



betting warmth against the cold

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betting warmth against the cold

by [goldkirk](#)

Summary

It's Tim's first Christmas as an official member of the Wayne family. He's struggling with some mixed feelings and old wounds, but luckily Bruce and his brothers are there to walk him through it.

Notes

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

I hope we'll be better than the past

Chapter Notes

Typed this on my tiny phone in a parking lot and basement, so any typos I haven't caught will be edited out later because I'm not going to try to edit line by line on an iPhone SE. Thanks for your understanding!

It's about to be Tim's first Christmas as an official part of the Wayne family, and boy is *that* a weird sentence to think to himself.

Tim, who's always already had parents and a house, even if those two things didn't often mix. Tim, who never in a million years thought he'd end up in the foster care system. Tim, who had been watching Wayne Manor from afar for *years*, always aching a little for the easy way they seemed to all get along, even during the worst of Jason's rocky first year after getting taken in. *Tim's* part of the Manor now, in legality and spirit, even if not in name.

"Penny for your thoughts, Tim?"

Tim turns away from the windowpane, wiggling around on the squishy old loveseat cushions, to see Bruce walking into the library, smiling.

"Hi Bruce," Tim says quietly. "Just...watching the snow. Thinking about how much things have changed."

"Mm," says Bruce. He sits down next to Tim, giving him space, and tucks the fleece throw a little more snugly around Tim's toes before patting them precisely twice. Tim's lip twitch up into a smile as he looks back out at the falling snow.

"There have definitely been a large number of changes for all of us this year," Bruce says quietly, now looking out the window as well. "It would be a lot for anyone to deal with. Are you okay?"

Tim sighs.

"Yeah," he says. "Nothing's wrong or anything." Tim spends a few long moments picking at some loose yarn on the blanket's edging, picking, pulling, *twisting*. Bruce gently catches Tim's fingers in his own warm, calloused hand. Tim looks up for a second before staring at his lap.

"But are you okay?" Bruce prods, again.

"I'm fine," Tim says, a bit of frustration creeping into his tone. "It's not like—I'm doing fine, okay, being Robin is *awesome*, my sessions with Dinah are good, everything in life is going

really really well right now. Like, shockingly great.”

“That’s all good, and I’m glad,” Bruce says. “But Tim. I’m not asking about your life. I’m asking about *you*.”

Tim doesn’t know why this makes him so angry and longing at the same time. He wants to shout Bruce all the way out of the room, just *absolutely lay into him* until he backs off. But he also wants someone to ask about him like this, to not just let it go when Tim says he’s fine. Tim knows it’s stupid and childish of him, to think and act like this. It’s not the first time in recent months that Tim’s dealt with this *frustrating* dichotomy of emotional combos, and it hasn’t gotten any easier each time it’s happened.

“*Why*, ” Tim grouses, narrowly keeping in the “—*do you care?* ” that his mouth wants to tack onto the end of it. That’s not fair to Bruce. All he’s done since he’s met Tim is show over and over again how much he cares. Why is Tim so suspicious? There are mountains of evidence of all the times that Bruce has genuinely wanted to know about Tim’s wellbeing and taken Tim seriously.

It’d be nice if Tim’s brain could get the memo.

“Because I’m a little worried about you, kiddo,” Bruce says. He brushes some of Tim’s flyaway strands behind his ear, fingers feather-light against Tim’s cheek. “You’ve been pretty quiet today. Also, Dick threatened to lick my pancakes in the morning if I didn’t sort out whatever’s going on with you before the movie marathon.”

Tim lets out a sharp little breath that’s two notches down from a laugh. He can’t help tilting his cheek oh-so-slightly into Bruce’s touch—the man’s knuckles still haven’t left Tim’s cheekbone and continue rubbing small circles even now.

“I’m okay,” he says, voice smaller than he would like. Tim clears his voice, tries again. “I’m...coping admirably.”

Bruce laughs, a quiet, real sound. Nothing like his public persona.

“You listen to Jason’s dramatic speeches too much,” Bruce says. He moves his hands to cup Tim’s face on both sides, thumbs sweeping over Tim’s cheeks once, twice. “You want to come over here and talk about it?”

Tim hesitates for several seconds. He’s good on his own. He likes space. That’s why he came to the corner of the library in the first place. But he loves Bruce hugs more than almost everything, too. Nothing makes him feel as safe. And it’s not like sitting by himself has helped him actually feel any better, so he might as well try to follow Dinah’s advice and actually talk through things with someone else for once. It’s hard to remember he’s not on his own for everything sometimes. He doesn’t want to bother other people for things he should be able to handle on his own, especially when he knows almost everything passes with time anyway.

But today is Christmas Eve. He’s tired of feeling confused.

Tim scoots across the gap, and Bruce reaches for him, helping Tim twist around and settle down in Bruce's lap like a much smaller kid. Bruce pulls his knees up, settles into the loveseat more firmly. Tim leans into Bruce's chest a little more heavily and spends a couple of minutes just listening to Bruce's heartbeat under his ear. Slow. Even. Not leaving anytime soon.

Tim appreciates how Bruce is okay with just sitting and not pushing for Tim to talk. He loves Jason and Dick, but neither of them are as content in silence as Bruce always seems to be. They want to tackle things and get them resolved. But sometimes Tim's just not ready, or it's not the right situation.

Bruce seemed to understand pretty early on that it's easier for Tim to talk when he's not in a face-on conversation, so somehow Tim ends up in the passenger seat of Bruce's car a *lot*. There's been an interesting uptick in the number of errands run in the Wayne household since Tim came to stay permanently, but Tim isn't about to let on that he's noticed.

Tim closes his eyes in Bruce's hold, basking in the warmth of his foster father and the blanket they now share. Bruce is like a furnace most days.

"I know I'm supposed to not care about them," Tim whispers finally. "But I miss my mom and dad."

"You're allowed to feel however you need to," Bruce chides him immediately. "They're your *parents*, regardless of how good or bad of a job they did of it. It's okay to miss them. They're not evil, and it's the holidays. I'm sorry they still haven't called yet."

"No, see, it's stupid," Tim says. "They do this. I'm not even surprised. It's—I miss them, I miss them so much. But they hardly even come home for Christmas or Hanukkah. I don't understand why I miss them when they're *never even here*."

"They're still your parents," Bruce says again. "It's normal. You want them to love you still and spend time with you. There's nothing wrong with that."

"But I want it to *stop*," Tim says. "I'm tired of being confused. I just want to enjoy the holidays."

"I know, buddy," Bruce murmurs gently, pressing his nose into the top of Tim's head "I know it's really hard. You're doing a great job."

"Thanks," Tim sighs.

"Do you want me to try to get in contact with them through a couple contacts on our end?"

Tim thinks for a minute. He has no doubt Bruce would be able to find Tim's parents pretty quickly if he set his mind and resources to it. He's Batman. And Tim is Robin now, with all the tools that title carries with it—he could probably find them too, if he worked at it for a few hours. But...

“No,” says Tim, so quietly. His eyes water—he guesses with all the business of the holidays, Alfred hasn’t been dusting the library quite as regularly. “They can—they can call me or not. I need to stop waiting for them so much. I have a different home now. There’s actually people this year.”

Bruce squeezes him tightly for a few moments.

“Mrs. Mac always goes to visit her family over in Ireland for the end of the year,” Tim whispers, turning into Bruce’s neck like he’s telling a secret. And maybe he is, really. “So even she wouldn’t be at the house either. But she usually left me some tupperware containers to reheat for the big day. And she’d *always* leave a really fun pop-up card with some kind of foreign money in it.”

“She sounds like a nice woman.”

“Yeah. But—” Tim sniffs for real now. *Goddamn it*, he thinks. *Not again. I go years never really crying and now that I’m with the coolest family in Gotham, I have to turn into a leaky faucet? How is this fair?*

“What, kiddo?” Bruce murmurs.

“It was so *empty*,” Tim says. “The *stupid* house. That stupid—it was so empty, with the stupid giant Christmas tree—we didn’t even put it up ourselves, Mom hired someone to do it while I was at school or something. It was gorgeous. But it was so boring. What’s the point of having a tree or a fire if there’s no one to watch them?” Tim takes a couple of deep breaths. “I used to. Um.”

Bruce makes an encouraging noise.

“After I started taking pictures of you guys,” Tim begins, slowly. “And I got pretty good at...sneaking around, and stuff. Sometimes I’d climb the trees behind your house, when I was too tired of not seeing anyone at home. And I’d watch you guys in the kitchen, or one of the lounges. Took a few pictures of your tree. I hadn’t really seen homemade ornaments before. Your tree looked so much more fun.” He sniffs. “I printed a couple of the photos and taped them up by my bed around Christmas and put some battery string lights around them so I could see it all when I went to bed. It was nice.”

Bruce sniffs, too, then.

“Last year was the best Christmas of my *life*,” Tim says. “I couldn’t believe that you all hung out with each other for two days straight. Like, not just for presents. You eat a bunch of meals, and relax in the same room, and you play games.”

“And *you* do too, now,” Bruce says. He pulls back enough to smile at Tim. “You’re family. No take backs. You’re never going back to being alone that way ever again. I hope you know that. No matter what, I’ll never let that happen. You will *always* have people, Tim, even if something happens to me.”

Tim shudders. “Let’s not think about that.”

“Okay, buddy.” Bruce shifts under Tim, getting a firmer grip. “You think you’re ready to hang out in the lounge with some of Alfred’s fresh cocoa? Or do you need a little time still?”

“Will you stay too?” Tim asks.

Bruce laughs. “I wouldn’t miss it for anything.”

Tim snakes his arms around Bruce’s neck tightly, burying his face in the man’s shoulder.

“Okay.”

Bruce stands and hauls Tim up with him. “Boy, Timmy. You’re getting bigger. That’s a lot of muscle you’ve packed on. You’re not as much of a pipsqueak as I remember.”

“Hey!” Tim says, pretending outrage. He kicks Bruce in the ribs with one heel. “Just because I’m smaller than Jason, who is built like a tank, might I remind you, does not mean—”

“There you are,” Dick says, relief dripping from his voice as he pokes his head around the library doorway. “I was worried.”

“Hi Dick,” says Tim. He lets go of Bruce long enough to wave.

“Hey, baby bird,” Dick says, leaning over to peck a kiss on Tim’s forehead. “What’ve you been up to?”

“I was watching the snow,” Tim says. Bruce doesn’t mention anything about their talk.

“Hm, good idea, but better done from the warm lounge bay window with warm drinks.” Dick sticks his arms out and makes a gimme gesture with his hands, fake-glaring at Bruce. “Hand over the child, mister. You’ve gotten to have your fun for long enough, the rest of us want a turn.”

“I’m *right here*,” Tim protests, while Bruce scowls right back, saying “I’ve only had him for a few minutes, I want more time with him too!”

Jason chooses that moment to strol around the corner, hands stuck casually in the pocket of one of Bruce’s old college hoodies. Tim wonders how long Jason has been just standing out of sight and biding his time. Probably the whole conversation, knowing Jason.

“You know,” Jason says. “We can solve the whole problem by just all being in the same room. Or couch. Everybody gets a piece of Timmers.” He takes the opportunity to forcibly haul Tim away from Bruce’s arms.

Tim squirms around till he’s holding on to Jason like a monkey.

“Good point,” Bruce says.”

“Fair,” Dick agrees.

“Glad that’s settled, then,” Jason drawls. “Now I’m gonna steal Tim for a hot second and we’ll meet you in the lounge.”

He turns and walks off with Tim, and Tim can't help laughing at Dick and Bruce's exchange of wry glances behind Jason's back.

"Should've known," Dick says mournfully, looping an arm over Bruce's shoulders.

Bruce just chuckles and pulls Dick into a full hug before suddenly stopping and tossing his son over his shoulder in a fireman's carry.

"Bruce!" Dick squawks in surprise. "B! *Dad*, put me down!"

"No can do, chum," Bruce says, grinning. "If I can't have my youngest, I'll just have to settle for my eldest. You were the first one I learned to do this with after all."

Dick grumbles, but doesn't make Bruce drop him like they all know he could.

"You want to be dropped on the couch or an armchair?" Bruce asks.

"Couch, I guess," Dick says, resigned.

"Done." Bruce strides off down the hall, quickly overtaking Jason and Tim, and a few seconds after he and Dick vanish into the lounge a stream of high-pitched shrieks and laughter echo down the hall.

"Tickle attack," Jason says, solemnly. "Moment of silence for Dickster's dignity."

Tim laughs.

They carry on down the hallway at a leisurely pace. Tim relaxes more, lays his head on Jason's shoulder. They're closer in height now than they were last Christmas, but Jason is still plenty big to hold Tim without much awkwardness.

"Jason," Tim starts, softly.

"Hm?"

"How do you not feel guilty for enjoying your time with someone *else* on the holidays? Like, I know your situation is different because your mom died. But...do you ever feel kind of like you shouldn't be just...so happy now, when you couldn't be with your old family?"

Jason frowns a little.

"Sometimes," he acknowledges. "The first couple years I was living with Bruce, I used to feel guilty that I was so happy, when my parents had had such shifty lives. And then I'd *also* feel bad because I was happier with Bruce than with my mom, even though I knew she worked really hard to try to make things as good as she could with too little money. It's not the quite same for you, but—you're allowed to be as happy as you want, okay? Your parents, it doesn't matter if they're happy or sad without you this season. They didn't care enough to see if *you're* happy so far."

Tim shakes his head, wanting to argue on principle but unable to come up with anything to really say.

“It’ll get easier,” Jason adds. “Time is gonna pass, and you’re going to get used to having other people to help, and being able to be young, and being happy.”

“Promise?” Tim asks.

“Promise.” Jason hikes him up a little higher. “I’ll never lie to you, Timmers.”

“Okay,” Tim says. He kisses Jason’s ear. “I love you so much. Thank you for not leaving me alone last year. You’re super annoying, just for the record, but I’m glad you’re my big brother.”

“Shut up, dude, you’re gonna make me cry.” Jason pokes Tim in the side, and he shrieks for a second. “Want to go gang up on Bruce in a tickle fight? If we start, Dick’ll get in on it in a second, and B can’t take down all of us at once.”

“Let’s go,” Tim says happily. Jason starts to sprint, quiet as only a Bat can be while flying down a hallway.

Things aren’t quite perfect. And he’s still a little confused, and a little hurt, and a little sad. But he’s a *lot* happy, and warmer than he’s been for most of the holidays he’s ever had, and all in all?

Tim thinks it’s going to be a pretty good Christmas.

a mended heart, by a thousand stitches

Chapter Summary

It's Christmas day. The family attempts a new tradition, like they do every year. Pokemon, pancakes, and perfectly planned presents occur. Tim gets reminded that he does not need his parents' approval to be worthy of love, and Jason's protective streak goes out the window when he has shenanigans to plan—unfortunately for Tim. But all turns out well, in the end.

Chapter Notes

I typed most of this on my phone again in the back of a minivan with children asking nonstop about computers and how they record and process via time and why clocks are important, and also it is Very Late At Night, so please forgive any typos or weird bits. I'll clean up both chapters later after a good sleep haha.

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

He wakes up warm, tangled up in three thick blankets, and wedged snugly in the corner where the two walls met behind his mattress. Tim lets out a contented sigh, burrows his face little further into the nest he often creates in his sleep.

“Timbit,” a voice whispers, *right* in his ear, and Tim jerks backwards. His eyes shoot open as his head hits the solid drywall with a painful *thunk*, and oh, *look*. There’s Jason, face inches from Tim’s.

“Oh god,” Tim wheezes.

“Shit!” hisses Jason, sounding actually rather sorry. “Didn’t mean to scare you like that. I was trying to keep it quiet.”

Tim shoves up from his tangle of covers and scrubs at one eye. He sighs. “...Why?”

“It’s Christmas, dummy,” Jason says, pulling at various blankets in an effort to help Tim wiggle free.

“And that’s supposed to explain you watching me sleep *how*, exactly?”

“We need to go wake up Dick. I got up stupid early for this, Timbo, and we are going to surprise *Dick* for once if it kills us.”

“Um,” says Tim, struggling to string enough words together to mount any solid protest. Jason drags him out of bed by one arm.

“Too many years,” Jason mutters darkly. “Too many years, I have laid in my perfectly good bed in this stupidly large house and been woken up by that hobbledehoy launching himself on top of me like he’s three instead of twenty-three. I won’t stand for it.”

“*Hobbledehoy?*” Tim echoes, incredulously.

“Shut up,” Jason says kindly. They stop in front of Dick’s door. “Listen,” Jason says, leaning down a little and putting both hands on Tim’s shoulders. “We have probably two more minutes before Bruce’s Dad-Bat senses start tingling, so we gotta get on the same page fast.”

Tim nods, desperately trying to suppress his sleepy yawn and look at least mostly with it.

“We will open the door slowly,” Jason says, one hand sweeping in a broad gesture. “I oiled the hinges last night, so it won’t squeak. “Then, I’m going to sneak up to the foot of the bed and get ready to jump, and you’re going to go up by Dick’s head. When I give the signal, we both jump onto Dick and try to hold him down while we tickle his weak spots.”

This is a *terrible* plan. Horrible. They’re all vigilantes. Dick is a world-class acrobat with years of ingrained attack reactions. *Oh my god, we’re going to die*, Tim thinks.

“Got it,” he says. “What’s the signal?”

“I’m gonna yell ‘ Surprise, motherfucker!’” Jason says cheerfully. “Dick won’t know what hit him. *Trust me.*”

“SURPRISE, MOTHERFUCKER,” Jason hollers in a *terrible* imitation of the meme, and they *leap*.

There are twin battle cries that Wonder Woman herself would shed a tear at, and then there’s a frankly *godawful* amount of shrieking, several *thwacks*, four seconds of uncontrollable laughter, and then an absolute *marvel* of a bodily *yeet*, and Tim is flying through the air just long enough to think *okay, so this could have gone a bit better, probably* before he hits and *bounces*.

Bruce skids through the doorway just in time for his alarmed “What the *fuck*,” to coincide with Tim’s odd little *hrnk!* noise as he ricochets *right* off of Dick’s firmly-inflated exercise ball and straight into the mahogany dresser.

Jason groans where he lies upside-down, dangling halfway off of Dick’s mattress.

“*Timmy!*” Dick practically squeaks, and scrambles out of bed in Tim’s last-known direction.

Bruce hauls Jason upright and steadies him by the upper arms, quickly surveying his *truly delightful angel* of a second child for any obvious signs of damage.

“Report?” Bruce rumbles.

“M good, B,” Jason sighs. “Sorry. Just a little bruised.”

“Hm,” says Bruce, and he turns to where Dick has scooped Tim up and perched him on the other side of the bed. “Tim?”

There’s a moment of hesitation, just long enough for Bruce to start getting concerned, and then:

“That...was *awesome*,” Tim whispers, a little dazed. “Dick. *Dick*. Throw me again.”

“Are you *nuts*,” Dick growls.

Bruce can’t help the relieved laugh that escapes.

“Was it really *that* fun?” Jason asks, brows furrowing. “Cuz if—”

“*No*,” Bruce says firmly. And: “Is he concussed at all?”

“Doesn’t seem like it,” Dick sighs. “God, Tim. I’m so sorry.”

“It was my fault,” Jason offers.

“It usually is,” Bruce agrees lightly. He ruffles Jason’s hair into an even worse mess of curly bedhead. “Come on, gang. If we’re all up anyway, we might as well start getting breakfast ready before any of you come up with more ill-advised schemes. It’d be nice for us all to make it through at least *one* holiday this year without any moderate to severe injuries, hm?”

“Yes, B,” all three boys chorus.

“But seriously,” Tim tries again, while Dick gives him a piggy-back ride down the long hallway a few paces behind Bruce and Jason. “B. Bruce. Can we add ball-launching to training? Because I think it would really benefit our—”

“No, Tim,” Dick says firmly. “*No* launching off exercise balls.”

“They do it on American Ninja Warrior all the time,” Tim points out.

“They’re supposed to make it across them, not launch themselves off!”

“Same thing. C’mon, Bruce, it’s so fun, please?”

Bruce breathes in for several long seconds and exhales just *slightly* above a sigh. “I’ll *think about it*,” he says, in the *don’t press me right now or it’ll be a NO* tone that all parents seem to magically possess.

Dick’s groans echo all the way down to the kitchen.

“Master Dick,” Alfred says, in an exasperated tone. “If you cannot avoid burning yourself another time on that skillet, you’ll have to be banished over by your father for the rest of the cooking.”

“Not the island of shame!” Dick exclaims in mock horror. “Please, Alfie, anything but that. Surely you wouldn’t put me in the same category as B. Not for this.”

Bruce grunts into his coffee mug.

“Refrain from being quite so reckless with the cooking equipment, and perhaps we can work out a compromise,” Alfred says, expertly flipping two pancakes at once.

“But I’m *dancing*,” Dick whines, spinning in a circle to emphasize this point as his oversized sweater jangles in several spots.

“That thing is a monstrosity and you’re not even in time with the songs,” Jason scoffs. “Tim! Your Bulbasaur!”

“Oh no!” Tim dives for the third skillet, sliding his spatula under the funfetti Bulbasaur as quickly and smoothly as he can. He breathes a sigh of relief when it lands safely on its uncooked side, only very slightly over-browned.

“Thanks, Jason,” Tim says, returning the fist-bump Jason throws his way.

“No problem, little bro,” Jason says. He carefully adds the finishing touches to his hand-poured Bat-symbol, then settles back on a stool to let the batter cook some.

When the Waynes had said they were starting a new tradition of making pancakes on Christmas morning, Tim imagined stacks of fluffy golden hotcakes like he always saw on the Bisquick boxes at the grocery store, or the flatter, slightly burnt imitations that he’d tried to make a few times with the help of Mrs. Mac.

Turns out, the Wayne family meant a pancake-cooking *challenge*. They had colored batter. They had sprinkles. They had a million toppings and add-ins and shape-formers, and Jason in particular had done a fair amount of research on what shapes were easiest to make out of runny batter. Bruce clearly had researched how to get the timing right when pouring a pancake design that had multiple layers, but unfortunately his usual Kitchen Curse kicked in. After the first minor fire broke out, Alfred gently banned Bruce back to his usual spot at the island and made him the official judge for the contest instead.

“Alfred’s just gonna win anyway,” Dick complains at that, while painstakingly pouring out some of the yellow batter to make a sort-of star, sort-of-Blubber-impersonation on top of his bubbling green Christmas tree. “We can’t hope to beat him at *cooking*.”

“Not with *that* attitude you can’t,” Jason scolds. “Buck up. Who are you, Squidward? Bruce, Dick is doing a *pessimism*. Call Zatanna.”

“Hm,” is all Alfred says, inscrutably.

Bruce and Tim laugh, share a fond glance behind the backs of the other three. In the end, Bruce calls a four-way tie.

“You’re all winners in my heart,” he says firmly, around a mouthful of chocolate chip and nutella pancake.

“That’s so *sappy*,” Dick laughs. “Who are you and what did you do with Batman?”

“You’re going to give me hives, B-man,” says Jason, but his smile ruins his half-hearted protest.

Tim just leans further into Bruce’s side, nestling into the side-arm hug Bruce pulled him into as soon as he sat down. He offers Bruce his crisped funfetti Zubat—or at least. His attempt at a Zubat, anyway.

“Reminded me of you,” he mumbles around a mouthful of blueberry pancake and syrup.

“Thank you Tim,” Bruce says quietly. “I can’t wait to try it.”

Tim thinks back over all the times his parents brushed aside his cookies, or toast he tried to get browned just the way they liked it, or tea blends he’d researched and mixed himself based on the places they’d traveled. Thinks of Bruce, now, willing to eat and compliment Tim’s slightly-burnt attempt at a pancake that looks more like a golden-brown preschool drawing of North America.

Yeah, Tim thinks, listening to his family buzzing around the kitchen, warm and full of laughter and the sound of forks clinking against plates. *This...is good.*

Tim gifts Jason a newly-released PS4 controller with special red chrome accents and a shirt that says *Momma Bird* on it as a joke (Jason likes it unironically, and yanks it on right then and there). He gives Alfred a book of coupons for things like *good for one free laundry day off* and *will water entire greenhouse for a day*, and so on. Dick gets a large, soft stuffed circus elephant that Tim had ordered off Etsy to look *just* like Dick had described Zitka, which earns him a long hug and a few teary thank-yous.

And Bruce...

Tim is having massive second thoughts about giving Bruce his gift now. The man had been so good to Tim over the past year, sure. And logically, Tim knew that Bruce didn’t seem like he would ever just dismiss something Tim had done out of hand. Even if he didn’t like it. Lord knows Tim’s seen Bruce diplomatically thank people for things a million times in his public persona.

But this is a big risk, Tim thinks. He’s tried this before. It always hurts. And maybe it won’t this time. But maybe it will, and sure, he can live through that kind of pain, but it’s so much harder now than it used to be. Getting tastes of how much better and more relaxed and calm things can be make it all feel so much worse now when something goes wrong, like Tim’s tolerance for bad moments got completely reset. He hates that, some days.

Maybe it'll hurt. Maybe Bruce won't like it. But maybe he will, and Dinah keeps telling Tim to work on being more vulnerable—Tim snorts at that, and regularly quips back that he's vulnerable in a city every night with people like the Joker trying to kill or maim him for fun. (Dinah is not impressed. "Stop deflecting, Tim," is a common refrain during Tim's Tuesday afternoons.) But Jason and Dick, too—they've both reassured Tim that they think this is a good idea, and they know Bruce pretty well by now, right? If they're so sure, Tim should at least *try*.

"Bruce," Tim starts, hands behind his back as he steps up to the armchair Bruce has melted into by the fire.

"Mm. What's up, buddy?" Bruce smiles at Tim, a little sleepily. He pats the arm of the chair, moving his own elbow aside so Tim has room to perch. But Tim shifts his weight awkwardly from one leg to the other, glances at the old grandfather clock, the fire, Bruce's knee.

"I have something for you," Tim says, wishing his throat didn't feel so tight all of a sudden. "Um. I made it, and. It's not that great, but I thought maybe you'd think it was kind of cool. You'll see. Here." He shoves a square object wrapped in gold paper and a black bow at Bruce, and hugs his ribs tightly.

He wants nothing more than to run for another room, but contrary to Tim's wishes, his feet are rooted to the spot and his eyes can't seem to stray from Bruce's face now that the deed is done.

"Thank you, Tim," Bruce says with one of his real smiles, looking at Tim like he means it. Tim bites his lip once, twice. Firmly clicks his teeth shut and forces himself to not gnaw on the inside of his cheek.

Bruce carefully unwraps it, lays the paper and ribbon on the floor by his chair. Opens the book. Tim closes his eyes when he sees Bruce go very, very still.

Bad idea, Tim's mind whispers. Bad idea, bad idea, bad idea. You should've just gone with a tie. How can you mess up a tie?

"Tim," Bruce says, and Tim keeps his eyes firmly shut. "These are amazing." His voice sounds a little surprised, a lot warm. But Tim can't—he still can't—

"Tim, buddy," Bruce says, more softly now, and there's a hand wrapping around Tim's elbow. His breath hitches. "I love it," Bruce goes on. "Hear me? Thank you for this Tim, these photos are amazing. You really have an eye for artistic shots. I don't think I've ever seen pictures of our nightlife that look this great. You put this all together yourself?"

"Yeah," Tim whispers, finally opening his eyes.

Bruce's gaze flickers across Tim's face, assessing, strategizing. He's still smiling.

"C'mere," Bruce says, standing now. He puts an arm around Tim, picks up the photo book with his other hand. "I have just the right place for this."

Tim sees Dick and Jason watching them in his peripheral vision, but his brain is still in a looping circuit trying to accept that Bruce liked the gift. No brain power left over to wonder.

Bruce walks them over to one of the fancy display tables ringing the lounge, with old silver candle holders and several photo albums Tim's been guided through by Alfred over the past year. Bruce settles the photo book in the center of one of the doilies, right in between—

“Are those—how did you—are those the books I made for my parents?” Tim asks. His throat isn't just *tight*. There's a goddamn boa constrictor squeezing the living daylight out of his windpipe now.

“Merry Christmas, Tim,” Jason says from over on one of the couches. “I've been hiding them for *months*. You don't make it easy, you nosy little ninja sneak.”

“But—” Tim starts.

Bruce pulls him into a hug. “Jason and I went out and checked out every Goodwill we could last year till we found the right one,” he says. “Did you really have to go halfway across Gotham to drop them off?”

Tim laughs wetly.

“All of your photos are so good, Tim,” Bruce murmurs, one arm tight around Tim's shoulderblades, one hand massaging the base of his skull. “I'm sorry your parents didn't take the time to see that. I'd love to see more of your photos sometime, if that's okay with you. Maybe we can go to one of the state parks in the spring, and find some good landscapes for you to shoot?”

“Yeah, okay,” Tim laughs through his building tears. “That sounds really good. I'd—I'd be happy to show you. Sometime.”

“Whatever you're comfortable with,” Bruce reassures. “When you're ready.”

“And *I* expect you to do my graduation photos this year,” Jason chimes in. “I'll pay you in M&Ms and skateboard wheels.”

“Hey, quiet in the peanut gallery,” Bruce fake-scolds. “We're having a *moment* over here.”

“Yeah, Jason, they're having a moment,” Dick says, grin clear in his voice, and there's a distinctly-Jason-sounding squawk a second later.

Tim's face is buried in Bruce's hand-knit sweater, courtesy of Alfred as always, and his eyes are puffy, and his throat is making those shameful little choking noises that always happen when he needs to cry but can't quite do it at the moment, and he's a little bit embarrassed but a whole lot loved. And if this is what it's like to have a family? All the crazy time together, the acceptance, the being there for each other just because, forgiving and laughing and supporting each other through the days? Tim can forget his parents for a minute. Forget the wishes he still has every day that they'll come back, that they'll praise his hard work, that they'll want to go do something like hike through a park or go grocery shopping with him.

He has love tonight. He has value, and hugs, and heckling, and a place he fits. A place where he's not just tolerated—he's *liked*. He's needed, he's *wanted*.

It's enough.

Chapter End Notes

I hope all of you have had a lovely happy Christmas if you celebrate it! And for all you Jewish pals out there, Happy Hanukkah, I hope it's blessed for u.

End Notes

TIM YOU DESERVE TO BE HAPPY WITHOUT GUILT SO HELP ME GOD.

Merry Christmas to everyone who celebrates it! I hope that it's joyful and fun for those of you who are having a good holiday, and blessedly quick for those of you who are in hard situations. Love you, please remember to drink something, eat something, and take any meds you need!

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