killing people, etc.), so Jason took action.

Proudest Accomplishment:

Jason was able to successfully kill Bruce Wayne without revealing his darker intentions to Dick or Alfred, and after leaving Tim in critical condition, he left no one to warn them of his true nature and boldly pretended to be a victim while Tim was still incapacitated. He only revealed himself upon stabbing Dick.

Want to find out more about this version of Jason? Check out his story in the "Jason Todd: Teen Titan?" series titled: Red and Black. Definitely note the Mature rating and mind the tags! Again, if you want any more info without the gory details, just message me and I'll send you a special synopsis upon request.

A Darker Jason

Chapter Summary

Learn more about Jason Napier's journey that brought him to the reality that we know, and get a glimpse of the sinister things he has in store.

Chapter Notes

Holy crap, I'm sorry this is taking so long.

I've kind of been delayed with all my writing since I moved last year. Nothing big, but a lot of things kind of hit me at once and I just ran face first into one helluva writer's block.

Unfortunately I hit it so hard that I'm backtracking in this chapter rather than really progressing, so for that I'm soooo sorry. I'm trying to fill in some holes I made with this one. And I know I promised more stuff soon, but I can't really make that promise with my track record these days, so I'll just promise that it's still plaguing my mind and I'm determined to make some progress.

Anywho, this is a darker chapter and I should warn that it does imply some abuse, murder, torture, and then some because Jason Napier is a much darker character. I keep the worst of it in the background, but you'll occasionally see more of the abusive nature that is Jason Napier's relationship with Duella, so just be aware. It's gonna get darker before it gets lighter. My dumbass decided to have a block during the key arc to this so I can't apologize enough for my awful pace.

Once again a character profile will be at the end of this chapter to help you get better acquainted with my AU characters who are in other stories connected to this series. This way you don't have to read the actually darker stuff in order to enjoy Probation. I'm always happy to answer questions if you've got 'em. I'll work on getting more up sooner than later in the meantime.

Enjoy!

How had it come to this?

Jason watched as Duella pressed the large syringe to the back of this Batman's neck with medical precision. He had to bite his lip to keep from exploding with raucous laughter. It was

too perfect. Too simple. Oh, how he would relish every moment.

But until recently, that hadn't been the case.

Jason had been faced with the very real possibility that he had lost his ability to smile.

Things that made him feel happy were always different from what the world found funny. He couldn't pretend to understand the emotional connections that people shared. He could mimic their interactions, but they brought him no joy. The only joy he ever felt was when he witnessed suffering. And when others smiled at the macabre masterpieces that he created; he felt a sort of vindication that left him craving more. It was why he had allowed Duela to remain at his side. Without her, there was no eager audience to his crimes.

And yet, after his magnum opus—after Bruce sacrificed himself to save a child who never knew him, after he destroyed Dick's body and heart, after he ripped Tim's childhood away and forced him into a world that tried repeatedly to crush him—he just couldn't recreate that high.

No custom drug could make him smile, no matter how many times people took it and died laughing.

No masterful caper that left the new Batman and Nightwing reeling had quite the same effect.

Then the space-time jumping speedster all but fell into his lap, opening up infinite possibilities.

The first alternate reality he visited had a Batman who had a whole family dynamic with Catwoman and their daughter Robin.

Tearing them apart had made him smile.

The next world offered a Batman who had never had a Joker to darken his city.

When Jason was through the man was buried in the bowels of Arkham, shouting random nonsense to any guard what would pass by.

Reality after reality passed, however, and Jason fell back into a slump. A few dead Batmen here and there no longer held the same satisfaction.

And so once again, he couldn't smile.

It was the thirteenth reality that they visited where he found a spark again.

He and Duela landed in a version of Gotham that was guarded by Nightwing, Robin, and the Red Hood because Batman had enacted his Knightfall protocol and "died."

It was this Red Hood figure that interested Jason the most.

Some snooping led to the revelation that he went by a different title before donning the hood; Arkham Knight. Finding information on the Arkham Knight proved to be much easier than

finding anything on Red Hood. The Arkham Knight had come out of nowhere with an army and brought Gotham to its knees overnight. He failed to kill Batman personally, then Batman went ahead and finished the job himself. Quite the extravagant little entrance for the vengeance seeking vigilante, and a very abrupt exit.

Jason needed more information, and the easiest way to get it was to get his hands on one of Gotham's known squealers: Oswald Cobblepot.

The pudgy old gangster was still just as annoying as he remembered, but it was interesting to see him in the sorry state that he was. Even with one eye, no henchmen, and the lung capacity of a lifetime chain smoker, the old bastard still had a lot to say about the Arkham Knight.

It tickled Jason to learn that, before his big attack on Gotham, the Knight was the second young man to wear the Robin suit. After a bad run-in with the Joker, Batman lost his second sidekick. The Joker had sent him evidence of the Robin's death and that was that for Batman.

But according to Cobblepot, that was the Joker's greatest trick.

The boy had lived, tied and tortured in Arkham's basement by inmates and staff alike for two long years. He only escaped when the asylum was destroyed.

How delicious. A version of himself tortured by another version of himself until he felt enough anger towards Batman to stage the greatest calamity Gotham had ever seen.

By giving it all up before he could see it through, this counterpart had ruined what might have been perfection close to the scale of Jason's own masterpiece.

"Lucky guy," Duela said dreamily as they watched Red Hood from the rafters of the old warehouse where some drug lord had holed up his operation. "Could you imagine being loved like that for two whole years?"

"Dee, you were abused for how long?" Jason brought up.

"Yeah, but not by you. Nobody loves me like you do." She rolled onto her back and let her long hair dangle down, tempting fate, but the Red Hood was too busy gunning down every dumbass who looked at him funny to notice them hiding up in the rafters.

"He's my kind of hero," Jason noted, watching the violence continue.

"Red Hood! That's enough!"

Jason sat up and watched intently as Nightwing swept in, flipping about like the showoff that Dick always was, and knocking out one of the few remaining goons.

"You're a little late to the party. Already got everything handled," Hood said, putting his handguns in their respective holsters.

"Are you insane? You can't just swoop in and kill everybody! Bruce wouldn't have wanted this!"

“Yeah, well he decided to tap out before he could tell me that personally, so you’ll have to forgive me if I don’t care what he would have wanted.”

Nightwing was exasperated. “Look, I get it, but you can’t keep doing this! Arkham is gone! What happened to you is never going to happen again! You just have to stop them, call it in, and the GCPD will take the criminals to Blackgate—”

“Where Waller’ll get her claws in them. How is it better that she’s sticking that implant in people and making them her personal slaves?”

Jason relished the thought of a device that would put people under his control. He already began imagining all the ways that he could make his jokes even funnier. A Batman who killed his own Robins might be a fine place to start. The idea was enticing.

“—I don’t want to send you to Blackgate. Please. Just... stop this.”

Jason had zoned out for too long. The opportunity he was looking for felt very close. “Be ready.”

Duela rolled over and took her whip off her hip. “Ready Freddy.”

“You’re not Batman. You turned down the cowl. You left Gotham. I’m handling things my way and it works.”

“It doesn’t work for me, Jason. If you’d just let us help you—”

“Like Bruce was going to? Some help he was! If I’d known he was just going to off himself, I’d have saved him the trouble and put one in his head like I was planning to!”

“Now.”

Duela’s whip lashed out, the blade moving like the head of a snake. It sliced right through Nightwing’s leg. Red Hood’s guns were back out in a heartbeat, but before he could even get them trained on Duela, Jason’s boots hit the concrete and Hood made sure the guns were both trained on him.

“Nice reflexes. Too bad I’m not going to die today.”

“Awful lot of confidence for a guy who’s messing with the Red Hood.” Despite his words and his completely rigid stance, Jason could feel the moment the guy got a really good look at his face. “Who the hell are you?”

Jason’s mouth quirked up into a grin as he thought of how he could use this Red Hood. “I’m the answer to your problems, Jason Todd. I think you can see that.”

Duela dropped down and snapped her whip again. This time it snaked towards Nightwing’s neck, but a bullet hit the bladed tip, keeping it from a fatal blow. “Whoo! Nice shot, hot stuff! Do me next!”

That, at least, got Red Hood to stumble.

“Don’t mind her. She has a type.” Jason took a step closer and let Red Hood’s gun press to his forehead. “Now me, I have an offer you’ll want to hear out.”

“I don’t negotiate.”

“What if I gave you another chance to get things right with Batman?”

“Ngh. Jason, don’t listen to him. You’re better than—”

Duela knelt by Nightwing and put her arms around his shoulders, holding him down on his knees. “Everybody’s better than you, birdbrain. Now shut up and let the men talk, or I’ll show you some love.”

Red Hood finally lowered his guns. “You look like—”

“You? Uncanny, isn’t it? You and I are one and the same. I’m just you if the world had been a bit... different.”

“And... you can really give me another chance?”

“Well, I’ll bet your Bat wasn’t dumb enough to blow himself up just because his identity was compromised, so I’m sure he’s still around somewhere. But until we solve the mystery of what cave he crawled off to, I can give you numerous Batmen. You’ll be able to make them all see justice as you see fit.”

“Jason... Please...”

Duela rolled her eyes and shoved Nightwing forward before driving the heel of her boot into the back of his neck. “That’s enough out of you, Tinker Bell. You’re not in charge of him. And don’t think we don’t know about the babe in the wheelchair still yelling in your earpiece. It’s cute that you two still act as each other’s beards here. But keep running your mouth and it won’t just be her legs that won’t work.”

Nightwing didn’t utter another sound after that. Red Hood watched him in silence for a moment before holstering his guns, pulling back his hood, and removing his helmet. “Fine. Doesn’t sound like a bad deal.”

Nightwing let his head hit the concrete in defeat and Duela laughed loudly before kicking him hard enough to knock him out. “Good to have you, Hoodie!”

By the time they made it to the next reality, he had adjusted his helmet and resumed the Arkham Knight name, explaining that Red Hood was who he became in memory of Batman, while the Arkham Knight was who he had become in spite of Batman. He proved to be one hell of an asset. Jason wasn’t a bad shot for someone who was entirely self-taught with guns, but Arkham Knight (or ‘AK’ as Duela had taken to calling him) was a true sniper. While Jason could cook up custom drugs, AK was all about custom weaponry.

A Batman who was rough with his sidekicks wound up with a bullet through the brain. A Batman who took bribes wound up on the wrong side of a rocket launcher. A Batman who was more interested in sleeping his way through the women on the Justice League roster got

a certain appendage shot off before he was ejected out of an airlock on the Watchtower so suffer in the silence of space.

AK's work was fun to watch, but soon enough Jason was bored once again. And AK only seemed eager to take an active role against versions of Batman that he felt deserved punishment. The versions that were acting 'within reason' by AK's standards, he wouldn't even bother with.

Like fate was trying to tell him something: just when Jason was running out of inspiration, they came upon a reality where Bruce Wayne never became Batman.

His lesser-known half-brother, however, had taken up the cowl as a version of Batman that AK described as 'doing it right.'

Not all heroes of the world saw things the same way, though. In fact, Batman was even more of a vigilante than usual; acting completely independently of the Justice League, which often clashed with him and his ideals.

Jason felt that a Batman with a grudge against Superman could prove even more useful, so he chose to snoop around more.

How they met, however had been less than ideal.

Because it had been their leaving point, they would arrive at each different reality in the equivalent of Jump City. As luck would have it, this particular Batman was already investigating the site and was ready to deal with them the moment they stepped through the portal.

"Who are you and what do you want?"

AK had his guns up and Duela was hiding behind Jason before he could formulate a proper plan.

"Well now. Quite the welcoming committee. We're just passing through."

Safeties were clicked off on both sides.

"Fair enough. I'm Jason Napier, he's Jason Todd, and she's... my assistant. Do those names mean anything to you?"

And the gun was lowered. "You're... not serious?"

Jason's smile played onto his face. "You ARE Batman. Tell us what happened to your Jason, then. We're all ears."

That had been when the unusually armed Batman removed his cowl and Jason hatched a new plan.

"This... explains the nightmares."

“Nightmares?”

Jason Wayne, as they learned, had been suffering from strange nightmares for the same amount of time that Jason and Duela had been jumping across different realities. AK noted that he had some odd dreams as well, but he was dismissive if only because he’d dreamt of different ways his life could have turned out for years. Jason was particularly interested in the nightmares they shared where they had an encounter with a version of the Joker different from the versions they knew and didn’t make it out alive. Strangely, instead of staying dead, in those dreams they’d awaken in a strange pool of water before waking from their own sleep.

That was a Jason he wanted to come across. That was a Jason who had truly experienced tragedy.

“There was also this nightmare where... I saw a different Batman on his knees and... I laughed. I knew that he was going to die, and I laughed. It was... awful.”

Duela snickered.

“We’re just passing through,” Jason assured his Bat-counterpart. “Hopefully our passing will end the nightmares.”

“Why are you visiting different realities?” he ventured to ask.

AK fielded the question without missing a beat. “We’re righting a few wrongs. But this reality doesn’t seem wrong. It’s nice to see Gotham in good hands.”

“Speaking of Gotham, I’ve been away for too long. I had matters to attend to. Selina is no doubt covering for me, but I can’t keep relying on her for that.”

That perked up Jason’s ears. “Selina? Catwoman?”

AK shuddered. “Wait, if you’re Batman, then you’re the one with a fling with Catwoman?”

Wayne raised an eyebrow and Jason felt like he was looking in a mirror that showed his future. The dusty gray in his hair didn’t look half bad.

“Selina has cat-like features because she’s a meta-human, but she has never gone by ‘Catwoman.’ And she’s not just some fling like what happened with Talia.”

AK sputtered and finally raised his helmet in order to get some fresh air. Apparently, the news had come as quite the surprise. Jason could remember Talia from his own world. Truly forgettable. Hers and Bruce’s bastard child had been an amusing toy to use against Nightwing for a short time at least, but he succumbed to the drugs, unlike Helena.

“Well, this has been... enlightening. Let me know if you need assistance before you leave. No doubt you know where to find me.”

AK would have been happy if that parting of ways had been the end of it, but Jason insisted on sticking around a little while longer. He went with the excuse that, if anything, it would be

interesting to observe a version of themselves who had taken up the cowl. AK was at least enthusiastic about clearing out one of Falcone's bases to use as their own.

Selina Kyle, as they quickly learned, wasn't JUST a meta-human, but one of the core members of the Justice League. Wayne tried to maintain a relationship with her, but the leader of the League, Superman, didn't approve of his methods. This was a difference that AK found, once again, made this Bat-Jason more respectable.

Jason, on the other hand, found sweet irony in a Justice League run by the boy scout due to the fact that they couldn't trust the true brains of the operation.

Even better, those brains belonged to a version of himself.

Maybe Wayne still fancied himself a protector of Gotham, but there was a darkness that Jason was eager to tap into.

Looking up articles regarding the Justice League, following along with a few cases that weren't too far out, and skulking about around Selina's personal residence later, Jason learned that the Justice League without Batman was predictably underwhelming. He accessed their version of the Watchtower's systems within days and, without AK even noticing, he sent out members on impossible missions just to see if they'd make it back alive.

Selina—or Fatale, as she was known—surprised him with her tenacity.

Not everyone was so lucky...

...but Superman proved that he was able to save everyone time and time again, spoiling Jason's fun. It occurred to him again that if he could only come up with a sort of controlling device like Amanda Waller's in AK's universe, he might be able to claim an advantage.

An explosion that rocked Gotham had gotten Jason's attention. He and Duela went to check it out, leaving AK to work on cleaning his guns. "Just another night in Gotham," he'd mumbled dismissively upon feeling the ground shake.

Jason discovered, at last, this reality's Joker.

AK's Joker had ruined his life. Whoever this Joker was, he was sure to be interesting.

The world didn't disappoint.

Hopping from the rooftops was a Joker more acrobatic than even Jason, and he'd been taught by the best.

Fortunately, the best was impossible not to recognize.

Seeing a Flying Grayson at work again was a real rush. Jason didn't regret what he'd done to his Grayson, but there was always something enticing about watching him work. It had been part of why he was so eager to learn from him in the first place.

Now, seeing a version of Grayson not unlike himself, Jason felt some feelings he thought were only needed to manipulate.

“Wowza! Who’d’ve thunk he’d be a hunk?” Duela joked, biting her lower lip. “Want me to catch him for you, Puddin’?”

Jason rolled his eyes. “Dee, you’re a great assistant, truly. But sometimes I wish you’d just shut up.”

Duela pouted and watched as the Jason-Batman soared overhead. “Fine. I’ll go slow down the silver fox for you. But don’t get too attached to this Joker. There’s only one of him and there’s two of us. You know who’s better.”

He watched her skip off, as giddy as a child, and he wished desperately, that Helena would remerge. Duela was so... desperate for attention.

Still, she was useful.

He went after the Joker, following him all the way out to a surprisingly still intact version of Amusement Mile. The nostalgia hit so hard that he couldn’t wipe the smile off his face.

He followed the Joker’s trail all the way into the hall of mirrors. Good times.

“Welcome to my—Now hold on. Familiar as you are, you’re not the Batman I was playing with.”

“No, I imagine I’m not. But you’re exactly who I was looking for. In fact, you’re better than I could have expected.”

This Joker traipsed around the maze at his own leisure, reflections of his gaudy Robin-colored suit assaulting Jason’s eyes. “You... look just like him...”

Jason raised an eyebrow and stepped so that his own reflection glided along the walls. “So, you know him then? That’s good. Jason and Dick should always be acquainted.”

“You’re Jason then,” the Joker confirmed. “You’re certainly not MY Jason.”

He laughed and felt genuinely amused for the first time in a long time. “Far from it. Where I come from, well, Dick Grayson would NEVER kill anyone. And judging by the size of the explosion earlier, I’d say you took out at least a whole city block.”

The Joker snickered. “It’s so difficult to get his attention. He’s been so busy with that Super-jerk lately. Can’t let him think he can just go on ignoring me.”

Jason stopped so that the both of them were visible in most of the mirrors. “Yeah, wouldn’t it be nice if we could just get the Justice League out of the way?”

The Joker shrugged. “I don’t care about them. Sure, that femme Fatale gets in my way now and again, but my dance partner is Batman.”

Jason nodded and took a different approach. “What if I told you we could make him and any other version of, well, myself yours to play with?”

Suddenly Jason felt breathing on his neck. “I’d be interested.”

It had been years since Dick had ever been that close. Memories flooded back and he felt just a little bit of heat pooling in his gut. “Jason Napier,” he said, as he turned and offered a hand to the smooth assailant. “It’s a pleasure to meet this version of you.”

AK proved to be nervous upon meeting this version of Dick Grayson. Of course didn’t like working with a Joker, no matter who was under the makeup. Jason had to elbow Duela in the side when she snickered at the remark he’d made to that fact. AK had never realized that they were the Joker of their reality. What a good laugh.

“You’re too young for me,” Dick joked, invading AK’s personal space. He took out a familiar escrima and smirked when the blade popped out of one end. He traced the tip over the ‘J’ scar on AK’s face and whispered, “But you remind me of someone... very important to me. Want to play?”

AK shoved him away and retired to his personal quarters.

“Do me a favor and don’t be so aggressive with him. He’s actually quite useful,” Jason half-heartedly warned.

Dick licked his lips and muttered, “I can imagine.”

Predatory Grayson Joker. What a world.

Of course with AK put aside, plotting was much easier. “While I’m happy to have your assistance, Dick, I’d like the complete set. Any ideas on how to get your man’s attention?”

Dick scoffed. “He’s always so distracted by the women in his life. His Fatale fending off advances from Superman, his obsession with his dead mother, and the mother of his child always trying to lure him to the darker side.”

“Tch. That lil’ snot’s not so tough,” Duela said. “Red, you remember what we did to our Wayne’s bastard?”

Jason couldn’t hide his smirk. He covered his mouth, trying not to laugh. He could still recall just how Dick had screamed upon watching Duela kill her drugged out half-brother, all the while none the wiser to the fact that they were related. It was an inside joke he never got to share in its entirety.

“Dunno why that always tickles him,” Duela noted.

At Dick’s suggestion, Jason decided to look into the child of Jason Wayne and Talia Al Ghul.

Aptly named Ozymandias—by an egomaniacal woman and a man attached to literature—the son of Batman was different from the one they had known.

Damian, as Jason had known him, came to Wayne manor when his mother was in danger and he chose to live with Dick, Tim, and Alfred. He took up the vigilante life despite Tim's vehement opposition to the idea.

Jason had made sure that the first night the kid took to the streets was the last.

Ozymandias, on the other hand, had come to his father's care when his mother was on the run, but returned to his mother at the first opportunity. According to this Dick, there was too little difference between his mother, who led the League of Assassins; and his father, who killed whoever he felt deserved to die. Ozymandias continued to live with the parent that he'd grown up with, but it never stopped his father from trying to reach out.

He was the perfect target.

Luckily Nanda Parbat wasn't a safe place to raise a child.

A threat from an anonymous source to Talia and a threat directly from the Joker himself to his Batman brought all of the players to the Lazarus Pit where Ra's bathed to maintain his immortality.

Unfortunately for both parties, Jason had also reached out to a few key members of the Justice League as well, and Superman wasn't too happy to see what he believed to be was Batman fraternizing with an organization dedicated to killing.

"I've let a lot slide over the years because of your relationship with Fatale, but to be on such intimate terms with assassins?"

A Green Lantern and Flash began rounding up everyone that they could. Batman and Talia had the sense to pull Kryptonite out quickly and watch each other's backs. With everyone Ra's' quick sword work managed to slice the Flash's calf, effectively stopping them and little Ozymandias used his size to his advantage; the Lantern ignored him long enough that he was able to get in close and sever the entire hand off the guy, cutting off his connection with the ring.

"Ooh, now that was a smooth move," Duela snickered, wiggling anxiously from her perch. "Lemme at 'im, Jay. Just say the word."

There would be a moment, but they weren't there yet. Watching Batman and Talia face off against a Superman who still took every effort not to kill, Jason felt his plan come to a more recognizable shape. "Patience." He handed Duela the Kryptonite attachment for her whip tip and said, "Remember, we're playing on Batman's side."

She winked then leapt onto the scene and snapped her whip at Superman, who didn't take kindly to the sudden interruption. "Branching out, Bats? I thought you were better than this!"

"Thanks for the assist, but there's not much to salvage in this situation," Batman said as he used a Kryptonite version of brass knuckles to catch one of Superman's punches.

“Don’t mention it, hot stuff! There’s no way I’d let some super-jerk get the best of ya!” One well timed lash and she managed to tear right across the S on his chest.

While they did their little dance, Jason went straight to Ozymandias and met the kid’s blade with the handle of his Kryptonite dagger. “Nice to meet you, kid. How’d you like to even the odds with your parents?”

Sending the boy after Superman tickled Jason. An assassin who no doubt had been tasked with watching over him tried to pursue Ozymandias, but Jason caught her, snatched one of her many knives, and slit her throat before she could get close enough to interfere.

“Oz, stay away!”

“No, Father! I can help!”

Now it was just a matter of timing. Watching Batman, Talia, Duela, and Ozymandias working together to keep Superman subdued was a sight to see. They all knew how to handle their own and Duela fit in nicely, leaping around blades dodging bullets. If he didn’t know better, he’d think she was born to do this dance.

But feigned interest aside, he gave a quick whistle and Duela faked a stumble, knocking into Ozymandias.

It was all the opportunity that Jason needed.

One well aimed knife thrown at Batman and he knocked it into the air on instinct, not even realizing that Superman was going after his son.

Jason couldn’t have written the moment better if he tried. The man of steel had probably only intended to knock the wind out of the kid. A simple strike that would likely end the fight.

But an inconveniently placed blade was falling right in front of Ozymandias.

“Hurk!”

“NOOO!”

Batman went to catch his falling son and splashed into the Lazarus Pit... which wasn’t exactly according to plan. Jason began to wonder what would happen if a corpse fell into the enchanted waters.

But several pregnant minutes passed and no one rose from the Pit.

“Beloved...” Talia knelt by the glowing green waters, no doubt considering joining her beloved and son.

“I didn’t mean... Oh god, I’d never—”

“Murderer!” Duela shouted, stirring the whole cave. “Man o’ steel my ass! No Superman I know would EVER kill a kid!”

The injured Flash and wounded Green Lantern seemed just as shocked as the League of Assassins.

Jason approached the water's edge, curious as to what would emerge.

Finally Batman rose from the water, his son's lifeless body cradled in his arms.

Jason hadn't accounted for what the Lazarus Pit's effects would be, but they fared better than he could have dreamed. He left as he had come, without anyone's notice, and Duela helped Batman to get home, where Jason was already lying in wait.

"Oh, Puddin' it was so awful!"

As usual, Duela was over-acting. Thankfully Wayne seemed too distracted to even notice her.

She proceeded to give a dramatic reenactment of what had happened and Jason largely ignored her in favor of getting close to the distraught Wayne. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"I can... feel it..."

Jason waited, still curious as to how he'd been affected.

"I can feel... the moment he died..."

Jason noticed the slight glint of green in the man's usually light blue eyes and recalled the way Wayne and AK had described a version of themselves they'd seen who had glowing green eyes. "What if we can bring him back?"

That got Wayne's attention.

"There's a version of us who died, but somehow came back," he reminded Wayne. "Come with us. We'll find the reality where he's from and we'll see how it happened."

Wayne agreed to join them, but upon returning to their temporary hideout, he remained inconsolable the whole time. AK tried to get further information, but Duela kept them apart and explained only that he'd lost someone important.

Jason spent the following days focused solely on locating the correct reality. The windows he was able to show always showed a version of themselves. A Jason who had become a priest. A Jason who had become a weapons dealer. A Jason who worked for Falcone. AK finally pointed out the Jason that piqued his interest.

This Jason was just a bit younger than them. They watched him argue with a version of Nightwing. The more emotions became apparent, the brighter his eyes glowed green. Nightwing managed to talk him down somehow and he didn't even bother to storm off, just seemed to agree to something.

"He works with Nightwing?" AK questioned. "I have NEVER gotten along great with that guy."

“If that Nightwing is similar to the ones you and I are familiar with, there’s a chance that this Jason could be considered a hero.”

“Please. Closest any of our kind has been to a hero is KB over there, and apparently he’s not seen as one ‘cuz Superman can get away with murdering his kid,” AK pointed out, gesturing towards Wayne who was too sullen to even acknowledge them.

He did have a point. Odds were even the priest version of them had chosen that path because of something that had happened to him.

“This is our next stop,” Jason announced. “Prepare yourselves.”

Keeping up appearances wasn’t a problem for Jason, but keeping the Joker-Grayson hidden from Wayne was difficult. Duela had been doing her best to keep Wayne distracted and somewhat consoled, so once they opened the portal she led him through first with AK close behind. Jason held back long enough to speak to Dick and get things settled.

“I don’t like seeing him like this,” Dick noted, looking longingly through the portal. “It’s not natural.”

“Can you honestly say you’re upset to see that kid out of the way?”

Dick shrugged with a smug grin on his face. “I’m not complaining. But I want my Jason at his best. I want him to look me in the eyes and go for the throat, you know?”

“Well, if we do this right, you’ll have a Jason whose throat you can slit again and again and he’ll just keep coming back for more.”

Dick shuddered with excitement. “Point taken. See you soon, boss.” And he stepped through.

Jason considered the pieces he had in play now. A weapons expert version of himself with a grudge to bear who was prone to emotional responses; a version of himself that was every bit the Batman he’d once known’s equal with the added bonus of no mercy; a version of his faux flame who was a real wildcard with a knack for chaos and destruction; and the girl he’d stolen right out from under Batman’s nose.

Together they were formidable. He’d already watched Killer-Bat take on Superman with minimal assistance. This was the team that he needed. He’d just have to find a means to control the people with real power, then he could start to reshape all realities in his own image. There’d be no need for other Jasons. He could torment all Batmen. Walk over the ashes of cities that heroes failed to save. The world would be his stage and all the people nothing more than props.

He took one last look at the preview of the reality he was going to and smiled at the sight of the reborn Jason.

“I’ll see you soon.”

CHARACTER PROFILE #4

Helena/Duela Dent—Black Joker

Family:

Helena was given up for adoption the day that she was born, so she never knew her biological parents. She was adopted by Harvey Dent, who wanted a pretty little baby girl to help win public favor as he went into politics. To that extent, he was determined to make her perfect no matter what it took. As she grew older and displayed any signs of things unflattering by his standards, he shut them down by abusing her and or putting her on various medications that she didn't need.

Alternate Personality:

Due to the usage of unnecessary drugs (something for ADHD, something for anxiety, something for insomnia, etc.), a chemical imbalance in her brain led to the creation of an alternate personality—Duela—who was all of the courage and rebelliousness that had been suppressed in Helena. Because Duela was created in order to protect Helena, Helena is unable to recall the things that happen when Duela is in charge. Duela, on the other hand, is completely aware of what happens when Helena is in charge.

Presumed Friend:

Helena/Duela met Jason Napier after a violent moment with their father had them sent briefly to child protective services. She hardly took notice of Jason then beyond his unusual demeanor, but felt a quiet fascination upon hearing [his version of] his past. After Jason was adopted by Bruce Wayne, they both wound up attending Gotham Academy together and were able to become close. Helena viewed Jason as someone who could be idolized. He was intelligent and fearless in her eyes and she admired that, wishing that she could find his inner strength. Duela was infatuated and felt that his darkness matched hers in some way.

Villain Backstory:

Helena and Duela were just another victim in Jason's path, but rather than destroy her, Jason's fascination with Helena led to him toying with her life. After a particularly violent night with her father, Jason offered her an experimental drug that would make the pain go away. She took it, unaware of what it was truly going to do to her. She was the first test subject for Napier's personal line of Joker drugs. That night, when her father tried to attack her again, her brain didn't register the pain as bad and instead saw it as a sign of affection. Wanting to show her father just how much she loved him, she proceeded to beat him to death. This occurrence broke her psyche. Helena no longer emerged and Duela was determined to please Jason in any way that she could. Duela went into hiding, leading the media to believe that someone had killed both the mayor and his foster daughter, which allowed her to work under the radar, spreading Jason's experimental drugs throughout the city. Typically they killed people rather than turn them like they had her, but that never stopped her from handing it out.

Methodology:

Duela is the face of the Joker. Most Gothamites don't even know that there are two Jokers. Duela takes this task very seriously, not realizing that she's putting her neck on the line while Jason lurks in the shadows. Thankfully she was naturally acrobatic and was able to teach herself a crude means of combat using her gymnastics training (just another thing Harvey

forced upon her). Her preferred weapon is a black leather whip with a bladed heart tip at the end of it, but she's handy with most blunt objects as well.

Genuine Friendship:

Poison Ivy, for whatever unspoken reason, developed a habit of helping Duella out of difficult situations. She acts as a sort of motherly figure and constantly tells Duella that she should look out for herself rather than continually putting herself in harm's way for the sake of a man who doesn't seem all that taken with her. But time and time again, Duella ignores her advice and goes back to her man. Ivy patiently waits for the time when Duella might come to her senses. Her reason for feeling so close to the girl, as she claims, is that Duella reminds her of an old friend.

Biological Parents:

Catwoman and Batman had a notoriously whirlwind romance, but late nights on rooftops led to a pregnancy that Selina wasn't prepared for. Rather than tell the vigilante whose alter ego she didn't even know at the time, she chose to have the child in secret and put her up for adoption in hopes of giving her a better life than she could offer. Upon learning about the horrible things that had happened to her daughter, Selina couldn't take the guilt and committed suicide, leaving behind a note with a request for Bruce to take care of their daughter. Unfortunately, Jason got ahold of that note and prevented Bruce from seeing it until HE wanted to show it to him. And by then, Bruce could only protect Helena/Duella by sacrificing his own life. Helena/Duella never knew them or her relation to them, and Jason Napier has made sure no one else has learned about it either.

Daughter of Darkness

Chapter Summary

Duela doesn't do well with sitting still and waiting, and her Jason was taking a little too long with his latest 'master plan' for her taste. So she slips out to take a night on the town and have a little fun.

Chapter Notes

O_o

Sorry this took so long. I wrote, re-wrote, un-wrote, wrote more, edited out more, and worked straight from Thanksgiving to Christmas Day. Even now I'm posting this on my first short work day where I actually got out before sunset. I supplemented the opportunity to relax with sushi and beer and editing time... and frankly, I HOPE I can figure out a way to do this within a more reasonable turnaround time soon, but sleep sounds nice too.

Hope you enjoy, of course! Will try to write more soon! Or settle on which version I've already written to stick with... Or whatever...

Duela kicked the gravel, disappointed with herself for upsetting her beloved yet again. She couldn't even understand what had set him off this time. All she did was carve hers and his initials into that gloomy world's Batman's face. It wasn't like he was doing much just being restrained in the hideout anyways, and she was bored.

But just the same, she'd just barely finished the 'D' for Dent when Jason slapped her clean across the room. It was nice to be reminded how much she was loved, but she wished she could understand why he felt the need to stop her from having her fun. It wasn't like he cared if she killed a Batman or two in the past, and this one was just lying around like a forgotten toy. It didn't make any sense.

Still, she'd been kicked out of the hideout and told to 'make herself productive' while she could. It was a vague request when Jason wasn't sharing much information about what he wanted to do this time around. He was always so particular about his 'Opuses'. If only he'd share his master plans. There was no need to be so secretive, in Duela's opinion, but she wasn't the mastermind behind anything, according to Jason.

Still, it wasn't like they were lacking in parallel-people to mess with in this universe.

Duela knew better than to look for any Harvey Dent. Father figure as he'd been in her home universe, Jason explicitly told her that he was off limits outside of where they were from. It was fine. She'd been allowed to show him all the love that she could anyways... It always felt a little raw to see the man she called "Dad," but he wasn't important to her in these other universes, as far as she could tell.

Of course, Harvey's close associates were mostly off limits too. Mr. Cobblepot—the main income for his political campaigns—was off limits... Which was a huge bummer, the guy was just asking to get punched in the face.

... Then again, it wasn't like SHE did any business with him. What could it hurt to mess with him a little when he didn't even know her face?

Causing chaos in any Gotham was comically easy. Duela took two steps into a cute little hole in the wall called the Stacked Deck and was delighted upon seeing a number of gruff looking types pointing guns at her. "Aw, just like home."

"The fuck're you s'posed ta be? Some discount Harley Quinn?"

Duela sighed, once again disappointed to find that her counterpart wasn't notorious enough to warrant any respect. Not a single universe they'd visited had a Joker like her.

"Play your cards right and you'll find I'm nobody's knock-off," she teased, leaning in towards the closest armed patron and running her hand up his thigh.

Poor sucker pointed his piece away from her and even had the nerve to smile and hum his approval. The rest of the bar settled down, seeing that she was just around for some dirty fun, so she cupped the man's face with one hand and pulled him in close. Sick fuck already had his eyes closed, anticipating a kiss. Duela let their lips touch just barely before he was trying to shove his tongue down her throat. Impressive how bold this stranger was, ready to feel up and face-fuck the first thing with boobs to walk through the door.

He was going to have to learn some manners.

There was a sudden whine followed by a sickening squish that got most of the patrons on their feet, startled by the sheer carnage of what had happened.

Duela spat out the large chunk of the man's tongue she'd managed to bite off before taking the whip off of her hip and driving the heart shaped blade at the end of it into the hand of her victim's table-mate, pinning him in place.

"Now! Bartender, I'd like your most flammable bottle of booze and a bottle of tequila for myself! You can put it on these two fucks' tab."

While waiting for the scrambling bartender to fulfill her order, Duela yanked the bladed heart out of the hand and table and proceeded to use it to carve a long strip of fabric off the tongueless wonder's shirt. When she left the bar, she had a prepped Molotov cocktail in one hand and top shelf tequila in the other. She popped the cork and downed herself a mouthful. It was dangerously smooth when it hit the back of her throat and left a pleasant warmth as it ran

down her esophagus, already fueling her ideas for the evening. She made it a good three blocks from the bar before a few GCPD cars finally drove past her, likely going to check on the disturbance that she'd left behind for them.

She strut along the busiest street of Gotham without attracting any attention—though she did trip a purse snatcher and pickpocket a watch off the lady who thanked her, who was shockingly ignorant of the blood splashed on Duela's chest from the man she'd de-tongued earlier. When she finally reached Founder's Pier, she smiled upon seeing the lit-up exterior of the Iceberg Lounge. What a perfect place to raise a little hell.

Duela stumbled straight to the front of the line of people all eager to get in and took one last gulp of tequila as the bouncers looked her over.

"You on the list, miss?"

Duela hissed at the burn of the tequila before hitting the bottle against one of the gold posts with the red-velvet ropes attached. "I'm not really the VIP type," she said before swiping the jagged glass across the bouncer's neck. She proceeded to walk around the man as he bled out and reveled in the shrieks and screams of the waiting crowd.

"Oh Pengwi, I'm hooooome!" she shouted, getting the whole place's undivided attention. She went on to light the end of the Molotov cocktail and waited for the criminal to poke his pointy nose somewhere that she could see him.

"Wak! Who the hell is this cuckoo?"

"Just the stumpy lil' man I wanted to see!" She lopped the bottle and one of Penguin's goons managed to hop into its path. The bottle broke at his feet and flames swallowed him up like he was already covered in lighter fluid. Duela laughed at the frantic screams and ensuing nonsense. Such a sweet symphony. She wished Jason was there to see what comedy she'd brought about. Maybe it would be the spark of inspiration he so craved. What could be more fun than such senseless chaos?

"Who put this bitch on the guestlist?"

Duela's laughter was stopped short by the booming voice. She searched her audience for the source and gasped at the sight of her father's face so horribly marred on one half. "Daddy?"

*

Jason's release from the implant hit the team in different ways, but the overall sentiment was one of relief. Given the strangeness of the situation and the overwhelming absence of Dick thanks to his still-untreated condition, having him free to help outside of Titans Tower was essential.

"I'd still rather be looking for Roy," Jason grumbled, knowing full well that Tim was listening through the cowl's communicator. "Not to mention I'm pretty sure B'd turn over in his grave if he knew I was the one holding the fort in Gotham."

[Do NOT make such ill-fitted jokes, you ungrateful—]

“Oh great. Little Demon-Spawn’s on the line. You’re just jealous your prepubescent stature couldn’t possibly fill out a Batsuit.”

[You are not worthy of—kzzt... kzzt!]

[Sorry. Little brat snuck in when I was checking on B-Team’s progress in Star City. What’s the scoop?]

“It’s hard to play quiet observer when dealing with this over-sized cape,” Jason pointed out.

[The police scanners are reporting a disturbance at the Stacked Deck.]

Jason rolled his eyes. “Yeah, the place IS a disturbance. Easiest place to shake down small-timers for information, so I started out there tonight. Whole place was pretty shook up because some ‘Harley-wannabe’ went full Hannibal Lecter on their asses. Nobody there’s going to cause any trouble while they think she’s still active.” Jason scoffed. “Hell, that kind of makes her more effective than Batman, wouldn’t you say?”

[Sure. I’ll tell B to switch his modus operandi to cannibalism as soon as we rescue him from your evil twin,] Tim joked right back. The kid really was a breath of fresh air these days. [Well, there’re reports of a disturbance at the Iceberg Lounge but... it looks like police were turned away after paramedics picked up a bloody bouncer at the door. Care to check that out?]

Jason leapt to the next rooftop over and rolled right off the edge, falling almost too perfectly into the seat of the Batmobile below. “Damn, I’ve always wanted to do that.”

[Don’t let the suit get to your head. This is temporary. We’re going to get B back.]

“Yeah, whatever. Keep your feelers out. I’ll let you know what I find at the popsicle stand.” He shut off the line of communication and revved the motor. It was impossible not to enjoy the sense of power that came with being behind the steering wheel of the Batmobile. It was so rare that Bruce let anyone else drive it, after all. So, taking a bit of a long way to the pier felt necessary. And the drive proved fruitful. He was able to stop a few petty crimes without even getting out of the car; including stunning a deranged woman who was beating up a guy with her purse for a watch that he hadn’t stolen from her.

When he reached the pier, he found the Iceberg Lounge closed early for the night, though it was still obviously lit. He launched himself from the Batmobile and had it remotely park itself in some dark alley nearby where basic defenses were put up to avoid having some street rat nicking the hubcaps off the tires.

Of course, Jason knew that a truly smart kid could still bypass the security—not to mention the time or two he rigged the Batmobile to blow sky high with Batman still inside—but the odds of someone else pulling that off seemed slim.

He landed softly on the slanted rooftop and was grateful to find that it wasn't ACTUALLY made of ice. More surprising was the conspicuously placed skylight. He figured Gotham's underworld had gotten smart enough to get rid of any extra points of entry that resident man-of-the-night could use.

Jason crept up to the edge of the skylight and checked what was going on through it. At the center of the stage where women usually sang or danced sat a single wooden chair with a woman tied to it.

Two-Face was apparently interrogating her and using brute force to get answers. When she didn't respond, he grabbed her chin to force her to look up at him and she spat out a mouthful of blood before laughing. In a fit of rage, Two-Face shoved her back so hard that the chair slammed backwards, and her head bounced off the stage. She sputtered and coughed out a little more blood before opening her eyes wide.

She was looking right at Jason through the skylight. Despite the nature of her situation, she gave him a wide, bloody smile that sent a shiver down his spine.

One of Two-Face's men fixed the chair so that she was upright again and the process promised to repeat for who knew how long.

Seemed like as good as time as any for Jason to make his presence known.

He flipped a hidden switch on one of his gauntlets to unleash a soft sonic pulse, shattering the thick glass he was standing on and dropping him down just a couple feet behind the henchmen who had been allowed to stick around to watch the show. It was an entrance, he felt, that was truly worthy of the Batman. He knew it wasn't the right time, but he couldn't help but smile at just how powerful it made him feel to wear the cowl. "That'll be enough of that," he said in that usual growl that only the Bat-voice-changer could get right.

Jason was able to make quick work of the goons. There was something so satisfyingly freeing to know that he could take the men down without fear of some trigger word incapacitating him. It had been too long since he had full gear as well, and now he was decked out in Batman's finest. These baddies couldn't pose a real threat if they tried.

And since he wasn't in any mood to waste time on Penguin or Two-Face, he put them down just as hard and fast as he had their men.

Empowering as it was, with so many scumbags down and useless at his feet Jason felt an itching in his trigger finger. How quickly Batman's gear had let him take care of them...

... How much quicker a couple bullets would take care of them for good...

"Oooh, my hero!" The bound girl hopped about in her seat, snapping Jason back to reality by acting quite a bit like a certain clown-based villainess that he knew. "And here I thought Batsy was a little tied-up these days. You're even more all-powerful than I've been told."

"And you're not as bothered by your treatment as one would assume." Now that Jason was able to look the girl over, he realized that she reminded him strongly of the Joker's psycho

girlfriend. She didn't sound like Harley... Didn't dress like Harley... But that wild look in her eyes was still familiar enough.

Dick had been an alternate version of the Joker, and based on who kidnapped Bruce, Jason was also an alternate version of Batman. This could very easily be an unusual version of Harley. She could be a threat, but she would be helpful with stopping the supposed Joker version of himself.

Sirens blared just outside the Lounge and the muffled sound of a voice over a megaphone rang out; unclear but still demanding.

"Aren'tcha gonna untie me like heroes do when they rescue their damsels in distress?" The girl's uncanny smile kept pulling at the back of Jason's mind. "C'mon, Batsy. I'm just the victim here. Don't leave me hangin'!"

"You're armed," Jason noted, eyes flicking for just a second to the loop of a black leather whip hanging off her thigh. "And dangerous."

"Aww, you don't believe that, riiight? I'm the victim here!"

"C...."

Jason and the mystery girl looked to Two-Face as he struggled onto his hands and knees. "I'd stay down, Harvey."

"Cunt's some kinda... whack-job," he sputtered as he reached into his vest to pull out the smaller piece he kept close to the chest. One well aimed Batarang knocked it clear across the room, leaving him angry and unarmed. "Keeps calling me... calling me..."

"Oh, just stay down, Daddy. Haven't I shown you enough love today?" The ropes fell off the girl like she'd timed it just for the moment, and took the whip off her hip. One quick crack and a bladed tip lashed out towards Two-Face.

Again, Jason felt the split-second urge to just let her finish him off.

A birdarang saved him from what would surely be a hell of a lecture. Damian had finally caught up and knew how best to handle the situation (or so he'd surely let Jason know later). But while the blade was driven off course, it still managed to catch Two-Face's unmarred cheek on the way back as she retracted it.

"Aww, if you're not careful I'll mess up his other half and then what's he gonna blame the duality on?" the girl said with a playful pout. "I'm honored you thought I was worth both Batman AND Robin's attention, though. Or is the runt here 'cuz of those dummies?"

"Who is this clown?" Damian demanded more than asked. "Why are you wasting your time on her?"

"She's... someone important," Jason settled on, unable to really voice what about her was bothering him. "And dangerous."

“She’s some Catwoman-knockoff. We run into them all the time! Get with the program and incapacitate her like you would any other goon!” Damian shot a line launcher at her with every intention of tying her up again and leaving her for Gordon’s pick-up crew. When she managed to offset its trajectory with the blade of her whip, Jason’s heart leapt into his throat. She caught the rope and gave it a hard yank, pulling Damian in her direction as her free hand clicked and showed a number of syringes emerging from her fingertips like claws.

She worked with the guy who’d made the poison that Dick was still suffering from...

Damian was in imminent danger.

Jason swiped the nearest gun off a downed goon and fired a single shot that went right between the girl’s fingers and Damian’s chest. Damian collided with her and pushed away just as quickly. He checked himself, startled, but she hadn’t punctured his body armor.

Jason had managed to shoot the needles off her fingers with a single bullet.

“Ooh, that’s a helluva trick. Didn’t think this Batman was supposed to be good with guns. But then again, you’re not the real Batman, so I guess that makes sense.”

“Y-you! You could have shot me!” Damian snapped.

“Might wanna thank ‘im, pipsqueak! You certainly wouldn’t be the first one of your kind I’d have killed.”

Jason tackled her to the ground and kept her pinned under his full weight. “I don’t take kindly to Robin-killers,” he growled.

Despite the threat, the girl blushed and looked at him through heavily lidded eyes. “Oh, Mister Jay’s gonna be so mad. I wasn’t supposed to mess with Ozzy or Daddy. If he finds out I played with both of them AND you?” She leaned her head up a bit as if seeking a kiss. Jason kept stone still, trusting his hold to keep her away from him. “But how could a girl resist?”

“T-T!” Damian may have nearly slipped and addressed Jason as ‘Todd’, but as it was it came off as just his usual annoying tongue click. “This is no time to get friendly!”

As if to back up his statement, the muffled megaphone sounded off again. Gordon wasn’t going to give them much more time.

“Robin, we’re taking her with us,” Jason decided. “Come take her weapon.”

“I don’t think that’s advised,” Damian said incredulously. “She’s strange, certainly, but I’m confident that her time would be better spent in Arkham.”

“Oh, you guys got one of those useless facilities here too? What a stupid solution!”

Now was hardly the time to agree with the enemy. “Before I knock you out... who are you?”

“Mmm, what’s it to ya? You got a girlfriend? Would make sense if we resembled each other, right?”

Jason pressed a little harder against her shoulder and her smile deepened.

“Ah, you’re just like him. Really gets my heart racing to be so close with another Mister Jay.”

“Harley calls the Joker that,” Jason said.

The girl scoffed. “Met a few of her. What a tool. Who wants to be his side piece? Me, I’m the whole dish! Jay’s my Joker and I’m his!”

“Two Jokers?”

“Twice the fun, right?”

“And you’re not Harley... or Selina...”

“Like the old cat lady? Ouch. Weird old lady couldn’t handle the pressure where I come from. She was an afterthought by the time Mister Jay saved me by showing me a new way to love my Daddy.”

“Dent... Duela then?”

The girl’s eyes lit up. “Oh, you DO know me! This could be fun!”

Jason attached a cord around her waist and cuffed her hands before grappling out through the shattered skylight with her in his arms. Damian shouted words of protest, but didn’t bother trying to stop him.

It was surprisingly difficult to sneak around the swarm of cop cars—good on Gordon, Jason supposed—but he managed to haul the dark Duela to the Batmobile where Robin was already waiting with his arms crossed over his chest and the back seat passenger section of the car open and awaiting its passenger.

“I still fail to see the importance of bringing her along.”

“This one’s a cutie. Too small to be Tim. Must be a Damian, right? I liked Damian. He was such a whiny little cutie!” Jason hoisted Duela up over his shoulder before lowering her into the passenger seat, all the while ignoring her taunts. “That Dickwad guy liked Damian too. He was really attached. Wanna know how hard he cried when his drug-addled baby brother hit the pavement without a parachute?”

Damian shuddered but didn’t dignify her with a response. He just shut the passenger section himself so that she was closed off in the back of the car, then went towards the driver’s side.

“Not on your life, Demon-Spawn.”

Damian rolled his eyes and went around the front hood of the car so that Batman could rightly drive the Batmobile.

The ride went mostly in awkward silence. Jason had taken the Batmobile out for a bit of a spin initially, but now he was on a mission. He called up Tim to help get things set up. "Prepare another cell in the Tower. We have another alternate universe guest."

[Another you? Or did someone else grace us with their presence?]

"Don't think you're all that acquainted with Duela," Jason offered.

[Joker's Daughter? I've had the pleasure. Not a fan.]

"Well I'm not sure this one's all... Duela. She's apparently a co-Joker, but I know Duela. I've had the time and pleasure. Duela's unstable, for sure, but she's guarded. Childlike. This girl? She knows who she is and exactly what she's doing, but something still feels off."

[That's wildly unhelpful. Whatever. I'll have a place set up for her. Did Damian reach you?]

"I stopped him from making a mistake he would not have been able to take back," Damian announced, getting Tim's attention.

[Not gonna lie: I kinda figured that would go the other way around. Good job. See you soon.]

Tim cut the communication line, apparently not aware of the bomb he'd just dropped in the Batmobile.

"I could have forced you to leave her behind," Damian said in a stubborn mumble.

"What's the point of showing Batman and Robin at anything less than their most compatible?" he threw back. "Disagreeing with me would have looked bad for Batman."

"You aren't Batman."

"But I WAS Robin. Much as I went against what Bruce wanted, disobeying him led to the worst day of my first life."

"You would have let her execute Two-Face."

And thinking back, Jason knew he would have let her go through with it again. One less menace in Gotham.

"I didn't let her execute you. Doesn't that count for something?"

Another pregnant silence between them before Damian clicked his tongue and muttered, "I think you were the right choice for Batman."

Jason scoffed. "Not like there were a whole lot of options to fill the role," he pointed out. "With Dickwad down for the count, it landed on the rest of the Robins or Bat-Women or Girls or whatever they prefer and... Well sorry, but you need to go through puberty before you even remotely fit in this suit."

“That’s not what I meant, you insolent...” Damian clicked his tongue again and looked out the side window. “I have been watching you for months. Training with you. Seeing how you... how you see the world... And I think you may TRULY be best suited to be Batman.”

Now THAT was unexpected. “Careful. You sound like your mother.” It was meant as a little joke, but Jason regretted it the moment he said it. “I’m just kid—”

“I know that Mother doesn’t regret saving you from Sionis’s killing blow,” Damian confirmed. “Maybe Father can’t understand the sacrifice for the greater good, but given the choice of saving you or letting you fall again... His anger is entirely misplaced.”

Jason kept his face stoic. “Thank you... I guess... But we both know that Dick’s the only one remotely capable of replacing—”

“I was Grayson’s Robin for a time,” Damian reminded him. “Grayson made a great Batman... but he only served as a decent alternative.”

“So... I’m a bad alternative?”

“You, I believe, are the only alternative that makes sense.”

“Flattering as I THINK that is, the cowl isn’t for me,” Jason said. “I’ve only been playing at Batman for a couple weeks while B and Dick are out of commission and it’s been your little saves that have kept me from letting every last one of these costumed criminals take a permanent dirt nap.”

“I don’t mind stopping you,” Damian admitted. “I fully understand your inclination to let them be done in, but keeping you on any further probationary period is a waste. You should be operating independently.”

Jason smiled but kept his eyes on the road. “Thanks then. Nice to know SOMEONE has my back.”

Damian blushed so hard that his ears lit up. “Don’t get the wrong idea. I am Robin to the REAL Batman and the real Batman only!”

“Whatever, twerp.”

“So, this Duela person. I now of the Joker’s Daughter. If that’s what we’re dealing with, T-T!” Damian smiled devilishly and Jason felt that odd tugging in the back of his head again, looking at Damian.

“N-no. I know Duela. Our Duela... Our universe’s Duela... I don’t think this girl’s the same. I think the name is something incredibly coincidental. Duela suggests duality. And while our Duela went by ‘Dent,’ she wasn’t in any way related to Two-Face. This Duela called him ‘Daddy’.”

“So, she’s Two-Face’s Daughter rather than Joker’s Daughter?”

Jason focused on the road ahead again and swallowed a dry lump in his throat. “She’s someone’s daughter at least.”

End Notes

Heyo! So I've been working on this for a hot minute (aka a month or two off and on between many a distraction) strictly because of my love for the Red Sheep in a flock of Black Sheep-- Jason Todd--and the acknowledgement that, while his animated movie was and is my favorite DC animated movie, he won't be added into the main universe of the DCAU any time soon (as was further proven with Batman: Hush, which I love-hated).

Anywho, this is my response to that. Basically it's a variation of the animated film universe where Under the Red Hood counted as one in the main Batfam line of movies. It's ridiculous, and very much Jason centric, but I also get to play with a bunch of other sidekicks I know and love.

Not meant to be taken too seriously and will lead into a lot of ridiculousness (including quite possibly a pretty obvious FNAF game-style storyline, for all y'all nerds out there). I'm also open to suggestions within the realm of possibility if anybody wants another hero or two to make an appearance. The characters in the tags are the only characters I can think of at present involved in what's been worked on.

Hope you enjoyed this and hope you'll read on!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!