

Latchkey

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Category: [Gen](#)

Fandoms: [Batman - All Media Types](#), [Batman \(Comics\)](#), [Red Robin \(Comics\)](#), [Robin \(Comics\)](#).






Characters: [Tim Drake](#), [Bruce Wayne](#), [Jason Todd](#), [Dick Grayson](#), [Alfred Pennyworth](#), [more to be added as the story progresses](#), [Ace the Bat-Hound](#)

Additional Tags: [Tim Drake-centric](#), [Kid Tim Drake](#), [Listen I play fast and loose with canon](#), [Bruce is charmed by Tim's genius and stupid brain](#), [Tim Drake Needs a Hug](#), [Child Neglect](#), [Emotional/Psychological Abuse](#), [Hurt/Comfort](#), [Warnings will be posted as necessary with each chapter](#), [Batfamily \(DCU\)](#), [none character deaths with left found family](#), [in this house we love and appreciate therapy lessons and trauma recovery](#), [and also proper care and keeping of children](#), [Tim Drake Gets a Hug](#), [Sibling Bonding](#), [Bruce Wayne is a Good Parent](#), [Stalker Tim Drake](#), [You think DICK is a mama hen? get ready for not-dead Jason Todd!!!!](#), [Jewish Bruce Wayne](#), [Jewish Tim Drake](#), [lots and lots of comfort](#), [Dissociation](#), [CPTSD](#), [DPDR](#)

Language: English

Series: Part 1 of [Shutterbug](#)

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Latchkey

by [goldkirk](#)

Summary

or, How Tim Drake Found A Family, Became A Photojournalist, Learned To Love Coffee, and Grew Up, not necessarily in that order.

Tim Drake is thirteen, runs the famous BatWatch blog that has spiraled hilariously out of control, has absentee parents that suit his purposes just fine, is training himself to run the streets at night, and is doing absolutely peachy, thank you.

Alfred and Jason disagree, and get Dick and Bruce involved in figuring out their weird nextdoor neighbor kid's life. Everything goes uphill from there.

Notes

For the purposes of this fic, Tim is 13, Jason is newly 16, and they both attend Gotham Academy right now. Dick is in Bludhaven, coming home to visit regularly. Damian, Cass, and Steph will join the family in future stories.

we're outside and free from all tethers

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is from Latchkey Kids by Silversun Pickups.

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

Tim is about to *die*. He's gonna die. And his camera will be broken, and his *neck* will be broken, and he won't have gotten the stupid blog post up in time to make tonight worth it, and it's all his own fault.

When Tim started the blog, he never in a million years had intended for it to turn into something like this. But one thing just led to another, and somewhere along the road Tim crossed a couple lines, and the world didn't end, and now. Now he's regretting just about every life choice he's made. Ever. How the hell did he convince himself running around Gotham at night was a reasonable idea? He took precautions, sure, but those only get one so far.

Normal cities, Tim complains regularly to Ives during their video calls, don't have *actual villains* running around who don't care about collateral damage. (Ives always laughs, and tells Tim he knows he loves it, really.)

Please, God, Tim thinks half-heartedly. *If I make it through tonight, I'll give up video games for a week. I'll stop the blog, someone else can take it over who's an Actual Adult or something, maybe I can blackmail Nightwing into doing it, I'm too young to die.*

All in all, tonight is shaping up to be a pretty normal Tuesday in what Tim's life has somehow become.

He's running across the edge of the rooftop at frankly breakneck speed, and—okay so this may not have been his greatest idea ever, but listen—it's not like he *planned*—

Tim catches and strangles the noise in his throat just in time to avoid shrieking as Killer Croc's head and shoulders crash over the edge of the next building over. Under Croc's claws, old concrete chunks have begun flying around in the air.

Tim hits the deck, flinging himself sideways off the roof ledge down onto the rough sandpapery surface a few feet below. Scrambles back into the nearest corner as fast as he can, clutching the camera like it's going to be his One Great Saving Weapon. Against a crocodile monster. Because that makes sense.

God, he hopes Killer Croc hasn't seen him in that moment. He's really not planning to be human lunch meat tonight, thanks. He's got a spelling test in the morning and if he misses it his grade is going to go down by six percent.

From the sounds drifting across the gap, Killer Croc is now definitely smashing up the other rooftop like it's made of toothpicks. Tim has no idea what's got him this riled up tonight, but he really hopes that Batman, or *anyone* really, comes soon and—

Wow, think of the devil and he appears, Tim supposes.

There's the ever-so-faint *chink-UNK* of a grapple sticking into place, and then a loud *THWUMP* of boots on hard flesh. Tim winces. He can only imagine how much of a jolt it must be to slam into something as hard and solid as Killer Croc at high speed. But at least Croc is distracted now, which means it's Tim's chance to move.

One hand on his camera, one hand shoving himself away from the sandpapery roof surface, Tim is up and scrambling in half a second. He ducks behind the air conditioning unit he'd been originally aiming for when he dove off the ledge. Safely tucked behind it for the moment, Tim lifts his camera to his eye and aims--just so, there's an art to it, of course, he's gotta frame the shot at a pleasing angle, *Yeah, like that*, he thinks. Time slows down around him, Tim breathing slowly, Killer Croc and Batman tangled in a flurry of swipes and dodges on the adjacent roof. They're weaving around each other, the bat symbol is flashing on the ever-present clouds overhead, and if Tim's memory is correct, Robin should be sweeping onto the scene in three, two...there.

Tim's finger snaps the button down, then releases. The shutter clicks, right as Croc lets out a particularly irritated sound that just. Ricochets around the whole area, and man, Tim did not miss Killer Croc, not one bit, Croc drives him almost as mad as Clayface does on the nights he's running loose around Gotham. If Tim has to scrub mud spatters off his boots one more time, he's going to sue for the cost of cleaning supplies and emotional damages. Or something. Can you sue a villain as a civilian? Maybe not the best idea, since he'd have to explain why he was close enough to the situation to actually get Clayface's mud on him. Tim files that topic away for later thought. Right now, he's got to snap a few more shots of the fight.

Batman and Robin make quick work of taking down Killer Croc after that. A well-timed distraction by Robin and a quick net shot, and Croc is tangled up enough that they're able to tranq him. They secure Croc to the roof a bit more tightly, then slip away to a nearby roof to watch from the shadows as the villain is carefully removed from the area.

By the time they leave the scene, Timothy Drake is long gone, vanished off into the city again like he was never on the rooftop at all.

The *BatWatch* blog has a fresh new post with some of the author's best action shots yet, and Agent A sits in the batcave with a thermos of tea, scrolling through his family's nightly adventures with a raised eyebrow. Then the Batmobile is roaring in and drifting into park

with the theatrics that Batman loves, and A closes the window, turning to deal with whatever bruises, wounds, and joint pains his strange little family has accumulated this time.

Less than three miles away, Timothy Drake sleeps in his room with a still-open window. He's sprawled out across his bed still half in his nighttime gear. One boot clings to the foot dangling halfway off the mattress. Tim dreams about his parents coming home early for once, and finding him gone, off and running in the city, and jolts awake with fear for a moment. Then he rolls over and drifts off, and sleeps like the dead until his alarm goes off a few hours later and he's chucking it across the room.

As it turns out, Tim should have just slept in and not bothered to come to school after all, because *somebody* decided that today would be the perfect day to start trying to elementally attacking half the city, and Tim's school was now an icebox. Literally.

Thanks, Gotham.

Another day, another villain, Tim types in the text box. Coming to you live from daytime Gotham, for once, I have a special update today! A Literal Warlock has been spotted in northern Gotham and has currently frozen at least three city blocks with solid ice, trapping hundreds of people inside buildings. People like his classmates, who were currently mostly headed for the cafeteria, figuring being frozen in with food was better than just sitting in a classroom getting cold and pretending to study bond angles.

Tim pauses to blow on his hands, trying to warm up his fingers a little. There are some scattered Twitter reports that he's also set a few places on fire while chanting in a language no one understands at the moment, and also that Batman has been spotted on a couple buildings now, but waiting on official confirmation for both of those facts before I'll list them for sure.

The ice, however, needs no official confirmation, seeing as I'm one of the ones currently stuck inside a giant ice cube. Will update more as things develop.

Tim hits the post button and sighs. Shoving his notebook out of the way, he kicks his feet up on the desk and tips his head back over the cheap plastic chair. If he's stuck in here, might as well take the opportunity to catch up on some of his frankly outrageous sleep debt. It could be hours before emergency services manage to get a path through to the building's door, depending on how quickly the warlock is taken down and how much they skimmed on the ice melt budget for this winter.

Hurry up, Batman, is Tim's last thought, before he starts to doze. The last thing he registers is a vague realization that there may be a reason he shouldn't be taking a nap right now, but then Tim's off and dreaming and the unease slips away like mist.

"Kid. Hey. You alive in there? Come on, wake up sleeping beauty. Last train to Clarksville, time to get outta here."

Tim cracks his eyes open at the hard rapping on his forehead. He squints, trying to get his crusty eyes to focus properly on the person in front of him, who has wild hair, a strong Gothamite lilt, and—is that Jason Todd?

“Hi. It’s just me, Jason. You okay, kid?” That’s his Robin voice. The one he uses with people who just nearly got hurt or mugged, kids who are lost.

“Buh,” Tim says intelligently.

Jason frowns at him. “Are you even awake right now?”

“I—” Tim’s voice picks the absolute *worst* times to crack, puberty is a nightmare and he can’t wait till it’s over—”yes.” says Tim. He’s a little cranky, now, because he’s been caught off guard by...

Well.

Pretty much everything about the last several seconds, if he’s being honest. And he *hates* being caught off guard.

Tim scrambles to sit up properly, returning Jason’s frown. “What’s going on?”

Jason takes a couple steps back, leaning against a neighboring desk. “The principal sent us upperclassmen to round all the stragglers up from bathrooms and classrooms, all that jazz. Fire department finally got a path cleared to the door, so we can all go home. You’re the only one still in this half of the floor, apparently, and no offense dude but you’re like. Half a humansicle right now. Did you call your parents to come get you?”

“They’re in Egypt,” Tim mutters, slinging his bag on. He’s still shivering. “I’m fine. I’ll just get warmed up properly once I’m home.”

“That’s rough, buddy.”

Tim shrugs. “It’s fine.”

“We could drive you, if you want?”

“We?” Tim glances over as they file out of the classroom.

“Yeah,” Jason says, jamming his hands in his hoodie. “Alfie and me. Alfred’s our butler. He picks me up from school pretty much every day, unless I have a track meet.”

“You don’t even know me, though. I could be an axe murderer,” Tim points out, reasonably.

Jason looks him up and down, a little pointedly. “I think I’ll take my chances.”

“You don’t know where I live,” Tim tries.

“Course I do. You’re Timmy Drake, right? You’re literally next door. Well. As next door as mansions get. Fuck, they’re huge. It’s ridiculous.”

“Language, Mr. Todd!” a teacher calls as they pass, and Jason waves a hand in acknowledgment but not apology. Tim and Jason squeeze out the front door and through the tunnel the fire department has managed to carve through the ice. Maybe flamethrowers, Tim thinks. However they did it, Tim’s impressed--it only took them an hour or so, tops.

Then they’re out, and Tim sees Starfire standing outside his school building, and—“*Oh.*”

Jason laughs.

“Yeah,” he says, clapping Tim on the shoulder. “You kind of missed the show. It was amazing, watching her through the ice.”

“*Please* tell me people got it on their Snap stories,” begs Tim, and he’s too in awe of one of his favorite heroes ever standing there in the flesh to feel embarrassed.

“Fuck yeah we all did,” says Jason cheerfully.

“*Language,*” a distinctly British voice interjects, and then Tim is being grasped, and turned, and shoved directly towards a sharp-dressed man if he ever saw one.

“Tim, this is Alfred. Alfred, Tim. I said we could give him a ride home, since his house is right down the road from the Manner. Is that okay?” Jason tilts his head a little sharply at the end as he asks this, like a bird. Like a robin. Tim furiously smashes down a nervous giggle. He can’t believe this is his life right now.

“Quite,” says Alfred. He holds out a gloved hand, politely shaking Tim’s with a firm grip. “Hello, Master Timothy. It’s a pleasure to see you again. You’ve grown a bit since the last time you were at one of Master Bruce’s galas.”

“Yes sir,” Tim answers, because that’s what adults expect you to say when they point out that you, a child, have in fact grown, as one does. “Are you sure it’s not too much trouble to drive me home?”

“Not at all,” says Alfred. He opens the back door of the shiny black car and Jason hops in. “It’s right on our way. And even if it weren’t, I couldn’t in good conscience allow you to travel home by yourself after being stuck in that ice. It will ease my mind to know you make it there safely.”

“Okay,” sighs Tim. He’s clearly not going to get out of a ride, so he tries to suck it up and put on a polite company smile as he slides in the backseat after Jason, and lets Alfred shut the door.

Jason Todd. Bruce Wayne’s newest son. Who is also the current *Robin*. Which Tim is definitely not supposed to know about, but he *does*, and Starfire herself is literally twenty yards away and *taking off into the sky* because that’s a thing she can do, and they’re being driven away from his literally-an-ice-cube school in one of Batman’s cars, as if any of this is remotely normal.

Except it kind of is, if you live in Gotham, and don't happen to *know* secret identities that you shouldn't. At this point, Tim doesn't really know if knowing makes things better or worse.

"So," Jason says next to him, flashing a grin. "What do you think about the all-school read they picked this year? I don't like it as much as *The Immortal Henrietta Lacks*, but honestly it's not that bad, the topic is pretty timely. Which I'm impressed by, not going to lie, I kind of thought the school administration was mostly a bunch of d—"

"*Master Jason*," Alfred says sharply from up front.

"—*underheads*," Jason finishes, sending an innocent expression in the direction of the rear-view mirror. "Alfie. What did you think I was going to say? I'm hurt."

Tim can't help but grin. *How is this my life*, he thinks, and he's in the car with Robin, and he's got more pictures to still import from his camera of this very boy fighting a giant crocodile man monster last night, and their school got frozen by a warlock today, and Gotham is just so weird sometimes Tim doesn't even know what to do with himself.

Honestly, though, he wouldn't have it any other way. And tonight, he goes back out. Justice never seems to sleep, so Tim often doesn't either.

Worth it, he thinks, and turns to add his two cents to Jason's monologue about school-mandated literature studies.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed so far! Have a lovely day <3

you keep dancing around what you want so bad

Chapter Summary

Jason invites Tim over for the evening, and Tim has feelings about Bruce he doesn't know what to do with. Featuring "Batdad sure loves Jason" and also head kisses and Alfred's cookies.

Chapter Notes

I wrote this on my phone while the baby I'm nannying napped, so forgive me if it's disjointed or has errors! I'll come back around for another edit later when I'm more awake lol.

Chapter title is once again from Latchkey Kids by Silversun Pickups.

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

The cafeteria is crowded, the mystery meat is questionable, and Tim is getting a sneaking suspicion that Jason Todd has picked him as his new pet project for the month.

It's no secret at their school that Jason is...passionate. About a lot of things. He tends to fixate on something with an intensity to rival Batman's (ha), and generally gets whatever he's set his sights on accomplished, often in a hurry.

Tim just wishes he understood what Jason wanted to accomplish with *him*.

"Yes, Mom, I know," Tim is saying into his headphones. He stirs the mushy green beans around the tray lazily, twirling his fork. "Yeah. Yeah. I'll make sure I'm there for the delivery. Yeah, promise. Tell Dad I say hi! I miss you guys. Mm hm. Hey, I wanted to tell you, we had this project last week for art where we were supposed to represent something about the city that we like that other people might not notice normally, and—okay, that's alright. I'll tell you later. Yeah. Uh huh. Love you, be safe, bye!"

Jason's tray clatters down on the spot across from Tim with a thunk.

"That your parents?" Jason asks, dropping onto the creaky bench. He's already shoving tater tots in his mouth like they're going out of style.

"My mom," says Tim. He unplugs his earbuds and shoves them in the side pocket of his backpack, then picks up his fork.

“They coming back soon?” Asks Jason. His tone is a little too cheerful, and Tim narrows his eyes slightly.

“Not yet,” he replies, carefully, watching Jason’s face. “They’re on the dig for another two weeks. Then they’ll be back.”

“Mm.” Whatever Jason was digging for, it doesn’t seem like he found it. “I don’t get how they just leave you alone for so long,” Jason says after a moment.

“I do fine,” Tim says sharply, and he already regrets the tone—both because it’s giving away a weak spot of his, and he doesn’t want to be rude to one of the few people at this school who seems willing to talk to him for more than study help. “I’ve got everything I need, and it’s not like they cut off contact. I’m not a baby.”

“I’m just saying. It’s not good for you to have to look out for yourself all the time.”

“If anyone should know that it’s doable, especially since I have supplies and more money than I could ever need, it should be you. You we’re living by yourself on the streets!”

“Yeah, and it *sucked!*” Jason snaps. He takes a couple deep breaths, looking down at his lap, and Tim’s eyes find a window and don’t leave it. He can feel the blush on his ears, and feels guilty for poking at what could only be a sore spot, just because he was upset and swiping out with claws like a cornered animal.

They both go back to picking at their food. Tim pokes at the meat again with his knife, and wonders if maybe the school district cooks have a villain in their ranks who’s secretly trying to poison the kids of Gotham before they can reach adulthood and change the way the city is currently run.

“Look,” Jason says, after a minute, quietly enough that no one can overhear. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t push like that. It’s a sore topic for me, and I’m self aware enough to know that I’m not far enough away from that whole clusterfuck to be any kind of detached or objective. I don’t really know your situation, and maybe we can just...agree to disagree about it for now?”

Tim sighs. “Yeah. Sure.”

“Cool,” says Jason. “Hey, you want to come over to the manor after school? Alfred makes fresh cookies on Fridays because Dick usually comes home on weekends, and god knows he spends half his time here raiding our fridge like he never eats during the week. There’s always, like, a bajillion, and we have plenty to share, and also I want someone to play Mario Kart with me before I start trying to flip every NPC off the tracks during races out of sheer boredom.”

Tim opens his mouth, then closes it again. He’s...confused. Extremely confused. Jason has only been hanging out with him at school for a couple days. And sure, he and Alfred keep offering Tim rides, which is nice? But Tim hates accepting help. That’s admitting weakness, and Tim isn’t in the business of offering anyone ammunition to accuse him of not being

independent enough, or not able to handle his own needs. If his parents find out he's been begging rides off the neighbors, he'll get an earful.

"Don't you have friends?" asks Tim, wincing at the bluntness of it.

Jason's eyebrows lift up into his hairline.

"I don't know if you've noticed," he says mildly, "but I'm a literal street rat from Crime Alley, who is under the care of Literal Bruce Wayne, the mythical figure, and I am not good enough at hiding my love for school and literature classes to be either cool or popular in a building full of teenagers who are trying to prove independence and stick it to the old people."

Tim couldn't help snorting.

"Seriously," Jason says, leaning back. "We're neighbors. We're close in age. Bruce is lonely, even if he doesn't admit it, and so am I, because it's not like anyone in the 'neighborhood' goes around making social visits like it's the 1800s anymore. And you can't tell me that you don't sometimes want a break from being alone in that stupidly large house, right?"

"Your house is stupidly large too," Tim points out.

"Yeah, but it's stupidly large with two more whole people in it, which is at least marginally less stupid," says Jason. He frowns. "Well. Maybe two and a bit people. Dick is home enough weekends that I guess he should count as part of a person."

"Fine," Tim says. "I will come to your stupidly large house and eat the stupidly large amount of cookies your butler bakes, and we're going to get our homework done for the weekend *before* we play anything."

Jason grins. "Bruce is going to love you. Work before play and all that."

Tim's hand freezes on its way to his mouth. "...Bruce? He's gonna be there?"

"Well, yeah, after work. It *is* his house. Why, are you gonna tell me that little Timmy Drake is afraid of the big bad Bruce Wayne?" Jason laughs.

"Don't call me Timmy," grumbles Tim. And not *Bruce Wayne*, exactly, he thinks, but he is wary of the big bad Batman, who for all intents and purposes seems to be way more perceptive than any human has a right to be. Tim has a whole side of his life he's trying to keep secret. Walking into the life of the exact person he's *most* trying to keep it a secret from is not sounding like the most appealing plan. But...

"I'm coming," he says, staring Jason firmly in the eye. "But after I drop my stuff off at home and water the plants."

"Awesome," says Jason, happily stuffing another tater tot in his mouth. "We'll swing by your place on the way home then."

“No,” Tim jabs the table with his pointer finger. “Nope! I’m taking the bus and walking. It’s fine. It’s my routine. I like it.”

“It’s like, 30 degrees outside.”

“My. Routine. It’s not like I’ve been doing the exact same thing all winter so far, or anything. Of course not.”

“But that’s cold.” Jason blinks at him.

“There are these things, you may have heard of them, called *coats* and *gloves* . They keep humans warm when the air is cold.”

“*Alright*, smartass, *gorram*,” Jason throws a mushy green bean at Tim’s face. “Suffer, I guess. If you change your mind, there’s a car seat with heating elements that has your name on it. Since your rich parents somehow don’t bother hiring a chauffeur or anything for their kid.”

“Noted, and that’s because *I’m fine walking*,” Tim says, and then he’s getting up to scrape his barely eaten lunch into the trash and absolutely positive he won’t be taking Jason up on that offer.

“I’m gonna murder whoever designed Rainbow Road, I really will, hand to god,” Jason is growling as Bowser goes flying off the edge for the millionth time. Tim eyes him sideways, not sure how many seconds away from throwing his controller at the screen the older teen is.

“If both of us suck at it this badly,” Tim ventures, cautiously, “why do you keep adding it to our playlist?”

“Because it’s part of the classic experience and I’m a glutton for punishment,” Jason says while mashing the 2 button as Bowser’s kart gets dropped back on the track.

“Damnit,” Tim mutters, when Toad flies right off a curve similar to the one that had just done Jason in. “I thought you said we’d have fun.”

“I’m having a blast. Dunno why you’re such a party pooper over there.”

“Listen, while you were right that Alfred’s cookies are to die for and I will from now on do most things short of murder and maiming if I can get some again, I fail to see how continually running ourselves at the exact same metaphorical brick wall headfirst is ever supposed to have a different outcome than frustration and a moderate to severe headache, dude.”

“Unfortunately, that’s how Jason likes to approach most obstacles he encounters in life,” a warm, solid voice interjects. Tim freezes, his finger still hovering over B and Jason’s impending downfall via red shell.

Jason instantly pauses the game, whipping around to peer over the couch back with a genuine grin lighting up his entire face. “Hiya B! How was work?”

Bruce Wayne steps into the room fully then. “Boring. But that’s business. Be glad I’m not making you train to take over the company someday.”

“I’d rather die,” Jason says solemnly.

“Let’s not joke about that.” Bruce sounds vaguely pained.

“Sorry.”

Bruce leans down to kiss the crown of Jason’s head, while Jason mumbles half-hearted protests and smiles anyway, and he reaches out and ruffles Tim’s hair (the way Tim has pictures of him doing to Dick, to Jason, when they’re in masks out on patrol, when they’ve done something good, when Batman is proud), before he stops, and turns, and looks. Tim is frozen solid. Tim is an ice pop. Tim has now merged with the arctic ice shelf, he’s never moving again, maybe if he stays still long enough he can turn invisible.

There’s a pause for a moment, then:

“Alfred!” Bruce calls.

“Master Bruce,” Alfred replies calmly once he makes it to the doorway.

“Alfred, is this a new child of mine?”

Tim unfreezes and twists around in time to see Bruce gesturing expansively at where Tim perches on the couch, and Jason wearing an enormous grin.

“Uh, no sir,” Tim gets out.

“This is Timothy Drake, from next door,” Alfred explains. He turns and walks back down the hallway, presumably toward the kitchen, Tim thinks. “And no, you have not adopted him. Master Timothy’s parents are still very much alive. Dinner will be ready in ten minutes.”

“Thank you, Alfred,” Bruce and Jason chorus together. Bruce turns to Tim, his gaze surprisingly piercing. Or unsurprising, Tim supposes, considering what Bruce moonlights as, literally. He’s the world’s greatest detective. There wouldn’t be much his eyes were blind to.

“It’s good to see you, Timothy.” Bruce shakes his hand. “I assume Jason brought you over?”

“Yes sir,” Tim says.

“No need for the sir,” Bruce waves a hand dismissively. “This house doesn’t stand on formalities.”

“Okay, Mr. Wayne,” he amends. Jason muffles a laugh.

Bruce smiles at Tim, small but genuine. Not his smile for the public. This one is real, and Bruce is staring right at Tim’s eyes, and Tim feels like he’s freezing in Superman’s Fortress of Solitude and melting in a fire all at once and he doesn’t have a clue why. “Just Bruce, Timothy.”

“Bruce,” Tim says, after a few seconds of trying to find his voice. “You can call me Tim. If you want. That’s my name. I mean, so is Timothy, but. Um. I go by Tim now.”

“He gets real annoyed when you try to call him Timmy,” Jason says. “It’s worth it sometimes just to watch him puff up like an angry baby duckling.”

“Jason!” Tim exclaims.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you for real, Tim,” Bruce says, smile deepening slightly. “Parties aren’t the best place to make true impressions. Although your parents always have such proper company manners.”

“Yes s—Bruce,” Tim replies. “They’re very good at that.”

“Hm.” Bruce watches him for a moment.

“Dinner is ready, sirs,” Alfred says from the doorway then. “And I would encourage you to serve yourselves before Master Dick gets here, because he called ahead to say he’s ‘absolutely ravenous’ and hadn’t gotten lunch today, and his appetite is always voracious on a good day.”

“It oughtta be, with how much energy he burns all the time,” says Jason.

“Jason,” Bruce says sharply, warning in his tone. Tim’s heart beats a little faster. He knows, but they don’t know he knows, and he’s not sure how to react, how he should play that comment.

As it turns out, he doesn’t need to worry, because Jason has it handled.

“*What, B?*” Jason complains. “Dick’s like a goddamn golden retriever. He bounces everywhere. I’m tired just watching him.”

“Language,” sighs Alfred. “Although you’re not altogether wrong.”

Tim breathes a sigh of relief internally as he turns off his controller and sets it in the basket.

“Thanks for the gaming, Jason, and thank you for the amazing cookies, Mr. Pennyworth,” he says. “I had a good time. I’ll see you on Monday, right?” He looks at Jason during the last bit.

“Yeah, but where do you think you’re going?” Jason frowns.

“Home.”

“No, but—you can’t, Dick is coming, you’ll love him. You should stay for dinner. Alfred’s cooking is the best.”

“I’m sure Tim needs to get home to his parents for their own dinner,” says Bruce.

“Uh—”

“They’re in Egypt,” Jason says. “Tim’s by himself over there.”

“Really,” Bruce says, and it’s flat. Not a question. Tim absently notes that he’s started sweating, and then absently notes that it’s stupid to be stressed about this situation when it’s perfectly fine and no different than any other normal Friday from the past few years.

“On Fridays our housekeeper makes a large dinner and we eat together,” he lies. “I have to go back before Mrs. Mac gets worried and the food gets cold.”

“Mm,” Bruce says, and Tim feels like Batman’s gaze is seeing right through his entire soul. *He doesn’t know you know, he doesn’t know you know, it’s fine, he repeats in his head.*

“Okay,” says Jason, sounding doubtful. “But you can stay if you want. Whenever you want. Or you can come back after?”

“Sorry, I got a lot of homework,” Tim says quickly, edging out the doorway into the hall. “But it was fun today! Thanks. I’ll see you around.”

He’s halfway down the hallway, too far away to hear as Jason looks at Bruce and says, “But he doesn’t have any homework, B. He’s the one who insisted we do it before even starting the game.”

Batman’s sharp eyes squint down the hallway, wondering about the neighbor boy who neither Bruce nor the Batman have given much thought to over the years. Maybe it’s time he did.

Tim sits on his kitchen island, waiting for the soup to heat up in the microwave. He did have a good time with Jason, he thinks. But now it’s dark, and in a few hours he’s got to be in the city if he wants to get any shots of the Bats now that Nightwing is back to join in for the weekend. If he’s lucky, he might catch Dick and Jason playing around during downtime on patrol, and having a contest with the grapple or batarangs or flips (which Dick inevitably wins).

While waiting on his meal to cool, he starts suiting up in his night outfit all the different layers and pieces, and stashing nonperishables in his backpack for the kids on 13th street in the old warehouse. Throws in a few twenties for the homeless veterans that let him share their fire often.

It’s been a pretty good day. Tim feels bad about rushing out on Jason like that, but the less time Tim spent around Batman the better. He couldn’t risk it. He’d make it up to Jason later. Especially since he really did want to try some of Alfred’s real cooking; the whole hallway had smelled like heaven while they played on the Wii.

For now, he’s got a job, and he’s doing it well, because someone has to make sure the world knows how much good Batman and his crew are doing for everyone else. No one is going to paint Bruce Wayne and his kids and friends as villains on Tim’s watch.

Tim hitches his bag up as high as he can, scrambling out the window to avoid the cameras, and just happens to glance down at the front porch step, not expecting anything to be there. His parents aren't getting any packages for another few days. But something shiny catches his eye, and he sneaks around through the bushes, careful to keep out of sight.

On the porch in front of the door, there's a foil-covered plate, and a tupperware container of cookies. A post-it note on the top has just a smiley face and a hastily scribbled cursive J.

Something in Tim's chest feels too tight and unbearably hot at the same time. He stares for a good minute or so. Then he turns away and sets off through the night to the nearest bus stop. He'll get them later on, when he's back. And maybe he'll email Jason an apology tonight, instead of waiting.

As he sits on the near-empty bus, riding into the city on streets that get grungier as they go, Tim can't help but feel a little bit loved, and if his photos that night are a little brighter, a little more cheerful than usual, more happy moments scattered in, no one in the blog comments seem to notice. But Tim knows. And he's still thinking about it in the early hours of the morning, as he drifts off into a surprisingly easy sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you SO much to all of you who left comments on the first chapter, holy cow! I am so blown away by your kindness and enthusiasm. I hope you enjoyed this chapter too, and I hope you're having a wonderful day <3

shades of life are echoing through my open ears

Chapter Summary

Sunday brunch, Bruce's coffee, and brotherly shenanigans all have their place in this chapter, much like Tim is beginning to have a place in the Waynes' home. Poor Tim is just trying to figure out what they want from him, and get some good action shots as usual.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is from Across the Universe, by The Beatles.

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

He's eating Froot Loops out of one of the biggest bowls in the kitchen. His head is currently propped up on his hand like it's the only thing keeping him from face planting into the milk (it is), and *The Partridge Family* is playing on his iPad when suddenly there's a knock echoing down the hallway to the kitchen.

Tim lifts his head just enough to turn and blink slowly in the direction of the front doors.

It's. It's a Sunday, his brain thinks, helpfully. *No post on Sundays*. (Thank you, Harry Potter? Tim is officially *absolutely not awake enough for this*.)

Then a knock comes again, followed by an insistent ring of the *incredibly loud* doorbell, god, why in the world do they have the slider turned up that high, there's not even anyone here to hear it. Or anyone to ring it in the first place besides delivery drivers. And whoever is there right now, apparently.

Tim drops his spoon and sprints for the front entrance, fearing the worst. His head is spinning with all the scenes he's ever seen or read, filled with military superiors and police officers and all kinds of bad news knocking on front doors unexpectedly, and he's bracing himself for the blow. Tim skids across the landing, flings the door open with his pajamas and his bedhead and all 5 feet of him tense and ready, and there's Jason Todd and Dick Grayson on his front porch, relaxed and cheerful like they own the world.

Tim stares. His mouth is still half-open in preparation to choke out *Hello, officer, can I help you?*

And maybe he's a little crazy, or maybe his permanent sleep debt is just hitting him harder than usual, because his first instinct is to almost ask out loud "*Why didn't you just come in a window?*"

Tim quickly snaps his mouth shut with a *click*.

"Hey Timmers." Jason grins and shoves his red beanie up his forehead a little higher. "We were hoping you'd be home! Dick wanted a chance to see you before he goes back to Bludhaven tonight."

"Hi, Tim! It's awesome to finally meet you in the flesh. I've been hearing so much about you."

And this is *Dick Grayson*, of the Flying Graysons, original Robin, Tim's biggest childhood hero, good-hearted police officer, current Nightwing, and he's just turned the full light of his thousand-lumen smile on Tim. *Is this what standing in front of an angel feels like?* Tim wonders distantly, and then he's being crushed in an enormous hug.

He freezes. He seems to be doing that a lot this past week. Tim's mind is racing, trying to think of the last time he's been hugged. Maybe a couple trips ago? His Krav Maga tutor gave him one of those bro side-hugs after Tim landed a hard move the other week, that counts, right?

But this isn't a *bro* hug, it's not a hair ruffle like from Bruce, or a hand on the shoulder the way Jason has begun doing to Tim with an...alarming frequency, now that he thinks about it. (Tim puts a mental pin in that one to come back to later.) But this? This is a full on *hug*. This is Tim being suffocated by a koala twice his size. This is arms-all-the-way-around, pressed into someone's chest, held tight like he's a tree Dick's clinging to to avoid falling off a cliff, real *hug*. Tim doesn't do hugs like this. He's—what is he supposed to...

Tim's arms slowly come up after a few seconds, stuttering once to pause halfway there. Then he's wrapping his hands around Dick's back, too, and returning the hug, figuring it's the nice thing to do when you're being gifted with something this rare and big and vulnerable.

He feels Dick relax just a bit, melting to pull Tim in, a little impossibly, even further. It feels nice, Tim thinks. Dick's a good hugger; he was back when Tim was a tiny kid at the circus, too. Tim remembers that. By all accounts, this moment should be incredibly weird, but somehow because it's *Dick* it's just...not.

(Tim, face strategically smashed into Dick's pecs, misses the triumphant grin and responding thumbs up between Jason and Dick.)

"Uh," Tim says, a little dazed. Dick had finally let go and given Tim room to step back, although not before a parting hair duffle. Tim wonders, between Bruce and Dick, who picked it up from who. "Do you want to come in?"

"Sure," Dick says happily, and steps lightly past Tim on his way into the foyer. Jason follows close behind.

Tim steps inside, pulling the door shut behind him til the creaky lock latches shut—he's going to have to replace that soon, before his parents get back, it's swollen and shrunk in weather changes too many times to be silent ever again. His dad hates that in a door.

“Brush your hair and get dressed,” Jason says, all business. “And grab a warm coat. Make it snappy.”

“What,” says Tim. Because, what?

“Clothes, hair, coat, let's go ,” Jason claps at him for emphasis, then makes a shooin' motion.

“I'm. But. Jason, I just woke *up* ,” Tim grumbles, rubbing one eye. “I haven't finished breakfast.”

Dick has drifted into the kitchen already, apparently, because he chooses this moment to chip in, “Froot Loops!!! My kind of man. Tim, good taste.”

“Thanks,” Tim replies. This morning is already so weird he's going to not even question it. “You can have some, if you want?” he offers. There's a delighted noise from the direction of the kitchen, and the sound of cabinets being opened as Dick likely goes hunting for a bowl. Tim sighs.

“Furthest tall cabinet on the left, second shelf up,” he calls, and then turns back to Jason. “Why do I have to get dressed, exactly?”

“You're coming over.”

“Am I,” says Tim.

“Yes,” Jason says firmly. “It's Sunday and we're gonna watch kid's cartoons and hang out and you're going to meet Dick and eat Alfred's amazing brunch if I have to drag you there like a sack of potatoes.”

And that's just. “*Why*,” Tim questions, feeling a little desperate and a lot confused.

Jason grabs him by both shoulders and stares Tim right in the eye. “Because you're my friend, and it is *killing me inside* to think about you in this empty fucking house all the time, and I need someone to be another target for Dick's unending attention, and also you're too skinny and Alfred thinks you need both company and fattening up. And no one argues with Alfred.” Jason says this as if that's just *that* , and somehow, inexplicably, it is. Tim's feet are already finding themselves on the stairs, and Jason's watching with satisfaction from the rug.

Tim gets dressed.

Dick and Jason shove Tim through the doorway to the kitchen and promptly flee the scene, shouting something about getting the lounge ready and being back for brunch. For being Bats, they're kind of terrible at low-key scheming in normal life. But Tim's head is still spinning from how weird this morning has been so far. He's bound to find out soon anyway.

And if they're going to leave him alone for a bit in a warm napping location, then they're not allowed to be mad at Tim for taking advantage of it.

Well. Nearly alone, anyway.

Bruce takes one look at Tim from across the surprisingly small table and slides his own mug of coffee across without a word.

Tim stares at it for a moment. He may not be a Bat, but he sure keeps the same hours as one, and between nights, running BatWatch, and regular old school, the words *sleep* and *Tim* haven't been allies for a long, long time. He's tired. He's confused. He's craving a familiar comfort that comes from holding a warm drink close, even if he still can't manage to like the actual taste of coffee. No matter what's going on, Tim realized early on in life that holding a hot tea, cocoa, or coffee seems to make any situation feel more familiar and safe.

The mug is tempting him. He can smell the rich undertones already, so Bruce must spring for the good quality stuff (no real surprise there). Except...he's just Tim. He's the neighbor kid, who knows more than he should, and isn't even sure why he's here at this point. Especially since none of *them* know Tim knows anything. And they're somehow still having him around anyway. He's not sure he should accept anything from the Wayne household at this point, until he has a better idea of where he stands.

But Batman just offered him his own coffee. In his own house. And Tim really is tired. Bruce is already up and making himself another mug, not expecting the first one to slide back across the table any time soon. Tim's shoulders drop, just a little.

He takes the mug.

The first sip is just as jarring as every other coffee drink he's ever tried. But he persists. And to Tim's delight, the taste quickly turns from just plain bitter to bitter that's worth it for the rich undertones. Like the difference between flavorless mild salsa you can't stand, and really flavorful hot salsa that you would have expected to be too strong, but is actually fantastic because of the taste.

"What is this," Tim blurts out. Bruce glances up from whatever report he's reading on the iPad screen.

"Hm?"

"The *coffee*," Tim says patiently. He's clutching the mug now, holding it close to his face in between gulps. "What kind of coffee is this?"

"Oh, that," says Bruce. "It's just something I stock up on when I'm over in Kansas. There's a little coffee shop outside Lawrence that has some great imports with a lot of flavor. This is their house blend."

Little coffee shop, sure. He knows Bruce is being purposely vague so as not to mention Smallville or anything that can tie him to it, but Tim is certain that's what Bruce is alluding to.

“Hmm. It’s great,” he tells Bruce. “Thank you.”

“You looked like you needed it.” The corners of Bruce’s mouth turn up just so.

Tim finds himself smiling back.

When Tim makes it back to his house that evening, he’s somehow carrying a backpack that he didn’t own ten hours earlier. It’s filled with hand warmers, socks, three containers of Alfred’s cooking, which is just. The *Best*, it really is, and also there’s a panic button bracelet, which is hilarious to Tim. He’s been running around for years on his own. And now all of a sudden, Jason Todd decided to singlehandedly become Tim’s parent in the span of a week. He even tried to talk with Tim about getting more sleep, and wasn’t *that* rich coming from a secret teenage vigilante. Tim had refused to explain the laughter that tore out of him over that one.

And at the very bottom of the bag, nestled in what turns out to be a fleece blanket with a sweeping landscape photo printed on it, is one bag of coffee grounds, and a post-it note that says only, “Use it wisely.”

Tim wonders how much Batman knows already. He wonders at how he can’t muster up the usual stress to care as much as he did a few days ago.

After a moment, he wraps himself up in the blanket like it’s a cape, and heads upstairs to start putting on his disguise for the night. It’s not the best quality fleece he owns, but somehow? Somehow it feels warmer than anything his parents have ordered over the years. Tim is firmly attributing it to said blanket having been tucked in near the still-warm food containers. But he still smiles when he catches his reflection in a hallway mirror.

A few hours later, Tim swipes the lip balm over his lips for the third time that night, mentally cursing winter as a conceptual whole. He’s been careful to always carry at least one tin of lip balm with him every night he went out, ever since the disastrous first time he went out on a cold night and learned that you could get windburn on your lips and *it wasn’t fun*. Tim was in pain for a day and a half every time he spoke or ate. He hasn’t made that mistake again.

He wonders if Batman and the others do the same, or if they’ve figured out some kind of high tech way to keep their skin and lips from getting dried out and chapped all winter. And the masks! How do the Robins not constantly have domino-shaped patches of acne, especially in the summer?

Not for the first time in recent days, Tim desperately wishes he had enough guts to just come clean and fess up to the Waynes that he knew. At least then he could ask the million and one questions like this that he’d thought of over the years. Or, he could so long as they didn’t decide to throw him in Blackgate or some kind of Bat-cell where he couldn’t spill their secrets, anyway.

Batman didn’t *seem* like the type to do that to someone without serious cause, but, well. He was more protective of his partners’ (*family’s*) safety than of anything else in the world. That

much was evident to anyone with eyes and two brain cells left to rub together. Batman would do just about anything his partners. Tim's pretty sure Batman would rip the universe apart if that's what it took to save one of his kids who was threatened. Even the Justice League members probably would only warrant the tri-state area, or maybe a small country.

And a lot of adults didn't seem like the type to do something until suddenly they did. Tim has learned that one the hard way too a few times.

So definitely no telling.

Tim sighs, and scrambles his way back down the drain pipe he'd shimmied up earlier. This night has been a bust, mostly. Gotham is as quiet as it ever gets. The few incidents Batman and Robin *had* dealt with, Tim was mostly at poor angles to try to catch. At least he'd gotten a nice shot of Nightwing backflipping off a low gargoyle to kick one of Falcone's guys off of a moving pickup truck. That one was *sweet*.

A few minutes and run-down streets later, Tim finally ducks out of the shadows near an alley and sprints across the empty street to the bridge. With practiced grace, he follows a familiar path up the metal bars of the bridge beams until he reaches his preferred viewing spot, nestled in an eyebar junction.

He weaves a loop of bungee cord around a couple of the rods, and then clips the MacGyvered end with the carabiner to the climbing harness under his long coat. Tim may be many things, risk-taking, precocious, a wild child, call him what you will. But unprepared is not one of them. He takes risks, sure, but he's not going to up his chances of injury or death while running around Gotham just out of laziness.

Anyway, if Tim's memory is correct (and it usually is), on nights when Nightwing is in town, the Bats tend to loop through this part of the Narrows towards the end of their night out. From Tim's vantage point, he's got a mostly-unobstructed view of several street entrances, plus the main road that travels parallel to the waterfront. Whichever way they come from, Tim's likely going to spot them from here.

After fifteen minutes or so, Tim hears the tell-tale rumbling of an engine. It could just be a random citizen, or a criminal up to no good, but they're past the hours when most of the nighttime crime happens. This is the few-hour stretch before dawn where even criminals have mostly packed it in. Everybody's got to sleep sometime.

So Tim waits patiently, camera held near his heart. The rumbling is getting louder, and that's definitely the Batmobile. Tim should know. But there's also something else, something higher pitched—if Tim could just hear it a *little* more clearly, he might be able to make out—

The Batmobile swings around a corner, chassis shifting heavily to one side, and Robin is whizzing along behind it, screaming with...glee, apparently. *What the hell*, Tim thinks, and he's already snapping photos, camera viewfinder millimeters away from his eye.

Snap. Robin's face, mask crinkled and hair flying in the wind. *Snap*. The Batmobile gleaming in the streetlights and reflection off the water's surface, tinted a faint purple-blue on the black chrome. *Snap*. A tight zoom on Robin in his painfully 90s-colored roller skates (maybe an

old pair of Dick's, Tim thinks, if this was premeditated and not spurred by boredom and the sight of a giveaway pile on the sidewalk), head tossed back in laughter, partially reflected in a puddle just inches away from his feet.

Thank god for high speed shutters in modern cameras. Tim has so much fun with them.

Snap. Oh no. Oh shit—the Batmobile takes another streetcorner a little too sharply, *snap*, Robin is yanked and loses his grip on the rope trailing from the bumper, and *snap*—there goes Robin, flying on smooth ball bearings, straight into a heaping pile of trash bags. Tim winces. He quickly unhooks himself, slides down the bridge like Tarzan in the jungle. He ducks behind crates to creep closer.

The Batmobile has slammed to a stop, and Nightwing's head pops up over the top of the car, peering in the direction of the garbage. Two gauntleted hands suddenly shoot up from the pile, enthusiastic thumbs-ups, which Tim definitely gets a still and video of. *This is going to be the Gotham gif of the month*, Tim thinks with delight. Nightwing starts laughing, then, and scrambles over the roof of the Batmobile to go help Robin up. Tim gets a couple pictures of them embracing, and Nightwing brushing stray trash off of an animated Robin as he gestures wildly and wobbles a bit on the skates, and then a slight movement captures Tim's eye.

He swings the camera over in time to get Batman in the frame, having just dropped down from wherever he came from this time. The boys are just turning, twin smiles still firmly on their faces. Even from where Tim is hidden, Batman's shoulders seem to slump, and he crosses his arms, body language screaming *I'm surrounded by children*. Which, he technically is? But whose fault is *that*, Batman.

Tim packs away his camera as Batman clearly begins scolding his wayward proteges, too far away for Tim to hear. This was already the latter part of their night shift, and there's no way Batman is patrolling any longer after his kids demonstrated that they've mentally clocked out for the night. If the vigilantes are packing it in, it's definitely time for Tim to head home too.

The next morning, Tim finds comments on his latest post and pictures flooding his inbox. People love seeing the family dynamic between Batman, Nightwing, and Robin, apparently, who could have guessed. "Agent A" even comments on this one, which is a rare delight. Tim can count on one hand the number of times that Agent A, Oracle, or the Bats themselves have interacted with his work in any way, and it's still a thrill. His comment is a simple "Thank you." (Tim wouldn't be surprised if one of his photos ends up taped in the Batcave somewhere by Alfred as a part of their weird family memory wall that he likes to imagine exists down there.)

Tim's never felt prouder.

His good mood lasts through two mugs of Bruce's coffee, a slew of comment moderation during lunch while struggling to keep Jason's prying hands off of Tim's laptop, and a short walk to the park to take some practice candids of people walking their dogs.

Then his phone rings, something it *never does* , and Tim's heart sinks. It's his dad's number, of course.

He can't help but wonder what bad news they're going to have for him this time about their trip schedule, and hits *answer call* already resigned to whatever the situation is. At least in a few hours he'll be back out on the streets, focusing on other kids' problems like he does every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday before the Bats start their patrol. If he's got to be lonely and left behind with a high-limit credit card to cover expenses that *never gets checked on* —and believe him, Tim knows, he spent six very strange months racking up increasingly ridiculous charges on that thing and not a *peep* came from his parental units over in Guatemala—then his parents don't get to be mad if he budgets in extra food and clothing money for Gotham's street kids. The rich are supposed to be philanthropic, right? Kind to the less fortunate and all that. Follow the great Bruce Wayne's lead.

After all, thinks Tim, he's been watching from afar, learning from the best.

Chapter End Notes

You guys. I can't believe how kind all of you readers are! You made me cry over the past couple of days from all of your lovely comments. Thank you, I love you, I hope you keep enjoying this silly little story! Have a lovely lovely day/night <3

well, I was young and naive

Chapter Summary

Tim's parents come home. Some Things happen. The Waynes aren't letting Tim fall to the wayside despite his best efforts, and Tim gets to go ice skating.

Chapter Notes

Warning for emotional abuse ahead. If you need to, skip the section that starts with "That night" and pick back up again at the section that begins with "On Sunday".

I recommend listening to "The Winner Is" by DeVotchKa during the first chunk of this chapter, to hear what Tim's emotional tone is. It's perfect for that part.

Chapter title is from The Truth Is A Cave by The Oh Hellos.

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

It's a Thursday morning when his mom and dad call again to let him know they'll be back that afternoon. And yeah, the call gets Tim's phone confiscated for the day, but he's so excited he can't bring himself to care. He's been waiting for this for *weeks*.

Between periods that morning, Tim catches sight of Jason and deftly shoves his way through the packed hallway until he finally twists around to a stop in front of the taller boy. Jason pulls up short.

"Tim?"

"Jason!" Tim is beaming. He feels like his face might split in two. "Guess what?"

"What?" asks Jason, smiling back. "Did your test get canceled? New game get announced?"

"No, dude, my parents are coming back! Tonight! Their detour in Spain is over."

Jason double-high-fives him right there. "That's great Tim! I'm happy for you."

"I can't wait," Tim says, happily.

Jason grabs him by the backpack and turns him around so they face the same direction, shoving him forward so they can walk. "So," he says, keeping one hand on Tim's shoulder.

“We’ve got a minute before class starts. Tell me about it. Do you all have plans for tonight? What do you want to do?”

“When I get home I’m going to bake some cookies, because everyone likes cookies, right? And I’ve been putting together photos for my mom and dad for a while now—they take photos of archaeology stuff, you know, but they don’t get much else? And I’m not there to take pictures of *them*, so I can’t give them a family scrapbook or anything.” Tim pauses his rapid-fire speaking to finally take a deep breath.

“But I know my dad likes birds, or at least the tropical ones, he has this book. And mom used to have a garden when I was little. It was really pretty. I remember her kneeling out in it and teaching me about how to take care of irises and orchids and stuff. So I’ve been taking pictures of birds and flowers around here for them, every time I’m at the park, or walking past peoples’ yards. I know it’s not the same as, like, toucans and venus fly traps and whatever else they see when they’re abroad, but.” Tim looks up at Jason. “I put them in little photo albums for them with descriptions and dates, like a travel log. Flowers for my mom, birds for my dad. I’m going to give those to them tonight. With the cookies, obviously. They’re usually tired when they’ve flown all day, so I figure they can relax and just look at the books.”

Jason is floored, for a moment, by how thoughtful Tim is. He’s thirteen. And it’s not like thirteen year olds are selfish, or anything, but they’re kids, and kids usually aren’t this attuned to other people’s needs. Tim’s so good at it. It makes Jason wonder what it would have been like to grow up with parents or siblings like Tim and Dick from day one. How different would he be now? Would he even be the same person?

“Tim,” Jason says quietly. “That’s an awesome plan. I bet they’re going to love that.”

“I hope so,” says Tim, and he looks so excited and desperately wishful at the same time that it makes Jason’s heart ache.

They stop in front of Jason’s classroom. “Listen,” he says. “I want to hear more about those photos at lunch, okay? And maybe we can give you a ride home after school to save you time?”

Tim pauses, clearly considering the offer. Jason takes this as the victory it is—he and Alfred have been trying to get Tim to accept rides for the better part of three weeks at this point, and only succeeded twice. It’s like the kid is physically incapable of accepting help. Which...if Jason cares to remember back to how he was, himself, when Bruce first took him in, is pretty familiar. It makes sense, considering how independent Tim has had to be so far in his life. But still infuriating for Jason and Alfred a little.

“I’ll...I’ll see,” Tim says, finally. “When school is over.”

That’s better than a no. “Okay,” says Jason. “I hope your class is good!”

“You too!” says Tim, and he’s off down the hall *just* slowly enough for the hall monitor to not be able to call him out for running.

“Mom!” Tim practically vaults over the side of the couch at the sound of the front door opening. “You’re home!”

“Hello, Tim!” Janet replies. She’s setting down her purse on the entryway table under the mirror. Tim steps close, and wraps his arms around her in a hug. She returns the embrace, albeit a little loosely, but that’s okay. Tim knows she can’t have had much practice while she’s been away working. They can get better at it together, while his parents are home for a while. “Boy, you’ve gotten taller!” she says, once they break apart.

“Yes, mom,” he says. He’s reminded of the similar exchange with Mr. Pennyworth a few weeks before. “I’m up almost an inch and a half since you were here last.”

“Taking after your father.” She nods approvingly. “He had quite a growth spurt in high school. And it’s about time, for you. You’ve been lagging behind your peers.”

Tim nods. Then Jack is rapping on the glass storm door, and Tim dutifully holds it open while his father carries to suitcases in.

“Hi, Dad!” Tim says, once his father is all the way in and the bags are tucked at the base of the stairs. Tim goes in for a hug with him as well, but Jack catches his shoulder with a hand and gives tim a light pat before turning to walk down the hallway. Janet joins him, one of her hands on Jack’s broad arm.

“It’s good to see you, son. I trust you’ve been doing well with your schoolwork while we’ve been away?” Jack asks.

“Yeah, Dad,” Tim replies. He’s a bit disappointed his dad didn’t want a full hug, but hey. He’ll take what he can get. They’ve got time. “All A’s. As usual.”

“Good.”

Tim speedwalks a few steps to catch up with his parents. “I made cookies for you this afternoon, after school.”

“That’s sweet of you, Timmy.” Janet smiles at him. “But I’m on a diet right now. I can’t have any extra sugar.”

“Oh,” says Tim. “Well. That’s okay, I can make you something else? A wrap or tea or something?”

“No, baby, it’s fine. I think I’m going to go put my feet up in the living room for a while.” She lets go of Jack’s shoulder and takes a turn, heading through the doorway towards the fire Tim started earlier in the fireplace. It’s always been his favorite way to curl up with a book in the winter.

“Dad?” he asks, looking up at Jack as they both keep walking. “Do you want a cookie or two?”

“Not right now, Tim,” Jack says.

“Okay,” Tim sighs. “I can make you tea or coffee, if you want?”

“That would be good.” Jack turns to look at him finally. “I’ll take some coffee with half and half.”

Tim runs off to make himself and his father mugs. Finally, something he can do to get his dad to smile.

“So,” Tim says, a while later. They’re all seated on different chairs in the sitting room by the fire. “I’m really glad you’re home.”

His parents both make tired sounds of acknowledgment. They all watch the fire in silence together for a few more moments.

“I made a couple things for you while you were gone,” he offers. “Hang on. I’m going to go grab them.”

His parents tell him the photo books are well made, then set them aside after flicking through a few pages apiece. Shortly afterwards, Jack and Janet turn in for the night, pleading exhaustion after a long day of traveling across the ocean. Tim understands. He does.

He tries to stomp down his disappointment, and almost succeeds.

The next morning, Mrs. Mac isn’t there, nor has she come and left already. Instead, Janet is in the kitchen frying bacon and eggs for Tim’s breakfast, and smiles at him with an enthusiastic “Good morning, baby!” on her lips. Tim doesn’t have the heart to remind her he’s vegetarian. He’s too excited to spend a morning with her like he wishes for while they’re gone.

They sit quietly at the broad marble island together on the bar stools, eating and drinking coffee—but not Bruce’s, Tim keeps the bag safe in his room. (He’s not sure how his parents would feel about Tim being friendly with the richest man in Gotham. It’s a toss up, really, between seeing it as a networking opportunity for their family and seeing it as someone trying to influence their son. Tim prefers to just avoid the whole issue in the first place. There’s a lot his parents don’t know about him; what’s one more secret in the pile?)

Tim has a lot of secrets, these days.

His parents do too, apparently, since they wait till Tim is running out the door to get to school—nearly running late—to tell him they’re leaving Gotham again in two days.

Tim manages to avoid Jason at lunch. He hides in the library and doesn’t eat, since that’s the standard rule in there. He’s not very hungry anyway, today.

Tim is angry at *himself*, more than anything else. He’s done this dance a thousand times. His parents never stay long. Tim can’t understand why he got himself so worked up into thinking this time would be anything different, anything special.

Whatever. Tim is fine on his own. He'll get over it in a few days.

Jason catches him after the bell rings, though, and Tim hates the emotions Jason wears on his face like a language he's trying to teach the world.

"Tim, are you okay?" Jason asks. He's worried.

"Yeah, fine!" Tim plasters on a smile, as bright as he can muster. "Sorry, I was studying a lot today. I'm worried about this project that's almost due."

"Did your parents make it home okay?"

"Yeah," says Tim. *Please, Jason, drop it, he* pleads internally.

Jason, of course, does not drop it, because Jason has never been capable of letting go of an issue he deems important, ever, not *once*, in his *entire life*.

"Did they like the books?" Jason is watching Tim too closely. Tim has got to get out of here. He needs space to process and think before he can be who he needs to be for everyone. Just a few hours, then he'll be fine. That's all.

"Yeah, they thought they were great," Tim lies, glancing at the doors. "Listen, they're leaving in a few days, so I really gotta get home. I don't want to waste any time. I'll see you Monday, okay?" He turns to press through the school's entrance.

"Wait," Jason says, catching Tim by the sleeve. "They're leaving again?"

"Can we *not* do this right now?" Tim snaps, finally letting frustration leak through. Jason's eyes widen slightly. Tim sighs. "Sorry. I'm just...I'm tired. I was up late last night and I really do need to go home."

"It's okay," says Jason. "Seriously, Timbo. Don't worry about it. But listen, really quick, before you go—Alfred and Bruce and I were talking, and we want to give you our cell phone numbers in case you ever need anything."

"Jason, I have plenty of money and supplies. I'm fine."

"Yeah, but if the power goes out, or you just want to talk, or need help with homework or something. Or, who knows, it's Gotham. If there's an Arkham breakout and you're stuck in the city, you can call then, too."

Tim thinks for a moment about that scenario. He's good at hiding and staying unseen. Now Batman and Robin want him to call them if he's stuck on the streets? What are they going to do? Drag Alfred out of the house into danger to come get him, bail on catching criminals so Batman and Robin can pretend to have been "asked" to go nab a random high school freshman, split up while one of them changes into civvies to take Tim home? He's not worth it.

"It would also let you have a heads up next time Dick and I are gonna kidnap you, instead of us showing up while you're in pajamas and eating Froot Loops alone like a sad gremlin,"

Jason adds helpfully.

Tim's not getting out of this building without their phone numbers in his phone. This is Robin #2 he's dealing with. He knows what that entails.

"Fine," Tim says, handing his phone over. Jason makes a delighted sound, and quickly adds four contacts, and hits "call" for his own, so he can get Tim's number in return.

"Cool," Jason says. He pulls Tim in for a sudden hug, and Tim squawks. "We're here if you need us, okay? Or even just want us." He lets Tim go.

"I know," Tim says. He smiles for a second. "Thanks for caring, Jason. It's nice of you." Then he's out the door, running for the Uber he ordered to take him home.

That night, Tim backtalks his dad, over something stupid and small and Tim is *so dumb sometimes*, why can't he keep it together? Yeah, he was reading for a bit to relax after doing his homework, but his Dad wanted him to *do* something. He should have just *done* it like a good son. Of course asking for a few minutes to finish the chapter was rude.

Tim *knows that*. But he's still yelling back and forth with his father anyway, frustrated over his own feelings and his parents' quick turnaround, not the *book* really, but here they are anyway, and Janet nowhere to be seen. And then Jack is tearing the old Kindle from Tim's hands, just like that, and he's storming towards the kitchen, Tim trailing after, still shouting—

And Tim's watching his dad open the drawer, and there's the hammer, why does he have the *hammer*—

It comes down on the screen with an awful sound, and as the plastic and screen layers crack and crumble Tim feels his entire body turn to lava, and his core freeze like his heart's become an ice cube, and he's not yelling anymore. He's not thinking. Tim's not sure he's even breathing anymore as his Dad drops the hammer on the counter finally, and fills the sink with soap. Twists the drain plug into place, turns on the tap. Drops in the Kindle.

He turns to Tim, red-faced and breathing heavy, as the Kindle disappears under a rising flood of soap bubbles. "Maybe this time, you'll finally learn some obedience," he says.

Tim can not speak. He's desperately glad Jack didn't think to demand his phone as well, he's glad he left it upstairs on silent, he's glad that Kindle isn't him.

Jack watches him for another moment, in case his son will respond, then turns his back when no words are forthcoming.

"Get out," says Jack.

Tim flees to his bedroom and doesn't come out until lunch the next day. He's sullenly glad his parents are leaving so soon, now. Jack has clearly not grown fonder of Tim in his absence.

On Sunday, the doorbell rings in the early afternoon. Tim scrambles up from where he's been perched on one of the bay window loveseats, shouting "I'll get it!" deeper into the hallway behind him.

He yanks the door open to find Dick Grayson on their porch. Tim stares for a moment.

"What are you doing here?" he asks. It's a little sharper than he intended.

"I came to see if you wanted to come with me to the aquarium," Dick said with an easy smile. "Jason is busy with an essay, and he thought you might like to go instead, and I thought it was a great idea."

Tim *would* like to go. He'd love to see the aquarium, go talk about the animals with someone who was kind of like...a friend. He'd love to get out of this oppressively quiet house with the tension bleeding through the air. But he can't.

"I can't," he says. "I'm sorry. This is kind of a bad time. You shouldn't be here."

Dick frowns, confused.

"Tim? Who is it!" A bellow from further in the house. His dad.

"No one, Dad!" Tim calls back, loudly. "It's just someone who got lost, heading for Wayne Manor. I'm giving them directions." He shoots Dick a pointed look, before looking back over his shoulder again to face the hallway.

"Make it fast. Don't let too much cold air in."

Tim turns back to Dick. "You should go," he says quietly.

"Tim, are you sure you don't want to come? I'd really love to have you."

"I'm sure," Tim says. "Maybe a different time? I'm sorry Dick. Have fun at the aquarium. Say hi to the sharks for me." He shuts the door before his face can betray him.

Dick leaves, but takes Bruce with him to the aquarium instead. The two of them talk about a lot, but especially Tim, or rather, what to do about him. It's clear that his parents aren't around as much as they should be, but Tim is very self sufficient. And very private. Getting details about his life out of him is like trying to nail jello to a tree.

"Bruce," Dick says seriously. "That boy needs some hot chocolate. And hugs. And I think his *eyebags* have eyebags right now, he needs sleep."

"You'd think," Bruce said, carefully, "that he'd be getting more now that his parents are in town."

"You would," agrees Dick, mildly. "And yet."

"And yet."

Bruce and Dick quietly begin to look into the Drakes' travel records, and whatever financial and other information they can get their hands on from the time Tim's been born till now. It may be nothing, but...

Bruce figures a little paranoia never hurt anyone. And since the BatWatch blog is on hiatus for a week while the owner is busy, there's nothing new he can do on that front to further their never-ending game of cat-and-mouse. He knows by now that the owner *does* have good intentions, and even goes to extreme lengths to avoid giving away Batman and Robin's patrol patterns, hideouts, and tactics—even though he'd have to know at least some of them after keeping tabs on the Bats for this long.

It's a mystery Batman has to be willing to let go of for now. But that doesn't mean he ignores it, or that Oracle doesn't keep working on it in what free time she has between college life and their nighttime escapades.

But, for today, Timothy Drake is more important. BatWatch and Gotham can wait.

Tim can't shake the crappy feelings before school on Monday. He tells his parents goodbye before he leaves the house, since they're heading off to the airport soon after his first class begins. He doesn't know where they're going specifically, only that it's somewhere in Asia this time. They haven't offered specifics, and for the first time, he doesn't feel like asking.

He's so *tired*. For two days, Tim has been feeling a frustrating mix of numb, angry, and scared, and he absolutely hates it. He prides himself on emotional control, on rationality, but *one* little thing happens with his dad, and he's reduced to an exhausted mess? Jason definitely picks up on it, Tim can tell, but for once in their friendship, Jason doesn't actually pry. Maybe he's chalking Tim's mood up to the fact that his parents are leaving again. And it is, partly.

Tim gives up on studying the geometry theorem of the day, and lays his head on his folded arms, looking out the window through the dead tree branches. It isn't much of a view, but at least there's open sky in part of it. Tim concentrates on trying to stay silent enough to not attract notice while blowing a chunk of bangs off of his nose, and pointedly not think about how he feels relieved that his parents are gone again, and guilty that he's glad that they're gone when all he wants when they aren't around is for them to come back. It's a mess. He's a mess. He just wants someone to talk to him and make things okay, but that's not how life works. Tim knows *that* by now.

He's just got to get through the next few days, let himself simmer down again, and then things will be okay. Like they always are.

On Saturday, he gets a text from Jason and Dick.

We're coming over in 20. Be there or be square.

Tim almost goes out in the woods to hide somewhere just to spite them, but decides it's not worth it. They probably have some kind of hidden Bat-gadget that shows heat signatures or something.

Actually dressed this time, he opens the front door when they bang on it, and Jason immediately grabs him by the shoulders and starts frog-marching him down the hall. “Yo kid, look alive. We’re goin’ ice skating.”

“What the hell?” Tim splutters, more in shock at being manhandled than anything else.

“Ice skating,” Dick echoes, cheerfully. He hauls Tim up onto his bed like he weighs nothing, and starts wrestling his arms into a coat. Tim doesn’t even think to ask how they know where his room is. Jason throws a pair of thick socks, a hat, and gloves directly into Tim’s face.

“From Alfred,” he explains. “He’s on his annual knitting spree.”

“Oh,” Tim says, dumbly. He pulls on the socks, and Jason bends down to tug his boots on for him. “I’m—I’m not a little kid,” Tim protests.

“Never said you were.” Dick smiles at him. “But it’s faster when we help each other, and look. We’re already done. Let’s go, gang.”

And then Tim is being picked up in a bridal carry, and that’s just one thing too many. He elbows Jason in the ribs, expertly twisting out of his arms and landing on all fours like a cat. But before he can take more than a few steps, a strong arm wraps around him from behind, and he’s being tossed over a broad shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

“Nice try, kiddo,” Dick laughs. “But it’s tradition. Everyone knows you have to go ice skating on the very middle day of December.” They start down the stairs.

“That is the most fake thing I have ever heard in my *life*. Are you kidding me,” Tim says.

“Yeah, Dickface, do better,” Jason agrees. “Everyone knows the midpoint of December is when you’re supposed to do sword dancing in front of the Christmas tree to lay the groundwork for proper Santa Summoning.”

Tim can’t help laughing now. “You two are so full of lies I don’t know what to believe at this point!” And, yikes, that’s a bit more on the nose than he realized when he started to say it. Secret identities and vigilante nightlife and all, added in to the fact that Tim still had no clue why they kept trying to do things with him, made a sobering combination.

They reach the car, and to Tim’s shock, *Bruce Wayne himself* is leaned up against the driver’s side door, popping it open and leaning the seat forward when they get close, so that Tim and Jason can scramble into the backseat.

“Hello Tim,” Bruce says, a cheerful smile in place. It actually looks like one of his real ones. “It’s nice to see you again.”

“Hi Mr.—I mean. Hi Bruce,” Tim gets out. “It’s good to see you too.” Jason nudges him with his elbow, and Tim looks over to see Jason waggling his eyebrows. Tim slugs him back in the shoulder once he’s gotten his seatbelt clicked into place.

Dick leaps into the passenger seat and flicks on Christmas oldies, and once Bruce is sure everyone’s buckled, they’re off to the races.

They ended up at a small pond on someone's farm, somewhere rural. Tim's not sure if the place is being used at the moment. But the ice is thick, and the day is warm enough to be pleasant in a proper coat, and it's honestly impossible to not have fun when Dick and Jason are both around. They play tag for a while, and crack-the-whip (although Bruce quickly puts a stop to that after the first time someone snaps off right into a thicket of frozen reeds). There's hot chocolate in thermoses courtesy of Alfred and Dick, for when they want a little extra warmth.

Then Dick and Jason come up with the brilliant idea of spinning really fast while holding hands and seeing who centrifugal force sends flying first—aka, who's the weakling. Bruce points out that inertia and mass give unfair advantage, and Jason tells him to buzz off. Bruce just laughs, and Tim watches with some surprise.

Tim is at a definite disadvantage compared with the older boys, so after a few rounds he begs off and just skates around in loops by himself instead. Dick and Jason link their hands to go for it again, each threatening to send the other careening into oblivion. As Tim is passing near Bruce, thinking about how pretty the landscape would be to shoot out here, Bruce suddenly reaches out and yanks Tim backwards, hard, into his arms, wrapping him up securely against his own chest so he can't fall. Tim blinks, and half a second later Jason is flying past them right where Tim was about to be moments before.

"Sorry Tim," Dick calls from across the pond. "We weren't thinking about angles well enough!"

Bruce's arms are still solid and warm across Tim's chest. His red scarf is brushing the side of Tim's face, the wool slightly itchy against his skin. Tim looks up, and Bruce is watching Dick and Jason as they bicker over who won the round and who's turn it is to be flung next, and Tim feels like something inside him is warming up and swelling like the Grinch's heart when he realizes Bruce is smiling wide and real, and so softly no one would believe it if Tim told them. Even Bruce's eyes are crinkled with fond amusement as he watches his sons.

And Bruce is holding Tim like he belongs, tight and close, like this meant more than just Bruce pulling Tim out of harm's way for a moment.

Tim is still watching his face. "Bruce?" he asks quietly.

"Yeah?" And oh, god. Bruce is smiling down at *him* now, with that same face, it didn't go away when he turned to look at Tim.

Tim fiercely shoves down the itching that's building behind his eyes.

"Thank you," he says.

"Anytime, sport," assures Bruce. "I'm glad you came with us today." Tim snuffles a couple of times. A cold breeze has picked up around the surface of the pond, is all.

"Yeah," he says, and to his surprise, he really means it. "Me too."

Bruce lets go, then, pats him on the shoulder once and gently shoves him in the direction of Jason, skating towards them. Jason pulls Tim along over to Dick, who to Tim's absolute horror and delight, scoops him up and plops him on his shoulders like a toddler. Dick starts skating smoothly, just like that, and Tim *should* be mad but he *isn't*, and he's got so many feelings he doesn't even know how to name them all. So he laughs, instead, and hangs on underneath Dick's chin, tries not to strangle him.

And for a while, for the first time *in* a while, everything is pretty darn good in the world.

Chapter End Notes

Well I sure made MYSELF emotional writing this chapter. I hope you enjoyed it still! Even when it gets rough, I'm never going to leave things terrible. No one dies in this, and everyone WILL get happy endings. That's a promise.

just say you're hurt, we'll face the world

Chapter Summary

Tim gets sick. This time, he's got some people in his corner.

Chapter Notes

I apologize for any typos, I write these chapters on my phone during spare moments during long work shifts and since I was up at 4:15 AM I'm not the most awake I've ever been in my life, lol.

Chapter title is from Take on the World, by You Me At Six.

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

In the week and a half after his parents leave again, things settle back into a familiar routine for Tim. He goes to school, chases vigilantes, updates BatWatch nightly, continues to never get enough sleep, narrowly evades Oracle and Batman using So Many, Many Server Spoofs, and manages to drop some photos of criminal activity off with GCPD for Commissioner Gordon to share with Batman.

That last one is always tricky, because both Batman and the police had great security and precautionary measures, and Tim can't very well walk in and drop off an envelope anonymously if he wanted to do it more than once.

So the street kids end up helping, in a strange partnership. The older ones are always trying to get the youngest ones somewhere safer than the streets and hidey holes. Tim needs someone to go to the police for him on occasion. And they *all* know that any kid that popped up on Batman's radar tends to end up well taken care of in the end. So what if they worked together to kill two birds with one stone?

When Tim has evidence he feels is important enough that it needs to get to the authorities, he lets Callie know—she's the main ringleader of the kids he helps. One of the kindest 17-year-olds Tim's ever met, despite all the lousy cards she's been dealt so far in life. Callie then picks one of the younger kids who she thinks is best for it at the moment, points them out to Tim, and lets the magic happen.

And Tim, for his part, has never used his real name on the streets. His disguise is an identity, not just a costume. Tim wears glasses, a black wig in a style longer than his own haircut—Tim tends to run around with a small man bun most nights, to keep it out of the way. He

dresses mostly in black, with hints of punk and rock and roll influence. The only name he gives, when necessary, is Jack Kelly. (Surprisingly, not a single soul has called him out on that yet.)

When the kid inevitably gets directed into the police station, sealed and fingerprint-free manilla envelope in hand, all they know is a fake name and a description that matches what every kid before them has said. It keeps Tim safe, creates a sort of routine for the police that arouses minimum suspicion, gets hurting kids fast-tracked onto Gordon and Batman's radar, and into better housing at the very least. Tim just wishes he could make it work for *all* the other kids he runs into while pounding the streets in Gotham's neighborhoods, not just these few.

So all in all, Tim was doing well. He has no reason to suspect anything would go wrong. Batman and Robin end up dealing with an Arkham breakout Wednesday night, which means Tim, of course, is out as late as they are, keeping tabs on the situation for the blog. Many Gotham natives have alerts turned on for his posts; over the past couple of years, BatWatch has gained a reputation for timely, reputable information. Even the police use it for reference on occasion.

When Tim trudges his way home that night, he's flat out exhausted. Nothing would be better than to sleep for a week, but Tim has a math test tomorrow and honestly, he has no idea how Dick and Jason have managed all this time.

He manages to change from his night gear into sweatpants and an old shirt, and grab a Gatorade, and then he's out like a light on the sofa.

He wakes up with a start some time later, confused and feeling off. Wisps of an unpleasant dream are flitting around in his memory for a few moments as he tries to orient himself—something about being trapped inside of a giant cathedral with his mother slowly catching up to him to scold him for something, while he tries to run away but can't get any of the faceless bystanders from the shadows to help him. It makes no sense, of course.

The clock above the fireplace says it's still only a bit after 3 a.m., and Tim rolls off the sofa to tumble on the hardwood floor with a groan. He lies where he's fallen for a few minutes, soaking up the blessed coolness against his cheek and arm. He's shivering, deep down to his bones, but he's sweaty too, and if Tim doesn't have a fever, he'll eat his sneakers. He'd been fine a few hours ago. Of course it's just his luck that he'd start getting sick right before a big test day.

It's not the worst thing ever, Tim thinks as he drags himself up the stairs to his room. He's taken tests while sick before, and as long as he can just space out the rest of the day or get Mrs. Mac to come get him if the nurse calls him out sick, it's always fine. He just needs to not be quite so fuzzy. And dizzy. Tim's pretty sure he's supposed to be able to see more than this. Everything's *really* gray.

Maybe he's dehydrated. That would make sense, if he's got a fever. He was running around for hours and not drinking much water. His throat is sore too, where it had just had a tickle

earlier in the day. Tim should have known that something was up when that made itself known around dinnertime. But alas, hindsight is always 20/20, right?

Tim's in his room, he's made it, and he's just got to get to the bathroom for some water. He's so, so tired. His muscles are rebelling, not working right, too slow. He already whacked his shoulder on the doorway on his way in. Tim is stumbling for the bathroom, and his vision goes out, everything is gray and dark. It flickers back in for a second, hazy still, just clear enough for Tim to stick out a hand and catch himself as he slides down the wall, and now his vision is all charcoal and Gotham sky at night, and there's flashing green at the edges, and his ears ring, and his body is somewhere on another plane of existence, he guesses, because it sure isn't with *him* anymore, and that's the last thing Tim remembers for a good long while.

Something uncomfortable is shaking Tim. He tries to protest, make some kind of movement to bat away what feels like hands touching, prodding, shifting, but all he can manage is a quiet hrrn noise that quickly gets shushed.

"Tim," he can hear, measured and calm. Smooth. It's like ironed aluminum foil to his ears. "Tim. Can you hear me."

Tim frowns, eyebrows furrowing slightly.

"Tim," the voice insists.

And Tim tries, he really does, shifts as much as he can, drags his eyelids open just a crack. He can barely see anything through his eyelashes. It's bright. Way too bright. Tim groans. What's going on?

A hand is back, on his forehead this time, so cool, and a soft keening noise comes out of Tim's throat that he didn't know he could even make. The hand moves through his hair, rests knuckles behind his ear for a moment, and somehow Tim feels like crying.

"Yeah, I've got him," Tim hears distantly. It sounds like the other voice is on the opposite side of wall of rushing water. "...was right to...sick. I'm worried he...dehydrated. Yeah. Yeah, I'm bringing...moment. Can...get the...guest room ready? Thanks."

Tim is drifting again. He's really tired. *That hand was nice*, he thinks. *It won't mind if he sleeps for a while. Right?* He's drifting again, possibly for moments, possibly for hours. It doesn't matter to him either way.

"Tim, buddy," It's the voice again. And the hand! The hand is back. Tim perks up, twists his head with what little energy he can, nestling further into the touch. "Hi," says the voice. "You with me now?"

Tim hums. It's too hard to open his eyes.

"I'm taking you home with me." And wait. *Stranger danger*, Tim thinks. *Street smarts! You ain't taking me to no secondary location, mister!* Isn't he supposed to...not go with people? But he's not really scared this time. He's too tired. And the voice is familiar, anyway, even if

he can't quite place it. The blessed hand smooths over his forehead again, twice. "It's going to be okay."

Okay, Tim thinks. If the hand stays, I trust you, I guess.

The hand, unfortunately, disappears as if it can hear Tim's thoughts. He huffs, displeased. But then it's *back*, sliding under his shoulders and holding on tight, and another slips behind his knees, bunching up his flannel pajamas, and Tim's heart swoops through the air as he's lifted like a baby. The arms pull him tight up against a hard chest, stable, gentle. Tim curls into the chest. Relaxes a little more. He's definitely not going to be dropped, not with this kind of strength.

"I've got you," the voice says, deep and soft, and Tim thinks *I don't mind this too much after all*. It's new, but good. For the first time in a long, long time, Tim feels like maybe it's safe to let go. Just a little bit. Just till he feels a little better.

And then he's asleep, wrapped up in strong arms and a promise and the warmth of a fever that he knows is going to be okay.

The next time Tim is actually marginally aware of his own existence, he's on something soft, wrapped up in warmth, and his head is smashed down into a stupidly puffy pillow. He never sleeps on pillows that soft. Clearly, he's not in his own bed, which means he's not in his room, which means...he has no idea what that means, *okay*, sue him, he's sick.

Tim drags his eyes open, which is a bit easier than earlier, or what he assumes was earlier. He doesn't feel *quite* as much like a limp pile of goo now. Still cold, though, which Tim takes as confirmation he probably still has a fever. He feels gross, both inside and out.

"Timothy?" A figure drifts into his narrow field of vision from off to the side, and he knows that voice. Alfred.

"Mr. Pennyworth?" Tim's voice is hardly clear enough to be called a rasp.

"Just a moment," Alfred says, and then a straw is between Tim's lips and he's taking a few sips of the best water he's ever tasted in his life. So cool. So smooth. It's perfect. God's choirs of angels should sing hymns about this water. And wait, Alfred is speaking again, oops.

"You were dehydrated, but we're getting fluids in you now, and medicine. You'll be all right," murmurs Alfred, and he pulls the straw away after a few more moments, and Tim wants so badly to ask what's going on, why Alfred is here, where Tim even is, but he's already drifting off again, already spent from that small effort. He's too tired to even dream.

Tim feels about 60% more human the next time he wakes up, and figures his fever must have gone down. The sweat-soaked sheets he's on seem to confirm this theory, and he shifts around, a little uncomfortable.

"Tim?" And oh. Oh no, that's—

“*Tim!* God. Don’t ever do this to us *again*. My poor heart can’t take it.” Tim ignores Jason’s theatrics for a moment to open his eyes and confirm that yes, that first voice was indeed Bruce Wayne himself, who for some reason is *sitting at Tim’s bedside*. In an unfamiliar room, too. *Must be Wayne Manor*, Tim thinks, and maybe he should be upset that he’s not at home right now, but mostly all he feels is *tired*. There’ll be plenty of time for emotions later.

“Hi,” Tim says, and his voice is better than before. He’s still surprised at how much energy just speaking seems to take out of him at the moment.

“Hi yourself,” says Bruce. “You back with us now?”

“Uh. I think so.”

“Tim, Where’s Mrs. Mac?”

Tim coughs a few times, closing his eyes. It should be illegal for *eyelids* to be sore. That’s just not fair. “She comes on Wednesdays and Saturdays. S’posed to call her if I need her other times.”

“Why didn’t you call her?” Bruce asks, and surprisingly there’s no tone of judgement Tim can discern. Just a genuine question.

“I didn’t...it was really fast,” sighs Tim. He opens his eyes again, and Bruce and Jason are watching attentively. “I didn’t feel sick earlier. It hit me in like, an hour. I didn’t mean to fall asleep on the floor, I was going to call after I got some water.”

“Tim, buddy, I think you passed out more than fell asleep,” Bruce says, gently. “When I brought you over here, your fever was at 103.8.”

“What?” Tim says. Then, belatedly, “Why’d you come over?”

“You didn’t show up at school this morning,” Jason interjects. “Figured maybe you were just late, but when you weren’t anywhere by lunchtime and the no one in the school office had gotten any calls about you not being able to make it today, I panicked and called Alfred. Then he sent Bruce over, since Bruce was home today, and then B totally panicked when there was no answer at your house and broke in, and it’s a good thing he did since you were unresponsive on the floor, kid. You can’t keep going like this.”

“Jason,” says Bruce, and there’s a little bit of warning in his voice. “There’s time for that conversation later, when Tim is feeling better.”

“Fine,” Jason sighs. “But seriously, Tim, you should’ve been awake to see it, B was *worried*.”

“You weren’t even here,” Bruce objects. “How would you know what I was like?”

“Alfred was, and Alfie tells me everything over tea.” Jason sounds smug.

Tim laughs, regretting it a little when it sets off his still-sore throat. Bruce helps him sit up through the coughing jag, and then lays him down gently again afterward.

“Sorry,” Tim wheezes.

“You’ve got nothing to apologize for,” Bruce says. He leans forward, hands clasped between his knees, and makes sure he’s got Tim’s full attention before he speaks. “Okay, here are the facts. You’re sick with a very bad flu. We’ve got you on an IV for fluids because you were dehydrated, and also on IV fever reducer. We’ll switch you to a pill for that in a few hours. You’re going to stay here until you’re recovered, at least, because there’s no way we can in good conscience let you go back to an empty house while sick alone. You’re going to rest, and eat what Alfred gives you, and you’re not any kind of imposition on us. Understand? We’re very glad to have you here.”

“Okay,” Tim mumbles. “Still sorry.”

“Dumbass,” says Jason, fondly, and Bruce whacks him softly in the back of the head with a notebook.

Tim grins tiredly.

“Go on back to sleep,” says Bruce. “We’ve got this. Just rest up and feel better. We’ll wake you when it's time to eat or drink.”

“Okay,” Tim says again, and if Batman and Robin want him to trust them, the least he can do is give them that. He has time enough to feel guilty for taking their time up later, when he’s not feeling vaguely like roadkill and baked clam.

It’s nice not being alone, this time.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Tim. I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! Next chapter is already in the works (and it's a lot more plot and Important Discussion heavy!) so look out for that to be posted within the next day or two. I hope you have a wonderful day!!! Your comments are so lovely, thank you so much, you have no idea how much they inspire me to keep writing!

one step closer to the ones we love

Chapter Summary

It's time for Bruce and Tim to have a talk. One of several that will be necessary in the coming months, but, you know. Baby steps.

Chapter Notes

CPP is New Jersey's CPS department, within the DCF.

I hope today blesses you with any coffee or other warm drinks you would like to have and I hope you're doing well!

Chapter title from *You're Not Alone*, by the Mowgli's.

“Tim,” Bruce says, when it’s just the two of them left in the lounge. “We need to talk about something.”

Tim tenses, just slightly. He takes a deep breath, even and measured, as he turns to look at Bruce from where he sits bundled up in blankets on the couch.

Bruce raises a hand. “You’re not in trouble, Tim, don’t worry. You haven’t done anything wrong. I just want to talk with you about some logistics, okay?”

“Okay,” says Tim, and his fingers fidget with the tag on one of the blanket corners. He suddenly regrets insisting he felt better enough to come downstairs and watch *Star Wars* with the family.

But he’s been completely wiped out for three days in a row, and if Alfred and Bruce hadn’t allowed the change of scenery now that he finally has more energy, he was probably going to just wear away at Jason until he helped Tim somewhere else in the manor anyway.

Alfred, wise to the ways of growing boys (he had raised a particularly precocious one first, after all, and the trend only continued from there), had rendered that unnecessary by saying yes to Tim’s plea.

So Tim is on the couch, and Bruce is in a chair, and no one is around to help Tim speed-shuffle somewhere (anywhere) else. He curses his still-weak muscles and joints.

“I want to clarify a few things before we talk about details, if that’s all right with you,” Bruce says. Tim nods. “You said Mrs. Mac comes on Wednesdays and Saturdays?”

“Yeah,” Tim says. “She comes early those days, cooks breakfast for both of us, and then does all the regular cleaning and housework. If I need her for other things, she’ll come if I call or text. And if my parents are home, she comes more days. Because there’s more dishes, and trash and stuff.”

“That makes sense. Has it always been like that at your house?”

“No, I used to have a nanny that was around most of the time. She’d do meals and stuff, and make sure I woke up and got to school, and went to bed on time.”

“When did you stop having a nanny?”

“The summer before I started eighth grade. That was our trial run, to make sure I would be responsible about a schedule and living in the house without someone to keep tabs on me all day. Make sure I didn’t, y’know, burn down the house on accident, or anything stupid. Mrs. Mac checked in every day back then, for an hour or two.”

“Hm,” says Bruce, and he sounds carefully neutral. Tim doesn’t like where this line of questioning seems to be headed. “What happens if something goes wrong, like a big storm, or you getting sick like last week?”

“I almost never get sick,” Tim says, a little defensively. “And I can take care of myself just fine. It’s not hard. Stay hydrated, eat soup, get rest. No one needs to watch me sleep all day. And if the power goes out from a storm, I call the power company and grab flashlights. It’s not complicated! It’s always worked out fine.”

“I apologize,” Bruce says, spreading his arms a little bit wider on the arms of his chair, opening himself up. A little of the defensive knot snarled up in Tim’s chest loosens. “I didn’t mean to offend you, Tim. You’ve done a great job taking care of yourself and the house for a long time.”

“Thanks,” Tim mutters. He wants this conversation to be over. But Bruce doesn’t look like he’s going anywhere soon.

“That being said,” Bruce adds, and here it is, Tim *knew* it. He’s planned for this exact conversation, amid the hundreds and hundreds of situations planned contingencies for over the years. Tim is *prepared* .

“You *can’t* call CPP on me,” he says, more of a demand than anything else.

Bruce closes his mouth, tilts his head slightly. Tim goes on. “First, even if you contacted them right now, and convinced them to open a case for me, my parents are out of the country until sometime in late February or March. They’re only taking communication from a few select people during that time, and even then it can be spotty because they’re working in the field, and there’s often nothing but satellite phone service. An open case can’t move forward

through the process unless the parents are able to be contacted and involved, so CPP's hands would be tied."

Bruce actually looks a little surprised now, sits up straighter. He's giving Tim his full attention, which is a little nerve-wracking since, y'know, that's *Batman* six feet away from Tim, and Tim is essentially trying to *out-logic Batman*, and oh god what is even happening in his life anymore?

But Timothy Jackson Drake is nothing if not logical and tenacious, so onward he goes. This *has* to work. He didn't expect it to be Batman he was having to have this conversation with, of all people, but at the end of the day a grown-up is a grown-up and Tim is *not* willing to get shuffled into the system. He meets too many of the kids it's failed. There's a lot of kids it doesn't, sure, and the system itself is necessary in society. Tim knows that.

But he's not going to be one of the kids in it. He's only four years away from being legal, anyway, and it's not like there's been a problem with his family's setup so far.

"Second," he goes on, gathering steam. "I currently have a stable life, with a solid living system, and all my financial, physical, and educational needs are met and *well* exceeded. I live in an extremely safe neighborhood, go to an excellent academy, and never am left to go hungry or cold or anything else for even one day in my life. That's worlds better than what many kids have, and CPP needs to devote their strained and overwhelmed resources to the kids who are in *actually bad* situations. Just because I have minimal adult supervision, it doesn't mean I'm in any danger.

"I'm mature for my age, which any adult who knows me at *all* will confirm under questioning, and I'm extremely responsible. I have no disciplinary marks from any school I've been enrolled at. I have the money and knowledge to call for help for anything that needs to be done for the house or for myself that I can't handle easily. The most dangerous thing that's happened since my nanny moved on to a different job is the time I put Oreo Cakesters in the microwave and they sparked twice because I didn't realize the packet was foil and not plastic." Tim pauses for a breath, stamping down the need to cough because it would interrupt this *whole thing*, and he can't afford that.

"Third," he says firmly, and here it is, his trump card. "If I have reason to believe that you or anyone else is planning to file a report of neglect to CPP or any other authority in the state of New Jersey, including the GCPD, I can and will *immediately* put into action my backup plan, which involves Mrs. Mac being paid *very* generously to both have a presence in the Drake residence every single day of the week again *and* state to anyone who asks that she has been doing so for years. Also, all peripheral staff that works at my home occasionally for things like landscaping will have incentive to confirm that narrative, including an overnight nanny I will immediately hire. CPP will have no case they can confirm enough to act on, and once my parents return from their current trip they can raise hellfire in this city's media strongly enough that the scandal will turn public opinion against the CPP and the case will fizzle into oblivion. Even digging up records proving how much my parents are out of the country won't be enough to make any changes happen, because I have the resources to get records produced on my end for all involved parties that would prove that I have had proper supervision every day of the week during said periods."

Bruce, by this point, has leaned back in his chair, looking equal parts surprised and amused. Tim isn't sure that's a good sign.

"I'm not willing to go quietly, if it comes to that, Mr. Wayne. That's all," he finishes, and waits for the verdict.

"Well," says Bruce, after a moment. "That was certainly thoroughly thought out. You've been planning for this for a while, I assume?" Tim nods, and finally allows himself the coughing fit he's been suppressing. Maybe it'll give him bonus sympathy points from Bruce.

Who is he kidding? This is Batman.

"I'm impressed," Bruce says. He leans forward a bit. "But that wasn't necessary, Tim."

What? Tim's brain grinds to a halt. *What?*

"I wasn't planning on contacting CPP—at least, not right now. Partly for some of the very reasons you mentioned a few minutes ago. Your situation is definitely not usual, you're correct. Your parents aren't around at the moment to have any kind of discussion with. And, as you have demonstrated consistently over the course of time we've known you so far, you *are* a very independent young adult, with self-sufficiency that many full-grown adults could learn a thing or two from."

Tim senses a *but* coming.

"But," says Bruce, "By all rights, I legally *should*. Despite your admittedly well-crafted arguments to the contrary, you're technically a neglect case, because if something was to happen to you—*something like you getting sick enough to be unable to care for yourself*, say—there's no one around consistently to help in that situation. You've been lucky so far."

Tim huffs quietly, but keeps silent.

"So what I *propose*," Bruce says, pinning Tim with one of his intense looks, "is a compromise." He's got Tim's rapt attention now. "When do your parents return, exactly?"

"I told you, sometime around the end of February," Tim says.

"They didn't give you an exact date?"

"Sometimes they do, but they usually end up delayed a bit anyway. It's easier to just know a ballpark estimate, and hear from them when they're literally on their way home."

"Hm," says Bruce. "All right, so we'll say last week of February. It's mid-December now, and you and Jason start winter break in a week. You're already staying with us until you're fully recovered, and *yes*, I know you could technically take care of yourself if you go back now, but that's not the point."

"What is the point?"

“I want you to stay here, at the manor, with us. Until your parents come home, and Alfred and I can speak with them about our concerns and see if something can be worked out where you’re properly taken care of *without* needing to get CPP involved.”

“You—stay at—*here*? ” Tim squeaks out. “You want me...”

“To live with us, yes,” Bruce says mildly.

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

“But I have a *house*,” Tim protests. “And a life.”

“You’re not a prisoner.” Bruce laughs. “You can live with us and still do what you normally do. I know I’m not your actual guardian—though you don’t have much supervision anyway so that’s mostly a moot point. This way, you at least won’t have to feed yourself all the time, and Alfred, Jason, and I won’t be worried all the time about you being alone in that house with no company and no one to help if something is wrong.”

“I have your phone numbers.”

“Which you still haven’t used,” Bruce points out. “I’m not above using Jason against you, just so you know. He loves you. And he’s been lonely over here, since Dick moved into his own place. You’d be doing him a favor by staying here, and do *me* a favor by keeping him out of at least some of the trouble he cooks up to avoid boredom.”

“But I can’t just barge into your life. I don’t want to intrude.”

“*Tim*, ” and Bruce leans in, nearly closing the gap between the armchair and Tim’s blanket burrito. “You’re being invited. We want you here, because we like you, and because I want to know that you’re safe. It would be my pleasure to have you stay with us for a while.”

Tim is silent for a while, processing that. Trying to decide if Bruce truly means what he says, or if he’s just saying what he should in order to get Tim to agree. He wants so badly for it to be true, but Tim has learned over the years that it’s better to keep his hopes low and wariness up so he doesn’t get as hurt when he’s inevitably let down.

But Bruce is Batman, at the end of the day, and Batman has never shown himself to be untrustworthy. And right now, Bruce is speaking to Tim as Bruce, not in his Bruce Wayne Persona he puts on for the public. So maybe...maybe Tim can tentatively trust this. Enough to at least try, for a while.

“And if my parents aren’t happy about it?”

“I’ll deal with them,” Bruce assures.

Tim doubts Bruce will deal with them the way that it needs to be done. His parents are touchy. Tim knows how to navigate their moods, but Bruce has only experienced their company manners. Fake smiles on the lips of all parties. It takes experience to avoid any land

mines. But maybe if he makes sure he's back living at home before his parents arrive next, it can work out all right. And anyway, it's a problem for future Tim.

"You're really sure?" Tim asks, one more time.

"Absolutely."

"And no CPP until we talk with my parents?"

"No CPP," Bruce confirms. "And if someone else calls them, I'm already a certified foster parent in the system, and we could probably make a case for kinship care by saying I'm a family friend who already is a trusted presence in your life."

"Okay," Tim sighs, finally. "Thank you, Mr. Wayne. I appreciate your generosity."

"Bruce, remember," Bruce replies, with a smile. "Okay, Tim?"

"Bruce," says Tim, smiling tentatively back.

"FINALLY," Jason nearly hollers as he slams the door open. "Gee *whiz*, Timmers, I cannot believe it took you this long to agree. It's gonna be like a never-ending sleepover, dude, it's not that bad."

"Were you listening the whole time?" Tim croaks out, heart still pounding from the sudden entrance.

Jason shrugs. "Pretty much. What, you thought I'd actually stay away when an important conversation was happening?" Bruce pinches the bridge of his nose, tilting his face up to the rafters as is praying for patience. "*Please*. It's like you don't even know me.

Tim snorts, then realizes he does have another question, and looks shyly over at Bruce. "Um, do you...should I go home for Christmas?"

Bruce's brow furrows slightly. "Why? Do you have relatives coming to town?"

"No, I just...I don't want to intrude or anything. It's family time, and I'm sure you have traditions and everything."

"Our motto is the more the merrier," says Jason. He flops down on the couch next to Tim. "We're a hodgepodge family with hodgepodge holiday traditions that get shuffled around every year anyway. We can just add you in to the fun. If you want to go to church, Alfred drives whoever wants to go on Christmas morning, so don't worry about that part. He'll swing by more than one denomination's church for drop-offs and pick-ups, too, if you're not Episcopalian."

"I, uh," Tim says. "I'm actually Jewish?"

Jason blinks. "You are?"

Tim nods. He hopes he didn't misjudge. He doesn't think the Waynes are prejudiced people, but people often don't really know much about being Jewish, either, especially outside of the East End communities, and he really hopes he didn't just make everything awkward.

"What a coincidence," says Bruce, and he's got a genuine smile directed at Tim again. "So am I."

"You...?" Tim gapes for a moment, the only thought running through his head a repeating chorus of *Batman is Jewish?!*

"Secular or religious?" Bruce is asking.

"Um. Mostly secular. We only really attend synagogue during the holidays. I watch livestreams on Fridays, sometimes, but that's about it. We celebrate Christmas too, because Dad's not Jewish, and he always wants us to have a tree around, and stuff. But Mom and I always do the eight nights—or, we do when she's in town, anyway."

Bruce nods. "I'm happy to take you with me when I go for Shabbat during the week of Hanukkah. It's a shame we missed Rosh Hashanah, I'm always a bit uncomfortable attending alone. Maybe we can go together next year."

"Yeah, maybe," Tim agrees. He's still reeling slightly.

Dick chooses this moment to walk into the room on his hands, still in his uniform from work. "Oh, look, the gang's all here!" he sing-songs. He's got a grocery bag balanced on his feet, not even wobbling.

"Master Dick," Alfred says, walking in behind him calmly, on two feet like a sensible human being. "I would like to remind you that while there are designated areas for you to employ your acrobatics, the main hallway *is not*, and *never has been*, one of them. On your feet, as is befitting of a proper young man."

"Aw, Alfred, where's the fun in that?" Dick complains, but he still flips upright, catching the bag with one hand and pecking a decidedly unmoved Alfred on the cheek.

"Bold of you to assume any of us have ever been proper young men even one day in our lives," Jason says, snorting.

"There is always hope," says Alfred, "no matter how hopeless a cause may seem."

"Hey!"

"*Boys,*" says Bruce, calmly, and the room magically settles. "I believe we're due for some dinner. And then perhaps a movie, after?"

"No way," Dick interjects. "I've got it covered this evening. We finally have enough people to make it worthwhile, so we're going to play Warlocks and Warriors. I'm already set up to DM."

Jason groans.

Tim, however, lights up like a Christmas tree. Getting sick? It's rapidly turning into one of the best things that's happened to him in *months*.

"*Fine*," Jason groans. *All right*. I won't name him Tjfuptguh. Party pooper."

Dick throws an arm out dramatically. "Oh, sorry, forgive me for needing to be able to pronounce my player's character names, *Jeeson Pertwee Toddler*."

"Shut up." Jason whacks Dick in the arm.

"I want to be a human rogue," Tim says, around a mouthful of brownie. "Like Batman. *I am the night*. They'll never see me coming."

"All right, sounds good. Roll for your stats," Dick says, smiling at Tim and ignoring Jason's rapidly escalating attempts to shove him off his dining room chair.

Bruce looks up from his spot across the table, stops chewing absently on the pencil eraser he's been tapping on his mouth. Frowns.

"I always thought Batman was more of a paladin," he says.

Tim's eyes widen slightly. Oh, *this*? This is golden. He can't let on that he knows anything. Oh man.

"Bruce. No," Dick says, not unkindly. "Are you kidding? Batman is the *essence* of a neutral good rogue. *Superman* is a lawful good paladin." Bruce frowns more.

"What about Nightwing?" Tim pipes up. He can hardly hide his grin.

Dick doesn't even blink. "Neutral good," he says, no hesitation.

"Saint Bernard dog," Jason says at the same time, and it's Dick's turn to whack him in the shoulder.

"That's not an alignment, stupid."

"Be nice," says Bruce, without any real bite.

"And Robin?" Tim asks.

Jason isn't quite as good as Dick at hiding his emotions. He puffs out his chest just a little as he declares, firmly, "Chaotic good." Dick and Bruce both nod without comment.

"Interesting," Tim murmurs.

He can't say he disagrees with them. Unfortunately, he's inadvertently spun them off into an hour long debate over what every single Teen Titans and Justice League member would be classified as, including a five minute argument about whether Green Lantern would be a wizard or a druid, and a solid ten minutes deciding if Superboy should count already since

he's still figuring out parts of being a living person in general and doesn't know all his *own* views on things yet.

Tim is still uncertain about how good an idea it is for him to stay with the Waynes, but everything so far is making him hopeful. As long as he doesn't drop his guard and is able to keep up with the important things, maybe...it just might work out pretty well, honestly. And it's certainly easier than having to manage operation Don't Get Thrown Into Foster Care Before Mom And Dad Get Back by himself on top of school and BatWatch. It's already a lot less lonely, at least (although he can't admit that to Bruce).

And after all, he's got time. It can't hurt to stick around for a while and see how things go.

with a thousand lies and a good disguise

Chapter Summary

Tim sneaks out of the Manor. Scarecrow makes an appearance. These things are, unfortunately, connected.

Chapter Notes

I am so tired I love you all you're AMAZING and SO kind I hope you enjoy this!!!!

Content warning for some mention of a drug ring and drug use among teenagers. Nothing graphic, nothing done by main characters.

Chapter title is from "You're Gonna Go Far, Kid", by The Offspring

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

So!

So.

Tim may have not thought this whole living situation through as well as he should have. (Not that he had much of a choice in the matter, really—Bruce Wayne tended to get his way in the end in most situations. But still.) This whole thing? The living-with-Batman-and-Robin-under-their-roof thing? The Batman's-paranoia-and-security-measures-are-extreme thing? A lot more complicated than Tim had anticipated.

Like, he knew Batman was paranoid and very, *very* good at his job. But Tim hadn't *realized*, had no true hint of the scope, no way to possibly understand what that meant in practice, in real life, outside of the city at night.

He sure has a good idea *now*.

Trying to figure out Batman's security measures is a goddamn *nightmare*. Tim knows he has no hope of predicting all of them, so he spends a lot of his free time just...poking around. Exploring. Innocently enough, always. It's completely reasonable for a newcomer to get lost in an unfamiliar setting as large as Wayne Manor.

He finds layer upon layer of security. Everywhere. Alarmed windows, hidden cameras, unhidden cameras, panic buttons galore. Jason, bless him, gives Tim a hushed heads-up that pretty much all areas of the roof have motion sensors, so if he's planning to sneak out for a

smoke or anything, he's gotta make sure to deactivate the nearby ones for the duration if he doesn't want an extremely panicked Bruce crashing through the roof access stairwell thinking someone's trying to break in.

Tim thanks him for the fair warning, and watches attentively as Jason demonstrates how to get around the security. In return, he shows Jason his camera and a few of his better wide angle shots of Gotham and Vernon State Park vistas, a carefully calculated risk. Tells Jason that he likes nature photography, and has been trying to take night sky photos from the roof of his house for a while now, so *thanks, Jason, he's probably going to end up using the info soon, yeah, really appreciate it. Please don't tell anyone, though, please, it's embarrassing, he doesn't like people knowing about his photos.*

"It's not embarrassing!" Jason says, hotly, and Tim is a little awed at how quickly Jason is offended on his behalf. "Photography is a completely respectable hobby to have, and from what I can see so far you're great at it. Anyone who's told you otherwise is a half-cooked brussels sprout."

Tim snorts.

"I just..." He pauses.

Does he play up the pity angle? He knows Jason is weak for it. Tim hates himself more than a little for how clearly he always reads people and knows how to manipulate them. He reads moods and watches micro expressions, engages in a delicate tango of interactions with the grace of a bomb defuser, and he always, *always* knows how to make people feel sympathy for him. He hates the manipulation, but it's gotten him out of so many binds over the years he can't bring himself to properly stop. But is now the right time?

He doesn't *want* to manipulate Jason. Never. Jason is all fire and warmth and an enormous good heart under the rough and tumble attitude he holds up against the world like a suit of armor. Tim doesn't want to use that against him. But the risk of being found out by Batman is so high, and Tim can't just stop his work for months on end—people depend on BatWatch. Value it. And besides, it's just about the only good thing Tim's accomplished so far in life, his one real success, even if it's secret no one else knows. He just...he *has* to.

"I just don't want any adults to know right now, okay. I don't want a repeat of my parents getting annoyed about it," Tim finally says, because that is, *technically*, true. "It's important to me. I need to protect what little self-confidence I still have about it." And that was a little bit *too* truthful, so Tim tries to laugh it off, downplay his slip.

Jason's not laughing.

O fuck, Tim thinks desperately. *Now you've done it. You made Jason get the "worried about you, but trying to hide it because I know attacking the issue head-on scares people off, but it's not working properly because I'm physically incapable of hiding my worry, unlike my more skilled mentor Batman who has a Stone Face Mode to rival Mount Rushmore" expression,* and boy oh boy Tim is in for it now. Jason's got his face screwed up, trying so hard to let the issue go like Tim wants, but Tim *knows* he's going to fail miserably in about three, two—

“Is *that* what happened with your parents?” Jason asks, question exploding out in a rush.

Huh. Didn’t make it to zero. Tim might need to adjust his internal Robin countdown timer, then, unless this turns out to be an isolated incident. *Need more data*, Tim thinks, and absently puts a pin in that thought to come back to at a less delicate time.

Tim clams up. He can almost feel the shuttering that Jason much be watching play out across his face right now.

“Tim,” Jason says, one hand out, conciliatory. Nonthreatening. Like Tim is a small animal about to spook. Tim isn’t sure if he feels offended by that or not.

“Jason,” Tim replies evenly.

“I thought you said they liked the photo books. Thought they were neat.”

Jason sounds upset now, and *ugh*, this is exactly why Tim didn’t and *didn’t want to talk about it*. The past is the past, he shouldn’t have gotten his hopes up, parents don’t want to be bothered with photography, lesson learned! Time to move on. It happened, it’s over, it doesn’t matter.

But now Jason’s going to be sad about it, and probably tell Dick, and make Dick sad, and both of them will be sad together at Tim, and Tim is allergic to people trying to pity him for no real reason, and *he needs to get out of here before it goes any further*.

“Jason, it doesn’t matter. There are way more people in the world than my parents, I’m sure someone will have a use for those books. I already donated them to Goodwill. It’s fine.” Jason, contrary to what Tim had hoped, now looks stricken.

“You—Tim!”

“I really have to go,” Tim blurts. “I’ve got...a thing. For history. Just remembered it’s due tomorrow. Thanks for showing me the roof, I appreciate it!” And he shoves through the rooftop access door before Jason can say another word.

Nine days into BatWatch’s self-imposed “*Sorry for vanishing, I had a personal emergency for a few days and now I’m going to be out of town for a bit ‘til everything has been sorted out*” hiatus, Tim is finally ready to hit the streets. He’s scoped out Wayne Manor inside and out, he’s extracted what information he can from Dick and Jason, he’s tweaked his disguise, and he’s figured out exactly which university wifi he’s going to use to update the blog that night. Because he definitely isn’t about to try using Wayne Manor’s network, which he’s positive is heavily monitored by both Bruce and Babs. Batman probably has an alert set to ping him if a BatWatch login was ever flagged in his home network packets

Tim isn’t about to give the whole game up that easily. It would be plain shameful, after all the hide and seek they’ve been doing for the past couple years.

So Tim is ready. Or as ready as he's ever going to be, anyway, short of explicitly asking someone *hey, hi, yeah, how would one go about sneaking out of Wayne Manor completely undetected? Just asking for science.*

He bids Alfred goodnight, throws a banana at Jason to remind him to eat before bed (patrol), waves at Bruce through the study's open doorway, and purportedly turns in for the evening. Tim stays curled up under blankets long enough to listen for the Manor to grow more or less silent, and then throws the covers off and drags his backpack from under the bed. He gives it one last check.

Ten minutes later, Tim is on the roof, headed for the gutters at the edge. He's got a rope already anchored to an AC unit, which Bruce thankfully had the foresight to have anchored solidly down into the rooftop with steel bolts. Tim rappels carefully over the roof edge, just like he practiced, until he can grasp one of the large limbs on a particularly good climbing tree and scramble down. He uses the ridiculous amount of hedges to sneak his way over to the Drake property line. From there, he takes his usual path to the city.

It's go time.

Tim's been out for a few hours, getting good shots of Batman and Robin and trying to collect dirt on a drug ring that sprung up in the Dockland over the past few weeks. Normally, he wouldn't be trying to get many shots of one of those—Batman tends to find them sooner rather than later and take care of the problem without outside help. But this one has been cutting weed and Molly with some really bad stuff, according to word on the street, and people are landing themselves in the hospital. A few unlucky souls even end up in the morgue.

Cocaine. Opiates. Sometimes various cleaning agents. The cut drugs were circulating among a younger crowd, mostly teenagers. No grown ups so far. Which means this ring is likely targeting the nearby school, and spreading out from there.

Tim doesn't like people who pick on kids. And neither does Batman. At *all* .

He snaps a shot of two of the men tearing open a stuffed turtle. Pulling out a baggie. Running its contents through their fingers like sand. Tasting it, touching a white-coated finger to their tongue and laughing. Chucking the baggie back into a box like it's not about to maybe ruin someone's entire life the next day. He takes photos of the crates, zooms in on labels and numbers, hoping to capture something that will be helpful in identifying a pipeline.

Tim's just about finished for the night, ready to compile tonight's post for BatWatch and then upload the evidence photos to the police dropbox, since Gordon will get the info to Batman within two days. They have a system between them, Gordon and Tim. Tim hacked Gordon's email once upon a time and let him know he was BatWatch and he wanted to help. Gordon, to Tim's delight, accepted. Few questions asked. (Working with Batman had probably desensitized the Commissioner's wariness towards nameless vigilante types somewhat, by then.)

Tim sends evidence to GCPD on a regular basis, but he only flags certain data dumps with “*It was a dark night tonight, but I managed to catch—*” and then ends the sentence with whatever the description is of his photos. Gordon knows those are for the Dark Knight of Gotham, and sets the wheels of fate in motion. Or so Tim likes to imagine.

So that’s the plan—post, evidence, crash in bed. But as Tim is preparing to pack up for the night, sudden motion a few shipping container rows over catches his eye. It’s too far away for him to make out clearly, but with his highest zoom lens he should be able to get a better look. He digs in his bag, carefully pulling out the wrapped and padded lens, slots it into the front of his camera.

And there’s Scarecrow. Bold as you please. Standing right next to a shipping container. Speaking calmly with one of the drug lords.

Oh, hell no. Shit, fuck, *and* damn, this is bad. No, make that capital-b, trademark symbol *Bad™*.

Tim ducks around a rooftop water tower’s leg to think for a minute.

Problem number one: Scarecrow is supposed to be in Arkham. If he’s out, there’s a possibility of other inmates being on the loose as well. Clearly Arkham isn’t aware of the problem, yet, because there’s been no push alert on Tim’s phone, and no sirens set off in the city. Which means aside from the criminals down below, Tim is likely the only person in the whole city who knows that Scarecrow is out and about. Which means Tim has got to do something about it, right?

Problem number two: Tim has stopped tracking Batman and Robin for the night. He has no idea if they’re even in Gotham proper anymore. For all Tim knows, they’re off getting ice cream or dealing with a domestic dispute on the other side of the river. He also doesn’t have a way of contacting them.

Problem three, and most pressing: Scarecrow deals in fear toxin. It’s his whole *thing*. It’s his magnum opus, his crowning jewel. *He* feels no fear, except when encountering Batman. And he’s addicted to that fear, wants to instill it in everyone else in the world. Scarecrow has tried multiple times over the years to poison Gotham—tainted candy, gas mains, water mains, aerosol balloons, fear-gas-filled party crackers on New Year’s Eve, and even an entire blimp one unhappily memorable summer. Scarecrow partnering with a drug ring is the *worst* kind of news. And Tim knows better than most citizens how much can be accomplished overnight in Gotham; if they reach an agreement down there, hundreds of pounds of drugs could be ready for distribution to unsuspecting teenagers by morning, laced with potent fear toxin instead of just aspirin or whatever else they’d planned on using tonight.

Tim has to *do something*. This can’t be allowed to happen. He has no way of contacting Batman, short of hollering at the top of his lungs, which would be just plain stupid. That’s a surefire way to get shot and hunted down if he’s ever heard one. He can call the police, but there’s no way they’ll arrive before Scarecrow would get enough warning to lickety-split and vanish to some hidey hole of a sewer or wherever he chooses to hide this time.

Tim groans quietly. He really, really doesn't want to do this.

He swings himself down onto the nearest fire escape anyway.

"Hi," Tim says, a little breathlessly, into his earpiece, the only thing he kept on him when he stashed his backpack on an unused rooftop. "Um, I'm by the shipping docks, and I want to report a Scarecrow sighting as of about ten minutes ago."

The keys he could hear clicking on the other end of the line go silent.

"Are you sure?" the dispatcher sounds distinctly less lively than when they first answered the phone.

"Yeah, pretty sure," Tim replies. "Since I can see him talking with another criminal right now." He throws himself into a leap and handsprings off a ledge onto the building's lower roof, takes off running to vault a narrow alleyway and lands on the roof of the next building over. Ancient gravel pieces crackle under his sneakers, and he skids.

"Just a moment," the dispatcher says, faintly, and there's a click on the line.

"Hello?" And Comisioner Gordon is on the call.

Huh. *That's convenient*, Tim thinks, then bites back a curse as he rolls his ankle while landing another jump. He may be a lot better than he used to be at freerunning (a *none success with left broken wrist* video on YouTube, courtesy of Ives, was the highlight of his earliest attempts), but he's no Robin.

"Comissioner," Tim says, quiet and confident. He's perched on the closest rooftop to Scarecrow now. The two men are still discussing the deal. He can see the drug lord waving his hands in sweeping gestures, while Scarecrow leans in slightly, seeming thoroughly engaged. "I'm reporting Scarecrow loose in Gotham."

"Where," Gordon says, and this is why Tim loves him. No questioning, no nonsense, no dilly-dallying, no fear in his voice for criminals to pick up on. Just trust. Just action. Tim would bet a Doritos Locos taco that Gordon is already yanking on his coat and heading out of the office door to alert the precinct.

"Shipping docks, northernmost area," Tim says. "He's talking with a drug lord."

"Shit." Gordon is quiet, but Tim picks up on it anyway.

"Yeah," he agrees. "The drug shipments are nearby, but I don't know if your men will have time to tackle that and still catch Scarecrow. He's in the process of making some kind of deal, and if it goes down the kids in the area high school are going to be landing in the hospital with a 100% success rate. I'd bet anything. They have the drugs hidden in stuffed turtles this time, for the record."

"Who *are* you?" Gordon demands, and Tim can hear the chaos of a precinct swirling into motion, the sound of car doors slamming. A car starting. "Get *out* of there. It's dangerous."

Tim thinks hard. Gordon has no clue who he is, and Tim's disguise is good enough that even if the police spot him, he could never be linked back to Timothy Drake by any facial recognition, human *or* software based. His voice could be a weak spot, maybe, but Tim is using a completely different accent right now than his normal. And Gordon trusts who he *really* is.

"BatWatch," he answers, finally.

"You kidding me?"

"No sir," Tim hisses. "And I gotta go. Call Bats. Flick the signal. Scarecrow always wants *him*. He'll stay for a showdown."

"*Get out of there!*" Gordon really means it. Tim feels bad for the genuine distress he can hear in the Commissioner's voice.

"Sorry," he says. "Good luck." He ends the call.

Tim picks his way down the stone corner pieces of the decrepit apartment building as quietly as he can, afraid that even looking at the rusty fire escape for a second too long might cause it to start creaking. There are police sirens faintly in the distance now, and Tim kind of wants to cry, or take a sledgehammer to some old cabinets and go to town. The police never seem to realize that if they give advance warning that they know something's up, the criminals are going to have time to prepare or get away instead of being caught by surprise. But habits die hard, he guesses, even in a place as crazy as Gotham.

Scarecrow is going to bolt if Tim doesn't do something *right now*. And it's stupid. It's awful, terrible, absolutely *batshit* insane, Tim could get *seen*, Tim could get gassed, Tim could get *shot*. But he's up and running across the last gap, scrambling quietly up the side of a shipping container stack. Just as the city's warning sirens begin spinning to life, eerily echoing through the rows of containers, Tim throws with all his might, and a batarang embeds itself in the metal just inches away from Scarecrow's shoulder.

Scarecrow whips around, mask firmly in place, scanning the stacks for his enemy.

"*Batman*," he hisses, and Tim has got to be careful now, he has to do this right.

The drug lord is armed. Tim is thirteen. Batman has training, and Tim can barely make four park bench vaults in a row. But he can *do this*. There are lives on the line.

He just has to hold out until Batman arrives for real. He's the distraction.

Tim leaps onto another stack, wincing at the *clang* his landing makes. He hits the deck, waits for the gunfire to stop, jabs play on his phone's voice memo app.

"Scarecrow," and that's Batman's growl coming out, echoing, hopefully strongly enough that Scarecrow won't realize it's not just from a speaker. There's a thud on the side of his stack, and a laugh from Dr. Crane, and Tim *books it*.

Come on Batman, COME ON BATMAN, and Tim is in the *worst* game of cat-and-mouse he's ever played in his life. The container stacks are endless, and he's so tired. Scarecrow has started throwing gas bombs everywhere he runs. The air is clouding over, turning into a toxic fog. Tim wedges himself in a gap just long enough to yank out the standard Gotham gas mask he always packs for these nights, but it's only rated for ten minutes in one of Crane's concoctions. Tim's on a timer now, and he'll have to either accept a fear gassing or bail when it runs out.

There's panic among the rows of stacks now, as lackeys and low level criminals get hit by the toxin. Panicked firing starts up everywhere, and Tim hopes all the police are staying well clear, gearing up the tactical teams they've no doubt trucked in.

Come on, Batman.

Tim's got less than a minute left of safe air. He can't see where he is anymore, and at this point he doesn't care. He's just picked a direction and he's *running*. He's down at the ground now, because speed and surprise are the only advantages he has at this point. And so far, there haven't been any gunshots from up ahead.

"Crane," he hears, deep gravel in a human throat, and *oh thank god. Finally.*

There's intense banging behind him now, and an enraged yell from Scarecrow. Batman grunts. Tim keeps running.

Right off the edge of the harbor platform.

He only has time to let out one shout of surprise when the ground drops away suddenly, and then he's hitting the icy water, gasping out what little precious air is still in his lungs. Tim struggles to the surface, breaks it with a deep gasp. He's got maybe a minute, maybe two before he can't keep himself up anymore. And Tim isn't familiar with the harbor.

He swims along the shore as best he can.

Tim's arms are turning to ice, and then to heavy warm lead, and then to nearly nothing at all. He's a battery, being drained to zero from the outside in, layer by layer by layer, each part powering down to black like an old TV. And he's just so tired. He's beginning to slip, head dipping below the surface over and over now, like one of the drinking bird toys he remembers from elementary school.

And then suddenly there's an arm hooking around him, armpit to armpit, and he's yanked upwards like a shot.

"I've got you, it's okay, I got you," and it's Jason. Robin. Tim is shivering too hard to speak.

Robin lets go of the grapple line and hauls Tim onto flat ground, yanking a metallic space blanket out of a pouch from his belt. Tim always loved those as a kid—couldn't believe how small they folded up, how well the foil really *did* trap and reflect heat energy. His parents thought they were stupid, and never let him buy one from the museum gift shop.

Good thing Batman didn't agree with them, he thinks, distantly, and Robin is yelling something, *Batman*, maybe, he thinks, and.

No. No no no no no *no*. Tim can't—his disguise is good but it's *Batman*, and he's too *tired*, he's so cold, he can't think straight—he can't lie properly to Batman like *this* —

Large arms are under him, and he's being lifted like he weighs nothing, held tight against a strong chest for the second time in as many weeks. But this time there's kevlar and body armor and a thick cape, not soft jersey knit, and he's cold, not hot.

But the words are the same, Tim realizes, blinking up in spotty street lighting at his hero, and when Batman says *It's going to be okay, I've got you*, Tim can almost believe it.

Chapter End Notes

I REALLY HOPE YOU LIKED THIS. I never end things with a cliffhanger like this, so I hope it was alright! I probably won't do any other cliffhangers for the rest of the story. Next chapter should be up tomorrow evening or night, don't worry, I'll get it written :)

you can still feel small though you are grown

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of Tim's misadventure, and also quality Batdad™ featuring Overthinking Tim Drake.

Chapter Notes

I have gotten 8.7 hrs of sleep in the past 2 days thanks to work and I'm not the most coherent rn, and I have to go to sleep so I can help wrangle chickens tomorrow, but I've cried six times over how grateful I am for all of you readers, thank you for brightening up my life and walking with me on this fic journey <3

Chapter title is from Walking Away by Regina Spektor.

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

He blinks awake to the bland interior of a police car. *Probably one of the SUVs*, Tim assumes, since the backseat he's sprawled out in is larger and more comfortable than he expected.

He wiggles around for a moment, taking stock. He feels surprisingly fine, considering the last thing he remembers is passing out in Batman's arms. The rustling of what has to be at *least* five separate shock blankets piled on top of him alerts the car's other occupant that Tim's awake. Said figure twists around in the front seat, and Tim looks up to lock eyes with Commissioner Gordon himself.

"Hello, *BatWatch* ," Gordon says, and, well. It's been a good life, all things considered.

Tim is *so busted*.

By all rights, Tim should be being grilled by Batman and the police right now, have all his secrets exposed, and also maybe be sitting in a hospital room for overnight observation. Instead, his identity is still secret, Gordon decided to be merciful and whisk him away from the EMS personnel when Batman carried him over (not too hard, since there were so many gas and gunshot victims to deal with), and Tim is thanking *every possible god in every possible universe* for waterproof makeup and the girl who caught Tim's attention on youtube a few years back with *if the men find out we can shapeshift, they're going to tell the Church*.

Tim will have to put together a new look after tonight, but that's much better than having to deal with the fallout of being completely exposed. He'll take it. Tonight has been the closest call he's ever had.

"Contrary to what my behavior tonight would indicate," Tim informs Gordon as soon as he's got enough energy back to push himself upright, "I don't make a habit out of running into danger. I've lasted this long because I specifically stay back and use high quality zoom. Believe me, I don't plan on an encore anytime soon."

Gordon *hmmms* at him and takes a large sip of cold coffee. Tim looks at him from under his too-long wig that's now a disaster of undone man-bun, and wonders *why would you help me*, and *do you know your only daughter spent years as a vigilante and is still fighting crime as Oracle while away at college, do you know, Gordon, and how do you live with a thousand secrets every day?*

Once he's fully awake and sufficiently warmed up, Tim gets a Stern Talking To from Gordon, a dry sweatsuit three sizes too big, and a ride back across the bridge from the police commissioner himself.

"You're young," Gordon says, eyes on the road. "I do not want to know how young. I gotta have some plausible deniability, all right? Robin can be a painful exception, because he is effective and he's got backup and supervision from Batman. You're flying solo, kid. That's dangerous."

"I've avoided any trouble or sightings all the way up to now," Tim says. He's trying not to bristle too much. "I think I've proven I can manage myself fine."

Gordon looks over for a moment. Sighs.

"Where am I taking you?" he asks, after a couple minutes of silence.

"Bristol," Tim says, no hesitation. "Drop me off at the cemetery."

"Jesus Christ, kid."

Tim shrugs. "It's a central location. I can find my way from there."

"Yeah, without giving me any more clues as to where you're based. Smart." Gordon waves a hand in Tim's direction. "Take the blankets with you, at least, if you're gonna insist on walking outside for who knows how long."

Tim thanks him.

As they near their destination, Gordon puts the car in park at a stop sign and stares Tim down.

Tim tries not to flinch.

“If you pull *anything* like tonight’s stunt again,” Gordon says, “I am going *straight* to Batman and social services with everything I do know about you. You’re good at acting mature, and I don’t know where you learned even half of the skills you apparently have, but I’ve dealt with enough precocious teenagers in my career to know that you’re likely no 18-year-old under the disguise. What you’re doing isn’t safe.”

“Nothing in Gotham is,” Tim counters.

“Maybe so. But at the end of the day, a minor can’t be allowed to run the streets at night, chasing after vigilantes and criminals without any kind of backup. Hell, you shouldn’t be out at night at all. And I’m a mandated reporter by law. I can only lie to myself about plausible deniability for so long, kid.” Gordon sighs and starts the car moving again. “I’m giving you one chance, here. And that’s only because I know you normally *are* careful, and *will not be doing something like this again.*”

Tim is not going to win this battle if he chooses to fight it tonight.

“Understood?” Gordon asks.

“Understood,” Tim confirms, and they drive the last few miles in silence.

“Try and have a safe life, kid,” Commissioner Gordon offers as Tim lets himself out of the passenger door.

“Thanks,” Tim says, and he means it. “For everything. You’re a good man, Commissioner Gordon. You deserve to hear it from more people than just Batman.” Then Tim turns and runs, slipping behind tall grave markers out of Gordon’s sight.

Tim can’t sneak back into Wayne Manor like this, with too-big clothes and no equipment. So he goes home.

Tim showers the harbor stench off after he grabs his duplicate phone with the cloned SIM card in it. He’s never been more grateful to see no new messages before in his life. Tim updates BatWatch with what information and photos he gathered, and pulls in some Twitter updates from GCPD for good measure, to cover up his missing coverage of the Scarecrow incident.

Tim’s perched on his bed, in warm winter hiking clothes, rubbing his damp hair with a towel, when his phone rings.

And it’s *Bruce*.

He slides right to accept the call, feeling like a condemned man stepping up to the gallows.

“Hello?” Tim greets. Curse his cracking voice. Puberty can just die in a *fire*.

“*Tim,*” and Bruce’s voice is tight with emotion. Tim can’t quite tell if it’s relief or anger.

“Where are you?”

“Uh...” Tim has no idea what he should say at this point.

Error 404, Tim Drake not found, please try again later.

“I’m not angry with you,” Bruce adds. “I’m just worried. You weren’t in your room, and no one noticed you leave. What’s going on, Tim? Are you safe? Do you need me to come get you?”

Tim can’t lie to Batman’s face. Ears. Whatever. He just can’t do it.

“I’m at my house,” Tim says, finally. “I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. I didn’t mean to freak you out.”

Bruce sighs.

“Sorry,” Tim says again, miserably.

“It’s all right,” says Bruce. “I’m just glad you’re there and not lost in Gotham, or in a ditch, or out clubbing with college students.”

“No, I’m—I just got out of the shower. I’m in my bed. I’m okay.”

“Good.” There’s a pause for a few beats. “Tim,” Bruce says more softly. “If you’re having trouble adjusting to staying here with us, you can talk to me. We’ll make changes. I want you to be as comfortable and happy as possible. And if there’s something going on in your life, with school or family or a friend, I’m happy to help with that too. I hope we’re not driving you away, I know we’re not the most...traditional personalities. If Dick and Jason are being too pushy I can tell them to give you some space.”

“No, no, it’s been really great,” Tim tries to reassure him. *Shit*. He’s made Batman sad. “You’ve all been wonderful. Seriously.”

“I’ll take your word for it, for now. I’m just glad you’re *safe*. When I checked in on you for the night, and you weren’t in your bed, or anywhere on the premises, Alfred and I were pretty worried, bud.”

And, oh no. Is Tim about to cry? He’s had a long, exhausting night, he’s worn out from his icy swim, and Batman just said he *checked on Tim* as if that’s a thing Tim’s ever had anyone do before in his life. And Tim wasn’t even there for it? He *missed it*?

It’s kind of creepy, the concept of someone coming in your room while you’re asleep and just like, looking at you, or checking if you’re still breathing. Whatever people do when they check on kids in the movies. But it’s...

Does Bruce do that for *all* of them? Has he done it every night Tim’s been staying with them so far, and Tim never knew? Is it a Batman thing, where he just can’t relax enough to stop doing perimeter checks and make sure everyone is still alive, or is this just checking for the sake of checking? And how will Tim manage to sneak out of Wayne Manor at night now if Bruce does rounds when he gets back from patrol? Tim will have to always make it back before Batman if that’s true.

“Tim?” Bruce asks, and oh, right. They’re still having a conversation.

To his horror, Tim snuffles. Like a little kid.

And of course Bruce hears it. Because *Batman*.

“Tim, buddy, are you okay?” Bruce sounds stressed. “Hang on, I can come over, I’ll grab my coat right now.” There’s a loud thud in the background.

“It’s okay,” Tim says, wetly. “You don’t need to, don’t worry, I’m sorry—”

“I’m coming,” Bruce says firmly, and, well. Tim supposes that’s probably that, but he’s got to *try*.

“Seriously, I’m fine,” Tim protests. “I’ve just had a—it’s been a weird night, it’s fine, I’ll come back. You don’t need to worry about me. I can handle myself.”

“You don’t need to, though. It’s my *job* to worry about you. You’re still a kid, Tim, it’s okay to need some help every now and then. Even adults do. I’ll be there in six minutes.” The line goes dead.

Six minutes. With how large their properties are, the only way Bruce is getting to Drake Manor in six minutes is if he runs. Which means Batman, after a full night of crime fighting and a visit to Arkham, is running across manicured winter lawn full of frost, in the dark, at *stupid* o’clock in the morning, in probably pajamas and an overcoat, for *Tim*.

Batman is coming over because Tim can’t tell the *truth* and made Bruce Wayne think he needs a grown up shoulder to cry on, and god, what is Tim’s *life*.

Tim is prepared, he’s pretty sure, after throwing all incriminating evidence into a spare room’s closet, and getting himself wrapped up in his old comforter. He’s got a sufficiently sympathetic story lined up about what might have made him feel the urge to run away back to his own empty home late at night, even though he’s never indicated he’s particularly fond of the place during any other time. He’s done breathing exercises to get rid of the sniffing issue. He’s ready.

Bruce knocks, and Tim is opening the oppressive front doors, in this giant empty husk of a house that feels more like a tomb just waiting for Tim to fall far enough down the rabbit hole one day, and Tim opens his mouth to start, but.

“Tim,” Bruce says, opening his arms. “Hey. Whatever’s wrong, bud, it’s going to be okay. I’ve got you.”

And it’s just the *very* last straw. In a long, long line of straws. Does Bruce just have those two phrases on a broken record in his brain or something? Is it just a reaction to Tim specifically? How many times is Tim going to have Batman say the same thing to him in one month?

Tim is out of his body and hovering like a balloon from a tenuous string, paused in existence, maybe not even breathing. And there’s Bruce, patient and waiting, not pushing. Just handing

Tim the offer if he wants to accept it. And Tim, frozen in front of him, one hand on the door he's just shut in the awful echoing emptiness, one hand clutching the comforter around his neck like he's a little kid playing superheroes again. Always alone. Always doing it himself.

Nothing actually *happened* tonight, Tim isn't actually having a problem, but Bruce has come anyway. Bruce has showed up. Which very, very few people in Tim's life have ever done for him. And Bruce has to be *tired*, and sore, and want nothing more than to go sleep for a week, but he still looked for Tim, and worried, and ran a mile in the cold because he thought Tim needed a hug. And Tim could have *died* tonight, honest to god. It's finally beginning to set in.

And Tim is suddenly slamming back into his body, time no longer frozen in crystal. He looks at Bruce, between his warm, tired eyes and his open arms, sees the small nod of encouragement, and.

And and *and*.

Tim takes in one shuddering breath, launches himself across the cold tile at Bruce hard enough to bowl a smaller man over. But this is Batman, this is Bruce, and he just catches Tim and hauls him up into his arms like he weighs nothing, even though Tim knows he's heavier than he looks. Tim wraps his legs around Bruce's waist, shoves his face into a shoulder.

"It's okay, sweetheart," Bruce murmurs in his ear. "You can let go. I'll hold on for you, for a while. You can take a break."

Tim doesn't cry, but it's a near thing. He lets out an occasional choked gasp, shakes like a leaf against Bruce's chest until they both end up asleep in one of the numerous giant armchairs.

In the morning, Tim wakes up in his bed upstairs. Bruce is asleep on the floor below, leaned against the hard bed frame. He still has Tim's hand wrapped securely in his. Tim thinks that maybe, possibly, this is the kind of parent he's been missing all these years. He knows Bruce isn't *his*, not really, but...maybe this isn't just something that happens in stories after all. Maybe it *does* exist behind closed doors and lit windows. And maybe it could be okay...maybe it can be okay for Tim to try it out while he's got it, after all. Just for a while.

Maybe Tim can take a break, just this once, since Bruce really wants to be an adult for him for some reason. It's been so long since Tim didn't have to raise himself, he's not sure he remembers what he's supposed to *do*. But until his parents come back...he thinks he's willing to try.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT CHAPTER HAS SO MUCH FAMILY BONDING I PROMISE LIKE ALL OF IT stay tuned for it to be posted late tomorrow sometime unless I get eaten by an angry chicken!

(I'm working my way through replying to comments, if I haven't responded to yours yet, I will by the end of tomorrow <3)

unconditionally cared for by those who share our broken hearts

Chapter Summary

Hanukkah, Christmas, and secrets, oh my!

Chapter Notes

I Am So Sorry This Is Late, today was so busy like omg (chicken wrangling and knife sharpening went fine, and I GOT TO HOLD A RAINBOW PYTHON SHE WAS SO SWEET). But I DID IT, I got it written, and made myself emotional. I hope I did these scenes justice!

CONTENT WARNING: some child abuse is hinted at vaguely, and neglect is mentioned in offhand ways.

Chapter title is from Snow, by Sleeping At Last, which is the theme song for this whole chapter.

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

This time last year, Tim was alone and carefully setting up a little ten dollar hanukkah from Target in his bedroom window. He could've gotten out his mother's, set it up in a window downstairs. But without her there, it just...didn't feel right. Hanukkah was a holiday to be celebrated in your home, with family and friends, remembering a joyous miracle, and with no one else around...it was hard to feel much of the spirit and light. So Tim contented himself with a quiet observation of the holiday, and ate McDonald's hash browns reheated while singing quietly as he lit the tiny candles for each night.

But now, Tim is in the largest front facing room of Wayne Manor, next to Bruce Wayne himself. Dick, Jason and Mr. Pennyworth have joined them, even, standing a few paces back from the window. The room is full of light, and voices, and Dick's laughter rings out following something Alfred says. Jason elbows Dick in the ribs, and Bruce hides a slight smile as he opens a new box of matches.

Last year, Tim's first night of Hanukkah was dark, cold, and more lonely than he wanted to admit. Now, all he feels is warmth.

"It's time," Bruce says, when his watch alarm goes off, and everyone quiets. The faintest glow still rests just above where the Sun has fallen down below the horizon, and paints the

sky a deep and vibrant purple. Tim wishes he could capture it forever on his camera, this painted landscape behind Bruce's intricate old Hanukkah menorah.

"Tim?" Bruce says, pulling him out of his thoughts. "Do you want to do the honors?"

Tim freezes for a moment, brain feeling like a sparking circuit board. He's not the head of this house. And he was *technically* head of *his* house last year, since there was no one else in it, and it wasn't really all that great. It was—well. He kind of wants someone else to take care of things, for once. Wasn't that what he'd told Bruce the other night, after all?

"Thank you, but...I'd rather you do it," Tim says quietly. Bruce's smile is warm, no hint of disappointment to be found.

"Okay," he says, and then his hand is around Tim's shoulders as he walks them both up to the window.

Bruce hands the first candle to Tim, who carefully slots it into the first branch on the rightmost side of their hanukkiah. Then Bruce recites the first blessing, and the second, and Tim is in love with the way the Hebrew sounds in the quiet chant. Bruce's voice is not particularly beautiful, but it's deep, and solid, and for Tim it is inherently tied to the safety and awe of Batman in his mind. Bruce is a pillar in their world. And now he's reciting the blessings Tim's mother could not come home to say herself, in her own house, and Tim is afraid to let himself wonder if she's even actually reciting them at all.

It isn't the time to think poorly of others, he chides himself, and then relaxes into the last lines of the second blessing as Bruce's careful diction fills the silent room.

Because it is the first night, Tim joins Bruce in reciting the Shehechyanu blessing, and then everyone in the room joins in to sing *Maoz Tzur* except Tim. His mother has never included anything further in their candle lighting rituals. Maybe he can ask Jason to teach it to him later tonight, so he would know for the future.

When the song is over and the candle is lit, and the shamash nestled safely in it's center branch, Alfred claps once.

"And now," he says, breaking into a smile, "we eat."

"I call first," Jason shouts, and he's sprinting for the hallway.

"YOU GOT FIRST *LAST* YEAR, YOU CAN'T TAKE HALF THE PILE AGAIN," Dick hollers at Jason's back, and then he's off and running too.

Bruce shakes his head, and puts a hand on Tim's shoulder as they walk at the pace of normal human beings. "Sorry about them," he says. "Alfred's latkes only come once a year, and somewhere along the line Hanukkah in this house turned into a contest to see who can try to squirrel away the most latkes to be frozen and hidden from the others. As if Alfred would ever let them stay hidden that way."

“Indeed,” Alfred agrees, glancing over his shoulder at them. “If I allowed the boys to succeed, the treat would no longer be as special. *For everything there is a season*, the Bible says, and *never* is that more true than in matters of food and the unflagging mischief of young adults.”

Then Alfred is in the kitchen, sternly telling Jason to *get down from that refrigerator, young sir, and try to maintain at least some propriety during the Festival of Lights, if you please*, and also *that does not excuse you, Master Dick, from your appalling attempt to consume four latkes at once, settle down*. Tim stops entirely in his tracks a few paces from the door, overwhelmed suddenly by the sheer amount of life in the house. He’s spent so long in such a slow-moving home, where silence was the rule and every creak and draft was known and expected, and order was kept unfailingly.

The chaos here is normally a welcome difference. But tonight, suddenly, Tim is struck by panic in the hallway, and he wants nothing more than to flee for his house with its silent kitchen and empty rooms, and it’s so *stupid*, because he doesn’t even know *why*. He’d just be miserable there, alone and quiet and always left behind—and Tim wants to *stop* now, just stop thinking, stop being here, stop realizing things.

He was *fine* before he started hanging around the Waynes. He was perfectly fine with the way things were. Why does everything have to be so confusing now?

Bruce, apparently, has stopped with him, because there are hands cupping Tim’s face, and Bruce is crouched to meet Tim at eye level, calm and steady and so, so careful. Tim doesn’t understand, doesn’t get it, he’s so frustrated that these things keep happening. The touch on his face shouldn’t be making his eyes well up hot and damp. Brothers singing *Hanukkah Oh Hanukkah* off-key in someone else’s kitchen shouldn’t make his chest tight like it will never expand again. He shouldn’t be freaking out in a hallway for *no reason at all*.

And Bruce is telling him *Breathe, Tim, it’s all right. Just breathe in, like this*, and Tim’s eyes shutter closed. He tries so hard to breathe with Batman, slowly, calm. In and out, one thing at a time. *You’re alright*, Batman says, *it’s alright*, and Tim leans his head into Bruce’s shoulder and just breathes.

They don’t talk about Tim’s brief freak out afterwards, just head into the kitchen for latkes and some truly *incredible* Nutella rugelach that melts in Tim’s mouth.

“Sour cream is best,” Bruce says, at one point, and Alfred groans.

Every year. They do this every year, without fail, and *every year* it goes exactly the same way. Bruce staunchly stands by his belief that dipping latkes in sour cream is the only true way to eat them, thanks to his father’s influence long ago. Then Jason will counter with applesauce, and Dick inevitably disgusts them both by insisting that they might as well dip the latkes in ketchup since they’re glorified hashbrowns anyway, and gets himself promptly banished from the kitchen for several minutes. Except *this* year, one small thing is different.

“I always prefer applesauce,” Tim says, his first words since entering the kitchen. “It’s a nice balance to the flavor and oil, I think. Fresh. Makes me feel less like I’m deep frying my

insides.”

The other three go silent. Alfred struggles not to laugh from over by the counter.

Bruce looks mildly betrayed, one eyebrow slowly lifting at Tim as if to say *et tu, Brute?* Dick’s eyes roll as he pointedly dunks his fourth latke in a dish of ketchup. And Jason, after a few moments of open-mouthed staring, punches his fist into the air so hard he lifts up from his seat.

“Yes,” he crows, turning to point at Bruce. “Two for applesauce! You’re beat, old man, I win!”

Bruce buries his face in his hands, and Jason hauls a bemused Tim out of his seat into an impromptu dance full of spins with *Hanerot Halalu* playing over the kitchen speaker in the background.

It is, by far, the weirdest, craziest Hanukkah night Tim has ever had. But good. Warm. Hallway breakdown aside, Tim might get used to this. It’s nice, having people, and light, and laughter this year.

Two nights later, it’s Christmas Eve, and despite what was likely vehement protest from Agent A, Batman, Robin, and Nightwing are out on patrol in the frosty night.

And since they’re out, so is Tim.

“You all deserve the night off,” Alfred had said to Bruce earlier in the day.

“Maybe,” Bruce replied. “But it’s the very last night, Alfred. People deserve to be safe while going home for Christmas.”

Tim doesn’t need to have overheard the quiet exchange to guess that something along those lines had been said. Regardless of what exactly had been decided about patrol, the Bats met up with Batgirl, currently home for winter break, and mostly perched themselves at a few key spots to make sure no funny business happened around the bus and train stops.

Tim kept a low profile, as always, and snapped a few particularly fun shots of Nightwing and Batgirl pranking Robin several times, and nearly scaring him over the edge of a roof before Batman put an end to it.

Now Tim has settled down on a mostly empty townhouse rooftop to capture a shot of Batman against the night sky whenever he pauses on a gargoyle or corner in Tim’s line of sight. Tim plans to photoshop a santa hat on Batman later tonight and post it as BatWatch’s annual Christmas card of sorts.

Then he loses Batman.

Tim blinks, frowning. Yeah, he's lost Batman plenty of times before. But usually it's because something's happening, and Batman needed to go stop it. Tim only looked down at his camera screen for a moment, to check the settings. As far as he knows, nothing new is going on in the general area.

Tim shoves his camera deep in his backpack. He'll drift a bit, see if he can catch up to the Bats again, and if he hasn't had any luck in fifteen minutes or so, he'll just call it a night.

It's been a few rounds of rooftop jumping and careful scrambling across a few chicken coop areas when Tim stops for a moment to survey the area, decide which way to go next. He's just about caught his breath and decided to head north towards his usual bus stop, dip out for the night.

"Isn't it a little late for you to be out?" Batman's voice says from behind him, and Tim is not ashamed to say that a genuine shriek came out of his mouth in that moment.

He whips around, wide eyes thankfully hidden behind deep brown contacts. Tim's heart races like a jackhammer, and he's flying through a checklist— *camera is tucked away, so that's good, although if he saw me taking photos earlier and that's why he's here then the jig might be up, oh god, please don't recognize me from the night with Scarecrow, I hope my outfit is different enough, and I chose curly black hair this time, please don't recognize me, please don't recognize me, how is this happening.*

"What are you doing out tonight?" Batman asks. He doesn't sound angry, or particularly suspicious. Maybe a little concerned, if anything.

"I'm—uh. Uh..." Tim loses his voice for several eternal seconds.

"Are you running away?" And there's that undercurrent of kindness, that strong compassion, deep in Batman's voice, exactly what Tim started all of this to make sure people *saw* .

"Uh," Tim says, throat surprisingly tight. "Yes. Yeah, I am. Running away. Sir." He gulps.

Batman nods once, slowly. Then he turns and sits right down on one of the roof's exhaust vent structures.

"Come sit down for just a minute," he says, gesturing to the other one several feet away. "Let's talk about it."

Tim sits.

Batman leans forward, just a bit. "What's wrong? What are you running from? It must be pretty lousy if you're making a break for it on Christmas Eve, of all days."

"It's not..." Tim scrambles, trying so hard to find something, *anything* to say that would work. His entire brain is nothing but Kill Bill sirens at this point. "I—I—"

Batman is sitting across from him, huge and dark and safe, but *overwhelming* , all that attention and energy on him like a laser, and Tim just can't think like this, not with how completely sudden and unexpected it all is. Not alone on a rooftop with Batman himself.

Batman seems to get that. He's saying something, quietly. *Into a hidden comm*, Tim thinks, *that is so cool*.

"It's all right," Batman says to him. Sets his hands carefully on his spread knees, posture loose. "Hang on."

And then Robin lands on the roof with a flip, just to show off, and Tim hates it and loves it and curses his own stupid hubris in every language he knows.

Robin clearly doesn't recognize him any more than Batman does, but clearly *does* recognize that this is a Delicate Situation, because instead of Jason's usual bold I'm-here-deal-with-it body language, he's taming himself into something more quiet, lessening any threat.

"Runaway, huh?" Robin says gently.

Tim wonders how bad a job he's done with this damn disguise if Batman and Robin just instantly assume he's young enough to be a kid running away. He's knows he's on the small side, but *come on*.

"You know," Robin goes on, and Batman is turned slightly, clearly watching his partner while still keeping a side eye on Tim. "I was on my own too, for a while. At home, at first, but then on the streets for real. I didn't trust anyone then. But listen. Someone helped me, for real, when I finally let them in a bit after they refused to give up on me. And it's not like everything in my life is sunshine and daisies and perfect story endings, but dude—there are people who will care for you and want you to be happy. And who will want to spend time with you, just because you're you, and love you, and really try to make life good for you. They'll value you for who you are. There are people you can exist with just as you are without changing a single thing, or having to be afraid all the time. I know it probably sounds impossible right now, but there *are*."

What is going *on* tonight?

"You're not as alone as you feel you are," Robin says, firmly, after a pause. "You deserve to feel safe, and cared for, and valued and appreciated and loved. You're really important, kid."

And Tim.

Tim.exe has stopped working. What the fuck. What the hell. This is. What? He just wanted to *photograph Batman*, how did this turn into some kind of therapy session on a dirty roof with Batman and Robin in the early morning hours of Christmas? He should have just stayed home. Like, *home* home, way back when, he should be in his empty house right now where at least he understood how things worked and who he was and what he was expected to do. This is completely out of his league.

"Listen," Tim says, and wow, is that his voice that's so croaky? "I appreciate it and all, but really I'm fine. Don't you guys have crime you need to fight, and like, important stuff to do? You can go."

Batman's gaze is still hidden behind the white lenses in his cowl, but Tim has never been more sure of anything in his life than he is the fact that at that moment Batman is looking him *straight* in the eyes.

"You're more important," says Batman, without a trace of insincerity. "I want to be sure you're safe and okay tonight."

Tim, to his horror, suddenly finds tears running down his cheeks, and shit, shit, these contacts were brand new, he can't mess them up yet, and oh no, here he goes, there's the sob. He wants to tell them, so badly, that it's him. He wants to know if they'd still say all of that if they knew who was under the wig, the contacts, the *lies* . He wants to know if they really mean *him* . He wants to come clean right now.

He's so *tired* . But he just...he can't.

The next thing he knows, he's getting a hug from Robin, and then from Batman, and this is so *stupid* because he's not even running away, the whole thing is a great big lie, but Tim can't stop *hiccuping* and Batman is like, rubbing his back and making little shushing noises, and this is quickly becoming one of the top three weirdest nights of Tim's life.

Once Tim has calmed down somewhat from his frankly embarrassing weep-a-palooza, Robin hands him some Kleenex.

"Can we take you somewhere safe for the night?" Batman asks. "They don't ask any questions there, and you don't have to pay. They'll let kids and teens stay so they're off the streets, and no predators or gangs get in. We make sure of it."

And, well. Tim's options here are to either confess or go, and his window of opportunity to fess up is well past. In for a penny, in for a pound, Tim supposes.

"Do they need names?" he checks, as Batman and Robin climb down the nearest fire escape alongside him.

"No. And if anyone comes looking for you, this place won't say a word about if they've seen or heard of you ever. In case you were worried about that."

"Okay," says Tim, and that's not what he's worried about. His problem is pretty much the polar opposite of that. He wonders how long it would even take his parents to have a clue he was gone, if he was kidnapped or something, since they don't listen to school messages anyway. Probably a good while.

He's silent the rest of the way to the youth shelter, where he politely thanks Batman and Robin and heads inside. He stays hidden just long enough so they'll think he's checking in for the night, then sneaks back out and calls an Uber to take him to Drake Manor.

He needs some space to think.

But this time? This time, Tim sends Bruce a text saying he's going home for the night, and he'll be back. So Bruce doesn't worry.

Small steps.

Tim spends maybe minutes, maybe hours, awake wedged in small, tight spaces, like he's been doing since he was little. They're *safe*. They're where no one will notice him. Sometimes all he wants is to be noticed by everyone in the world, to be the center of attention, to have every eye in the room. Other times he just wishes he could crawl into a hole and never be seen by another person again. Usually when Mom or Dad are upset about something.

But then, even someone being angry at him is better than him just ghosting through day after day alone in his world.

The Waynes have shattered his normal. They just tossed it right off the edge of a cliff like it wasn't worth even glancing at. He's been yanked into their fold from day one, and it's been so fast, and so new, that part of him thinks that it's exactly the kind of thing he should run away from.

Most of him is craving it more and more every day. He doesn't know how he's going to go back to how things were before, when his parents are back from their trip.

But he's been fine for years. He'll be okay again. It'll be fine. There's no reason he can't just go back to his normal, right?

Tim groans and bangs his head on the wall of the closet, over and over, quietly even in the empty house.

Do you ever really crash, or even make a sound? drifts through his head, from Dick's musical playlist binge earlier in the day. Tim tip toes through his own home like he's not allowed to take up space, make noise. At Wayne Manor, he's all but encouraged to slide down banners singing opera if he feels like it. These two parts of his life that are clashing now, they can't be more different. And yet Tim, *nighttime* Tim, BatWatch the bold night reporter, the fearless kid tailing Batman himself, bridges them. Always the same. Always the most honest version of him, in the end. And Tim is so tired of secrets.

He thinks it's time. He can't lie to them any longer. Not after all this. After what he's seen, with them.

Tim gets up, disguise tossed in the trash bin. He walks across the grounds all the way back to Wayne Manor.

Bruce is still in the kitchen, waiting, when Tim slips in from the back. Tim stands for a minute, no words on his tongue to explain, to apologize, to thank him. He stands there, blinking back tears that he *still* is surprised to find he can cry.

Bruce hands him hot cocoa and pulls him into a hug, and Tim. Tim remembers—

Jason and Tim in the lounge, playing through the Mass Effect trilogy together over the first week of winter break. Ribbing each other over bad driving, talking about how much they ended up caring about their crew in ME2, how everyone really felt like a crazy tight-knit family on a spaceship with a crazy suicide mission, and how losing someone was so unacceptable they were willing to rewrite hours of playtime to change the outcome. Laughing together, tipped over into each other's shoulders, laps. Shaking with mirth when Bruce walks in from work with his tie half off just in time to hear Jason cussing out Kai Leng for being a little pointy bitch with poor fashion sense as they take him down on Thessia at last.

Dick, kidnapping Tim and taking him out in one of Bruce's more humble cars to an old stretch of road, saying it was an *older brother duty* to teach younger ones to drive. Dismissing it when Tim tries to say he doesn't really count. Patiently spending hours that afternoon teaching Tim the parts of the car, how to adjust mirrors, all the tricks to parallel parking. Letting Tim get a feel for the gas and brake, never once complaining even though Tim jerked them around a million times and probably scared the living daylights out of Dick when he nearly ran off the edge of the road into a ditch after he got startled by a frog.

Dick wrapping Tim in hug after hug after hug each day, till sometimes Tim has trouble breathing, sometimes starts feeling like he can relax and hug back fully.

Bruce. Bruce, there, when Tim was sick, there when Tim was cornered and ready to fight the whole world if necessary, holding out a hand and patience and treating Tim like an equal to be respected instead of dismissed. Bruce, who comes running when Tim doesn't even know he needs someone. Bruce, sharing with Tim the best parts of his traditions, sharing a history, sharing family. Bruce, there to catch him when Tim doesn't even know what he's feeling, Bruce, there to carry him when Tim can't walk, Bruce, Batman, there every night, again and again and again, not even knowing it.

Bruce, there giving a lifeline to a kid he doesn't know, shaping years of a life, and will he regret it? Would he still do it again, once he knows?

Tim takes a deep breath. Pulls out his camera.

"Bruce," he whispers. Waits until Bruce pulls back, looking at Tim with that mix of concern, worry, relief.

"What is it, Tim?" And he's still so calm, so kind about it. Even after everything Tim has put him through. After how much trouble Tim has been, for absolutely zero reward to Bruce.

Even now, when Tim is about to hurt Bruce even more.

"I have a secret," Tim says, and swallows. "I haven't been honest with you. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Bruce, I should have told you all a long time ago, I should have—well. I..." Tim looks

down, shoves his camera at Bruce until he takes it, clutches his mug in both hands.

“I’m BatWatch,” Tim whispers, and his eyes close. He can’t help but tense up, waiting for the storm that’s about to hit.

Tim hears a few quiet breaths. There’s a quiet clunk, and then the mug is being pulled from his clenched fingers, one by one. And then two large hands are holding his, and Tim can’t help the shuddering sob that comes out. It’s about to *come*, he knows, either words in his ears or a hand against his skin. He’s ready. He definitely deserves it, for all this.

“Okay,” Bruce says, softly, and. And.

What?

Tim’s eyes fly open, look up to Bruce’s face, and a part of him shrieks at the boldness, screams *you’re going to pay for daring to look when he’s angry, you know that*.

But Bruce doesn’t look angry. He doesn’t even look disappointed. He just looks *kind*.

“Okay?” Tim whispers, asking.

“It’s okay,” Bruce repeats. “Thank you for telling me the truth. We need to talk about this more, at some point, because it’s definitely not safe. And it absolutely adds a whole new level to the problems with how your parents are raising you, as well as my concerns about your safety. But you’re not in trouble, Tim. I’m not angry at you. You’ve been doing a really dangerous, really impressive thing, and I’m proud of how well you’ve managed for so long. I’m just sorry,” he says, making sure he’s looking Tim right in the eyes, “that you’ve been going through everything so alone all this time.”

He holds Tim for a long while, that night.

They have Christmas. Bruce and Tim agree not to bring BatWatch up with anyone else until the new year, so that they have some time to talk and sort out what will happen. Also so that Bruce can have time to figure out a way to tell Dick and Jason that won’t result in an entire day of upset feelings, emotional slingshots, and rushing off to throttle the Drakes and alternately scold and hug Tim until he promises to never put himself in so much danger like that ever again.

Dick wakes Tim up in true older sibling fashion on Christmas morning, taking a flying leap from the doorway *straight* on top of Tim in the bed. Tim wakes up exhausted, and shrieking with laughter in the face of an all-out tickle assault. Together, he and Dick drag a drowsy Jason downstairs to brunch, and everyone eats French Toast and fruit and real maple syrup until they kind of never want to eat anything ever again.

They do presents, and Christmas carols, and a Harry Potter marathon for some reason, and for the first time in his life Tim realizes this is something that he might be able to have someday. This is what a family can be like, not just sometimes, but every day. Maybe his

parents can do this too, if he gives them time. Maybe he'll even end up with a younger sibling he can be a good older brother with, like Dick has been teaching him to be. Maybe he can look out for them the way Jason does for him.

Tim aches for all the time he hasn't been given this, all the time in his life he's spent lonely and lost and *fine* all on his own, and he aches with the hope that this is what he can make his family become, sometime, maybe. If they all work on it together. Bruce said he'll do what he can to help, and Tim is ready to try. He's ready to fight.

Tim may be exhausted, and the future is uncertain, but right now he's in a blanket nest with people who really want him around and have been nothing but kind to him since they met. He's blowing gently on the embers of his hope that things will work out okay, just as Harry is doing the same thing up on Bruce Wayne's giant TV screen.

It's the best Christmas he's ever had.

Chapter End Notes

And there it is! Tim's secret is out. At least partly. Well. One of his secrets, anyway. There's a lot of other things he tends to keep to himself, too.

I barely had any time on the computer today, so I didn't catch up on many comment replies, but tomorrow I have a lot of time since I'll be iced in and I'm replying to ALL of you then, love you, please drink plenty of water and eat something if you haven't recently!

Thank you SO MUCH for reading this story, friends.

i've got a phone that beeps, makes me know i'm not alone

Chapter Summary

Tim's parents come home. It's not the best.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a little rough, I didn't have much time to write today, so it might be re-edited later on and come out more polished. But here it is! And depending on if I'm snowed in at work tomorrow night without a laptop, I MAY or may not get the fic written and posted from my phone. If I don't get a chapter up, that's why lol

CONTENT WARNING: emotional child abuse, mild physical child abuse depending on what your standards are

Chapter title from H.S.K.T. by Sylvan Esso.

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

Ever since the Wayne household all found out Tim was the one behind BatWatch, Tim's been having a hell of a time trying to actually get out at night and *do it*. He knows they'd all rather he stop completely, but no one outright told him a solid *no*. Instead, they all dance around it in a sort of tango—Tim constantly finding new and exciting ways to sneak out at night, and Bruce, the boys, and *especially* Alfred constantly foiling his plans.

He only makes it out a couple times a week, now. (Tim's pretty sure it's because they're letting him, just to keep him from running back to Drake Manor and the old unsupervised nights.)

And Bruce has kept his promise, even after the reveal. He still hasn't called any authorities on Tim. If Bruce wasn't Batman, Tim is pretty sure he would have called in a heartbeat the day after Christmas, but as it is, keeping tabs on Tim's safety now that he's aware of the issue is just small potatoes for the Bad. So that's worked out great.

But since they all are *so determined* to keep Tim home, the boys seem to have worked out a rotating schedule of who stays home all night to make sure Tim doesn't just bolt once everyone is "*in bed for the night*." Because he *will*, and *has*, and they all know it at this point. Tim waited till three in the morning once, in the first couple of weeks, before scrambling out a ballroom window.

Tim hates—absolutely *hates*— that their babysitting is keeping one of them off the streets at night more often than not. It’s killing him. He knows it’s his fault, because he won’t just promise to stop doing BatWatch. And he’s terrified that one of these nights, Batman and Robin will be out without Nightwing on the weekend, Batman and Nightwing out without Robin, or Batman out without either Robin at all, and something is going to happen. It’s only a matter of time. And it’s going to be Tim’s fault when it does.

He can’t confront them about it, because they don’t know he *knows*. But he also can’t quite bring himself to *stop*.

Out of all of them, Bruce seems to understand the most, because the second time Tim sneaks out for a night on the town, Batman finds him in an alley and gives him a Bat-print panic button bracelet. Tim has to fight not to smile.

“Use it. The very first second you think you need it.” Batman says. “I’ll always come. A mutual friend wants you to know someone’s here to keep an eye on you.”

“*You* worry about the criminals,” Tim says, but he slips the bracelet on under his coat sleeve anyway. “*I’ll* worry about myself.”

Batman grapples away, and Tim stays out for two more hours. Just to prove his point.

Alfred and Bruce are still up and waiting with tea when he gets back to Wayne Manor. *Point taken*, Tim concedes. But he can’t let himself get used to this life. He’s going home soon, back to his old routines and his parents and his big perfect house. He can’t get attached, no matter how good the tea is.

Tim’s parents come home on a Friday this time.

When Tim gets the call that they’re on their way, he follows Bruce’s plan and tells them he’s over at Wayne Manor, which Jack and Janet seem fairly happy about. Gotham social ladder, and all that, Tim guesses. Bruce takes the phone, then, and asks if they’d be willing to speak with him when they come to get Tim.

Except—

Except Tim knows they *hadn’t* been planning to swing by and pick up Tim. He was going to walk back over himself, or hitch a ride from one of the Waynes. And this was a terrible time to ask them to talk, much less to have a serious conversation that was probably going to make them upset. His parents got tired from traveling. Airports were stressful, and so was jetlag. You were supposed to leave them alone for the first day or two!

Tim’s frantic *no! stop! abort!* motions at Bruce go either ignored or unnoticed. Bruce’s high status and polite company manners force the Drakes to agree, politely, to *come right on by to have a chat, of course, we’d be delighted*.

Tim vaguely wants to crawl into a hole and die.

“Bruce,” he says, a little frantically, as soon as Bruce hangs up and hands the phone back to Tim. “You can’t talk with them this soon. This is really bad timing. Can’t you wait a couple days?”

“Tim, we’ve waited for them for months,” Bruce says, frowning. “I know this is something you’d rather not ever talk about with them, but it’s important. Neglect is neglect. They need to understand what’s wrong about this, and if they need help learning or figuring out a safer plan to change your situation, I’m happy to help. Heaven knows that I know firsthand how unprepared adults often are to raise children. It’s not shameful to not know what you’re doing—only to refuse to learn and do better for your kid when you find out you’ve been wrong.”

“Bruce. *Please*,” Tim begs. “You don’t get what I’m saying. It’s not going to go well if we do this right now. It’ll—they’ll—it won’t work. You have to wait for the right time. I know how they work, what they’re like.” He pauses, takes a breath. “You can’t do it like this.”

“What *are* they like, Tim?” Bruce’s eyes have sharpened, a bit of Batman shining through.

Tim shrugs helplessly.

“Tim. If there’s anything I should know before talking with them—”

“You should *wait!*” Tim shouts, frustration flaring into anger so quickly it startles both of them. “You should *listen to me* when I’m trying to tell you you’re doing this wrong! It’s going to be bad if you scold and threaten them now. It’s bad enough that you’re making them come get me instead of going straight home, I should head over early so that I’m there and everything’s normal anyway when they arrive.”

Tim takes a few breaths, tries to calm down. “Their *image*. Their reputation is everything to them. We have to behave right, and look right, and do the right things. If you bring them in there when they’re already stressed out from traveling, and attack their decisions, it’s like...like—” Tim doesn’t know what he’s trying to say.

Bruce’s expression is carefully neutral. Tim *hates* it.

“Never mind,” he snaps. “Forget it. Do what you want. I’m going to go pack my suitcase.”

He leaves Bruce’s study without a backward glance, temper already simmering down and being replaced by roiling guilt and shame. Tim didn’t *yell* like that at people. Only his parents, and that was bad enough. Oh, god. He’d just yelled at *Bruce*. Bruce, who’s been nothing but good to him, and kind, and let him stay here for ages and mooch off of his money and hasn’t called CPP.

He could take all of that away in a second. Maybe he’s calling CPP right now because he’s finally decided Tim’s too much of a problem. Or that Tim’s parents are too complicated to deal with. What if Tim gets taken away and never comes back to his school, or sees Jason again, or doesn’t get to go home or get his things or see his parents again? He doesn’t want that!

But no one cares what kids want, Tim thinks. They want you to be responsible, but they don't want to treat you like an adult. You just have to follow whatever they decide.

Tim makes it through ten minutes of half-hearted packing before he throws up in the bathroom toilet. He cleans himself up, brushes his teeth, and finishes packing. Then, suitcase in hand, he treks down the back stairs and out of the building, and heads over to Drake manor like he should have long before now.

If he hurries, there's just enough time to call his parents and make them come straight home, instead, as long as he can convince them Bruce had something come up.

He's glad he went home. That first day, he manages to keep his parents happy, and everything actually goes fine. They eat dinner as a family, when Mrs. Mac tells them it's ready. She doesn't mention exactly how long Tim has been staying away from home, and Tim doesn't tell his parents about it either, except to mention how close he and Jason have gotten through school, and how that's why he was with the Waynes.

"That's *lovely*, Tim," his mom says, with a real smile. "I always worry about you, with how hard it's been for you to make friends. Ever since Sebastian moved to Maine, I thought you might never find a new best friend."

"Jason's really great, Mom," Tim says, more brightly than before. "He's really funny, and kind. And he's super into books, too. I think he might end up being a writer someday. He's always at the top of his English classes."

"And he's a boy of good standing, despite his less than ideal origins," his mother agrees. "You're doing a *wonderful* job of networking, sweetheart. I hope the two of you become good friends."

"Thanks, Mom. Me too." Tim can't help beaming.

Three hours later, she screams back and forth with him over his jacket being left out in the foyer. He knows it's not about the jacket, really. She's tired, and she doesn't really know how to deal with a teenage son, and she's always really serious about her house being completely clean. It's one of her few rules, and he did break it.

But it still hurts, being yelled at, and it hurts in an even *worse* way to be the one doing an equal share of the yelling. It never makes him feel any better. But despite his best intentions, when he's being yelled at, Tim can't help but holler back, and then they're BOTH off and running. No one ever wins from there.

Tim goes to bed that night with a sigh, and swipes away the seventeen missed notifications from Bruce and Dick. Jason, he replies to with a simple, *Settling back in. Talk to you soon.*

Tim lies down wedged into the corner between lots of pillows, and doesn't even try to sneak out that night.

The next morning, Tim and his father share companionable silence in the breakfast nook by a window. They each have a coffee, warm and steaming. Jack catches up on articles, or maybe emails, on a tablet. Tim has homework spread around. As he scribbles down another part of a formula on a neon green index card, he's surprised when Jack asks, "What are you working on, Tim?"

"Huh?" Tim blinks, looking up at his dad across the table. "Oh, this? It's for my computational analysis class. It's one of my electives for the year. I figured it would be good preparation for college."

"Computational analysis, huh?" His dad smiles, takes a sip of coffee. "Sounds complicated."

"Sometimes," Tim agrees. "But honestly, it's so interesting, I don't even mind when it's hard. We get to do the *coolest* things. Everything in this class is about practical applications, you know? Instead of just doing statistics for the sake of stupid statistics."

"Hey, now," Jack says, pointing his coffee at Tim in mock dismay. "You know, some of us actually like math. Maybe even majored in it, at one point."

"Sorry." Tim says. "But you know I'm not math's biggest fan."

"Truly, a great sorrow."

"But," Tim adds. "If every math class were like this one, I think you might be able to convert me to the dark side."

"Wow," his dad says. "Must be really interesting, then. What is it right now?"
Tim hesitates.

But...his dad seems like he really wants to know. This is exactly what Tim's been hoping for, right? He wants them to be closer. He wants to get to know his dad, and be known by him. It's never going to happen if Tim doesn't take those difficult first steps, too.

"We're making a mathematical model of how a virus gets transmitted during an epidemic," he says, dragging his chair around to his dad's side. He pulls some of his notes with him, points to a large diagram he's made. "See? You have these different groups of people—infected non-symptomatic, symptomatic, recovered, dead, non-infected, right? And the virus can be transmitted in certain ways. And if you're tracking an outbreak, you know certain times and rates. You know how many hours or days it takes for symptoms to start, and then for a progression to happen. And you know how many people seem to get sick once the virus reaches an area, and different factors that affect all of that."

He gestures at his numerous index cards spread out across the table. "So you can take all those pieces, and tie them together using the rates, which tell you how many people in an hour, or day, or week, are moving from, say, the symptomatic category to the dead category, and the symptomatic category to the recovered immune category, and you can make these equations."

"And the equations help you model what's going on?"

“Exactly!” Tim grins at his dad. “Except instead of just showing what’s already happening, when we build these equations, we can use them to try to predict statistically what will happen next. Who’s the most vulnerable? When will the peak of infections be? How long could this epidemic last, if you quarantine the area? What if you have new people constantly coming in on planes and other transportation from other areas?”

“That’s really interesting.” Jack sounds like he means it. “Have you gotten the model set up for this one yet?”

“No,” Tim says, smile falling. “I got stuck. I’m working on it.”

“Want me to take a look? I may not be an analyst anymore, but I don’t think I’ve forgotten quite everything I learned back then.”

Tim’s eyes widen. “Really? You want to have a go at it?”

And Jack *does*. He and Tim spend at least twenty minutes working together on Tim’s homework, and fix two errors Tim hadn’t caught. It’s one of the best mornings he’s had in ages.

His parents are good people; he knows that. They’re good to Tim. Yeah, they fight with him sometimes, but it does take two to tango. Tim’s no paragon of calm and even-temperedness himself.

Sure, Jack and Janet aren’t around much, and yeah, he’s got to be careful of their moods. But they’re *good* people, at their cores, and they care a lot about moral causes, and fight for the underpaid workers they encounter, and have funded several initiatives to get artifacts stolen from civilizations still in existence returned. They’ve got *good hearts*. Tim and his parents have just...not been quite sure how to get to know each other, over the years. *But that can change*, Tim thinks. *And it will. It is, already.*

They just have to take it one step at a time.

Then Bruce Wayne shows up at their house that afternoon. All Tim can think is *oh no. Not now*. Things were going *well*.

Tim avoids Bruce the whole time he’s there.

Bruce is gone, but the mood in Drake Manor has soured. Tim had been looking forward to a nice evening with his parents, but that definitely isn’t going to happen anymore. His suggestion that they watch a movie together is instantly shot down, and Tim decides silence is his safest option for the rest of dinner.

Not long after, he and Jack are shouting at each other. Except it’s more Jack shouting Tim down than anything else, after a few minutes. All over a stupid comment that *stupid* Tim had made about the *stupid* Waynes.

And Tim is shouting at his father, hot and flushed and heart pounding in his chest like a runaway drum line, and his father is towering over him while Tim finds himself backed up against the counter.

“You think that pompous ass of a man is better than your own mom and dad, do you?” Jack shouts. “Give him the *audacity* to think that he can come in here and tell us how to parent you better? As if he knows you at all, from a few months of playdates, when we’ve had you your whole *life*? ”

Tim flinches. Jack takes another step forward. There’s a vein visible in his forehead now, and his face is just as flushed as Tim’s own. Janet watches from the side, not participating, but not leaving either.

Jack jabs a finger at Tim. “You ungrateful little *brat*! We feed you, clothe you, house you, pay for all your schooling and activities all these years, give you *everything* you ever need or want, and you diss us like this? What, are you suddenly too scared to stay by yourself in a house with state-of-the-art-security now? Or maybe you want Wayne to take you in like he did with those two charity case gold diggers of his.”

“Leave Dick and Jason out of this!” Tim can’t help yelling back. “They didn’t do anything wrong. Just because you feel like I’m dissing you and mom doesn’t mean I *am*! I didn’t ask Mr. Wayne to do that! But you know what, if you want me to answer you honestly, he probably knows me better right now than either of you do. It’s not like you’re ever actually *here*!”

Tim’s head snaps backwards and to the side, and he teeters into the counter, countertop edge digging into his ribs. His mother is inches away, furious.

“Don’t you dare speak to us like that,” she hisses. “We’re your *parents*, Timothy Jackson Drake. You are out of control!”

“I’m sorry,” Tim says, stunned. “But—”

His mother slaps him again.

He stands still for a few more minutes of his father shouting, and apologizes two more times. This time without any conditionals tacked on.

As soon as he can, he escapes up to his room and locks the door. His face feels like lava where his mother’s palm had landed, and he wonders where exactly he’s gone so wrong. He needs to keep that from happening again.

He’s got to be a better son.

Tim avoids Jason in school all monday, skipping lunch again like he did back in December. He finds a granola bar shoved through the slats of his locker when he opens it that afternoon, and it’s the first thing that’s made him want to smile all day.

Tim slogs through classes, through yearbook club, through the walk home. But that evening, he texts Jason. They talk about nothing in particular for a while, just light conversation. Jason invites him over the next day. Tim declines.

Everything okay over there? Jason asks, as Tim is getting ready for bed. *Bruce and Alfie and I miss you. And Bruce says he hasn't heard anything from your parents, but they were supposed to contact him.*

Bruce. Bruce Bruce Bruce.

Bruce, who held Tim while he cried, and brought him to his own home, but who also ruined the good thing Tim had going with his parents for once. Now, they're not going to trust Tim again for years. The house is filled with cold silence. Tim knows the ins and outs of the silent treatment well, but that doesn't make it any less awful each time.

It's fine, Tim says, even though it's absolutely not. *You can tell Bruce to stop trying to interfere and mind his own business for once. I don't need more help.* He pauses for a moment, then adds *My parents are still **here**, aren't they?* and hits *send* before he can second-guess the nasty tone in everything he just wrote.

Tim shoves his phone off the side of the bed, then pulls a pillow over his face.

It takes him a long time to fall asleep.

When he wakes up in the morning to get ready for school, there's one text from Jason lighting up his lockscreen.

I'll back off. Sorry. And I'll keep Bruce off your tail too, for a while. I miss you, dude. If I promise not to pry unless you want to talk about something, will you please eat lunch with me again?

Tim sighs. He misses Jason, too. A lot. There's a hole in his days where Jason has been for so many weeks now, at breakfasts, popping around doorways, playing games, offering book recommendations. Tim misses it all.

I'm sorry too, he types. *I've been kind of a jerk, and you don't deserve that. And yeah. It's a deal.*

So Jason and Tim hang out at school, but Tim doesn't go back to Wayne Manor, and he doesn't go out at night. BatWatch announces it's on an indefinite hiatus.

This, unfortunately, makes the nightly news, and Tim is graced with a solid ten minutes of complaining from his parents about lawless vigilantes and the fool (or fools) who have been needlessly endangering themselves for so long just to follow them.

"If they really are hurt and out of commission, then good riddance," Janet says. "Maybe that will finally teach them to not take that kind of risk just for attention and fame."

Tim tries not to let it sting.

And life goes on. Tim goes to school, hangs with Jason, sees Dick on weekends when they all go out to a diner, or skate park, or the movies. His parents work at Drake Industries and spend free time at home. Both he and his parents are all the more miserable for it.

Tim gets good grades. His parents nod. They move on, weaving around each other in the giant pristine house, and it's strange how it feels just as empty as before even with two more bodies walking the halls.

Then on the second Thursday after his parents have returned to Gotham, Tim is tired and frustrated after a hard math test. He responds to his father's request with the hint of an attitude in his tone, and both of them are primed and ready for a fight, and everything just *explodes* from there.

It ends several minutes later in Tim's room, with the TV ripped out of the wall and thrown into the hallway, and Tim's \$600 wide-angle camera lens crushed under Jack's loafer. Tim can do nothing but stare. The plastic and glass shards are scattered around the carpet like blood droplets crystalized, and Jack is *still* angry, and Tim doesn't know what else Jack *wants* from him. He doesn't know what to do anymore. He doesn't even really care. There's a black hole devouring his chest, deep among his ribs, and Tim just doesn't *know*.

Jack drags him downstairs, out the back door, and locks it in Tim's face. He's ordered to stay out there until he's cooled down. Tim hears the alarm system beep as it's turned on, and knows that his chances of getting back in through a different door or window have just gone down to nil.

Tim waits several minutes, and his anger does vanish quickly. He has no jacket or coat, nothing to keep him from feeling the sharp bite of the late February cold. It's hard to focus on a petty argument with wind biting through his shirtsleeves.

He's got space and time, now, to breathe, and calm. He regrets his own shouting. He's definitely ready to apologize. But when he calls for Jack, knocks on the door, his father still doesn't let him back in. He won't believe Tim is ready to behave.

Tim sits back down on the stone steps. The cycle repeats three times.

After the last time, something inside Tim just...shuts down. *It doesn't matter*, he realizes. *It doesn't matter anymore. I can't make him happy.*

He's got no coat, no hat, no gloves. No food. No money.

He does have his phone, though.

And he has someone who has come for him when he's called. Someone who's come every time Tim has needed him in the past few months, and a couple times even when he didn't. Someone who didn't give up on Tim, or kick him out. Even when Tim has been more trouble

than he's worth. Even when Tim yelled at him. Even when he knew Tim didn't want it. Because he didn't want Tim to be alone.

Tim stands up. It doesn't matter if his dad lets him in or not. He doesn't care. He starts walking across the lawn, towards the property line. No one calls out after him from the house.

Tim pulls out his phone, and with shaking fingers, he dials Bruce.

"Hello?" Bruce answers after a single ring. "Tim? Are you all right?"

There's a pause. Tim tries to find his voice.

"Tim?" Bruce asks again. Concerned.

"*Bruce,*" Tim gets out finally. "Bruce."

"What's going on, Tim?"

"He locked me *out*," Tim whispers. "I'm s-s-so cold. *Bruce.*"

"I'm here, buddy," and there's noise in the background, shoes hitting hard floor. "Where are you?"

"Bruce," Tim chokes out, because he's *so sorry*. He can hear a door slamming, and wind, now. Tim's been nothing but cruel to Bruce since he left. And now he's calling him out of nowhere, with another problem to add on top of all the others, as if Bruce didn't have enough to worry about. But Tim just wants to feel *safe* again. He wants to come *home*.

"Tim, I see you. I see you. I'm almost there."

The line cuts out, and Tim drops the phone in his pocket as Bruce is coming near, sprinting across the grass. Then they're colliding, and Bruce's arms are the best thing Tim has felt in weeks, and he's being hugged tighter than maybe ever before.

"I'm sorry," Tim cries into Bruce's button up. The man didn't even have a sportcoat on. "I'm sorry, I was so mean, I'm sorry I yelled at you, I'm sorry I said—"

"Shhhh," Bruce tells him, fingers running gently along the back of Tim's head. "I've got you. You don't need to apologize. It's okay."

"It's not," Tim nearly wails, and then he's sobbing so hard he can't speak. And Bruce is still there.

Tim doesn't know if he's shaking more from the heaving sobs or the bitter cold, but either way Bruce scoops him up like a kid and starts to walk. Tim's arms loop around Bruce's neck, and his legs wrap around his waist, and he clings to Bruce like a koala as they make their way across the grass.

“I’m sorry I called,” Tim mumbles, as they’re reaching Wayne Manor. “Didn’t want to cause more problems.”

“Tim,” Bruce says firmly. “You’re not a problem. You’re a wonderful young man. And I’m glad you called me, and I’m glad you’re back with us. We missed you.”

Tim sniffs.

“Although,” Bruce adds, “I’m sorry it’s under these circumstances. I was really hoping your parents would work things out.”

“Master Bruce!” Alfred exclaims as they come in the back door. “I’ll get a kettle going.”

Bruce sets Tim down in one of the kitchen chairs, then crouches down to look him right in the eyes. Tim looks down. Bruce’s hand cups Tim’s chin, tilts his gaze back up.

“Tim.”

Tim looks.

“You can always call me,” Bruce says. “Day or night, happy or sad, you can call me, and I’m going to come. I’ll tell you that as many times as you need to hear it to believe me. I’ll come every time. I’m happy to do it. You’re important, Tim, not just to me, but period. I want to know you’re happy, and healthy, and safe.”

“Okay,” Tim says, and he doesn’t totally believe Bruce yet, not all the way, but he’s *trying*. He’s trying.

“It’s going to be okay.” Bruce pulls Tim in for another hug, while Alfred wraps Tim in one of the throws from the lounge. “We’re going to make everything okay.”

Tim closes his eyes. And maybe, just a little, he’s starting to believe that.

Chapter End Notes

I know this was a really heavy chapter, sorry. I promise we're hitting an upswing from here on out! It gets better!

Also the weather is SHIT tomorrow morning is going to be a miserable drive to work and I may end up iced and snowed in there overnight. IF I DO I will write even more, so at least there's that. I hope you're all safe and warm and hydrated and happy!

but i kept running for a soft place to fall

Chapter Summary

The Batfam talks. Tim realizes some painful things, or starts to at least. And brotherly cuddles!

Chapter Notes

I really, really hope this chapter doesn't come off as rushed, but I am so tired of editing lmao here enjoy!!!

CONTENT WARNING: past child abuse discussion, dissociative episode

Chapter title is from "Runaway" by Aurora.

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

Tim doesn't go back to his house that evening, and his parents don't call.

He sends them a text saying he's safe anyway.

Bruce almost calls child services right then and there. Jason, once he's home from track practice that night, is on board with that plan. But Tim doesn't want it to escalate to that, not yet, and when they realize how genuinely distressed Tim is getting over the idea Bruce agrees to wait for now.

"Despite the fact that in actuality there have been many, many strikes," he says, "we'll call today officially strike two."

"Strike three and you're out?" Tim quips with a weak smile.

"Strike three and I call my resource family support worker from CPP and inform her that we need to add someone to the official house occupancy list. And my lawyers, to start working on emergency custody paperwork."

Tim stares.

“Shut your mouth, you’ll catch flies,” Jason says, gently tapping Tim’s nose with a finger.

Tim’s face scrunches. He will not cry. He *will not cry*, he’s already sobbed on Bruce once today. Tim is not a kid, he can get a grip.

“You’d—?” he starts, and can’t finish the sentence.

Bruce pulls out a chair and sits in front of Tim. Alfred comes over as well, putting a hand on Bruce’s shoulder and sending Tim a soft smile.

“I told you, we’re going to make things okay.” Bruce clasps his hands, rests his elbows on his knees as he leans closer to Tim. “And I mean that, whatever it takes. You deserve to have a safe, stable home where someone is there to look out for you and have your back. If you want me to, and if it comes down to it, I’d be honored to have you come live here with us permanently.”

Tim is wrong. He *will* cry again.

“You—but—“ and he’s already choking up again, here he goes. “You’ve only known me for a few months,” Tim tries to protest. “And I can’t do anything for you. You’ve already done so much and I can’t pay you back for anything, and I just keep bringing you problems. And you already have a family.”

Jason yanks Tim into a hug and somewhat aggressively shoves his own beanie onto Tim’s head before putting hands on both sides of his face and squishing Tim’s cheeks like a chipmunk.

“Timbo,” Jason says. “I love you, but you are really, really dumb sometimes. You don’t have to *do* anything for Bruce. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but he really likes taking people in like stray puppies, and if he liked me and brought me home after I hit him with a tire iron in the middle of the night, I’m pretty sure you don’t have anything to worry about here.”

“Y’r’ squish’n me,” Tim says. Jason clunks their foreheads together once before letting go.

“Master Tim,” says Alfred, finally breaking his silence. He’s kept Tim supplied with a steady stream of tea like it’s the lifeline keeping Tim afloat right now (and maybe it is, Tim wouldn’t be surprised), but has so far seemed content to let the others do the speaking.

Tim looks up at Alfred, questioning.

“Love,” says Alfred, “is not conditional. It is often effortful, sometimes painful. But it is not selfish, or bargaining like a business deal. It is not a formula of owing. Approval or tolerance are not the same as love. Do you understand? You do *not* need to earn—or even reciprocate, should you not wish to—any of our love for you, Master Tim. It is freely and willingly given, and not dependent on anything you can do for us.”

Tim is...so confused. He’s. He’s sure Alfred is *right*, because Alfred is always right. And his words match what Tim has observed of the Wayne household. But no, Tim just doesn’t *understand*.

He loves his parents. His parents love him. They give him what he needs, pay for his hobbies, talk with him about their work when he's curious and even help him with homework sometimes. On good days, they have nice conversations and let Tim complain to them about his kid problems.

His mom taught him how to bake the best challah bread in the world, spending hours and hours helping him measure ingredients and learn to braid the dough. And just the other day his dad spent the morning working on Tim's project with him. Tim behaves and makes them proud, and they tell him he's done well and spend time with him when they're home.

There is always the unspoken understanding that if Tim is bad, they'll be upset with him and there would be consequences. And it's *fine*, because how the world works, at home and at school and in society at large. Do something bad, face the music. Do something good, and you're accepted. Right? There are *rules* for these things.

"Tim," and it's Bruce talking again. Carefully. Gently. "Do you love Jason?"

"Of course," Tim answers promptly.

"Why?"

Tim stares for a moment. "What do you mean *why*?"

"Why do you love Jason?"

"He's nice," Tim says, and no, that's too simple. "He's *good*. He's kind to everyone unless they're being a terrible person. He's funny. He wants to hang out with me, and he makes my days better. I like spending time with him."

"Why do you like spending time with him?"

Tim is getting frustrated. "Because I do?"

"Why, Tim?" Bruce insists, calmly.

"Because he's my friend! He's enjoyable and fun and kind and good, and he's always nice to me and nice to *be* with."

"So is a Starbucks barista," Jason says, grinning a little. "Try harder. Something makes it different, when it's *me* instead of anyone else."

"Why is he nice to be with, Tim?" Bruce prompts.

"*I don't know what you want me to say!*" Tim snaps at the two of them, and then he's bursting into tears. *God*. God, he knew he shouldn't have come. He's just hurting Bruce again. He's acting just like his dad. And he'd yelled at his *dad*, earlier, too. No wonder his own father didn't like him half the time. He can't even control his own reactions.

This time, it's Alfred guiding Tim up from his chair and out into the hallway, into a spare room. He puts his hands on Tim's shoulders.

“Timothy,” Alfred says, softly. “Timothy, lad, look at me.”

Tim scrubs fiercely at his eyes with his knuckles, angry at himself for crying again, for shouting, angry at everyone and angry that he doesn’t understand *why*. The loss of control is miserable and he can’t seem to turn it *off* today. He doesn’t want to feel this. Tim doesn’t *do* breakdowns. What is wrong with him?

Alfred catches his fists and pulls them away from his face.

“What Master Bruce was trying to guide you to realize,” he says to Tim, “is that you love Master Jason because he is *Jason*. Not for his jokes, or his ongoing efforts to ensure you eat more than once a day, or his generosity and care for others. Those things are all a part of it, because they are a part of him. But you like being friends with Master Jason because he is *himself*. Any one person can have all those same traits you listed before. But no one else is *Jason Peter Todd*, and that makes him precious to you.”

Tim sniffs. “You mean, I like him just for being him, not what he does for me or brings to my life?”

“Exactly.” Alfred smiles.

And Tim gets it. He does! But it’s not the same. Jason is...

Jason is *Robin*, and he was chosen by Bruce, and he’s got skills and value and a warm personality, and Jason’s...well, he’s *him*. But Tim is different. Tim’s no one’s choice.

He’s *fine*, of course, and he tries to be as good a person as he can. But he’s not like Jason. People like Tim as long as he does good things. The street kids like him because he brings food and doesn’t think they’re lesser than he is, and his teachers like him because he does quality work and contributes to class discussions. His parents like him when he’s good, because then he’s being a well-behaved son they can be proud of.

The Waynes like him because—he doesn’t really know. They’re saying it’s because they just do? Because he’s him? But that’s not how it *works*. It’s such a nice thought, and Tim has loved the attention they’ve given him in the past few months, but it’s just not correct.

Tim hates to break it to them, but he’s not as great as they seem to think he is. He knows it’s only a matter of time until they see it, too. He tries his best to always be good, but somehow always slips up. And they’ll see that. They’ve started to already, while he’s been giving Bruce the cold shoulder lately and snapping at them in the kitchen just now.

They can only put up with Tim so many times before they get fed up with him.

The door opens. Bruce steps in and gently pushes Tim over to the edge of the bed to sit, then kneels down in front of him. Jason sits on the floor nearby, criss-cross applesauce.

“Tim,” Bruce says, like he’s speaking to a wounded animal. “I want you to tell me what’s going on in your head right now. It doesn’t matter if you think it’s stupid, okay? I want to know what’s going on in that beautiful big brain of yours. I mean that.”

Tim shakes his head. Bruce's eyebrows furrow, ever so slightly.

"Tim, I really want to help. But I can't if I don't know what's going on. Come on, buddy. What are you thinking about right now?"

"You're going to get tired of me," Tim blurts out. Bruce looks surprised (not as surprised as Tim feels!), but before he can say anything, Tim is talking again. It feels horrifyingly as if Tim just uncorked a shaken bottle of champagne, and everything is trying to pour out.

"You're going to realize that I'm not worth it. You'll just leave. You don't want to *now*, but you haven't been around long enough. I know how it works. I'm not good enough to—to make it worth people's while. It always starts good and then falls apart." Tim takes a shuddering breath and looks at the dresser. "You should walk away from my life while you still have the chance. I'm just going to keep letting you down all the time."

Shit. He's said way too much. This is why Tim *doesn't talk about feelings*.

"They don't like me," he says, then, and *oh my god*, can't he shut up?

"Who doesn't?" Jason asks. Because Bruce is looking too stunned to say anything at the moment. Tim thinks he's rebooting.

"My parents," Tim says. "They love me. But I don't think they *like* me all that much."

Bruce has powered back on now, and Tim can literally see Batman Mode trying to come online in his face.

"What," Bruce says, clipped and careful, "makes you feel like that's the case, Tim?"

Tim opens his mouth. Closes it. He shakes his head. How do you tell someone *everything* but also *I know they love me, they're good people and tell me they do and I have lots of happy memories of them*. How does he tell Bruce *I feel like they don't know me and they don't want to listen when I'm talking about things* when his dad got involved in his school project the other day?

How can Tim say *they always leave me and it hurts* when he knows that it's their job and he's well provided for anyway?

"Too big, Bruce," Jason says, in a certain tone of voice. Like it's a code between them or something. And maybe it is, because something seems to light in Bruce's eyes.

"Let's start simpler," he tells Tim. "Can I ask you some questions? You can say as much or as little as you want. Jason and Dick call it the boulder method." He smiles. "It gets easier once you talk about smaller things first."

It can't hurt. Tim nods.

"We'll start out easy. Yes or no questions, all right? Just shake or nod your head if you don't want to talk." Bruce glances at Alfred, who slips out of the room, then back to Tim.

Jason hops up on the bed and puts an arm around Tim in solidarity, starts kicking his feet back and forth like a kid.

“Did your father hit you today, Tim?”

Tim shakes his head vehemently. No! Of course not. Does Bruce think his parents are *abusive*? Is *that* what this is about?

“Okay. That’s good. Did your mother?”

No.

“Have either of them ever hit you?”

Tim’s face twists. Not *hit* the way Bruce is thinking. He hasn’t been abused. It’s not like *that*. They’ve just slapped him a few times over the years, and spanked him when he was a kid. But it’s Batman, and Tim knows people don’t get away with half truths, so he nods and makes an *eh, sorta* motion with his hand that isn’t trapped next to his body by Jason.

“Can you use words to tell me what that means?” And what is he, a kindergartener? *Yes*, Mr. Wayne, he does know how to use his words! What the hell.

“They never hit me badly,” Tim mutters. He wants to stop with the questions. “Just a slap or two, you know. And really rarely. Only when I definitely deserved it.”

Jason’s hand tightens on his arm for a moment. Bruce’s expression doesn’t change, and Tim is grateful for it. He has so, so completely lost control of this situation. This whole day, really.

Bruce nods once. “Okay. Do your parents yell at you, when they’re home?”

A nod.

“Are there any times when you’re afraid of them?”

Tim swallows. Nods again.

“But—“ he starts, and Bruce puts a hand on his knee.

“It’s yes or no. Do you want to change your answer to a no?”

Tim hesitates.

“No, but—“

“We’re going slow, remember?” Bruce asks. He looks at Tim carefully. “Why do you feel like you need to qualify this answer right now?”

“I...” Tim frowns. “They’re...they’re good people. It’s not their fault.”

Bruce nods. “You think that your parents making you afraid is something people might see as wrong?”

“I’m not a kid!” Tim snaps at him, and then immediately feels terrible. He shudders in a breath, and Jason puts his head on Tim’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” Bruce tells him after a moment. He reaches out and takes Tim’s hands in his. “You’re right. You’ve proven multiple times that you’re intelligent and mature. I’m going to level with you, Tim.”

Tim straightens slightly.

“You’ve been neglected by your parents, in supervision and attention. And I also think you’ve been emotionally abused by them.”

No. Nope! They’re not doing this. This is not what Tim wanted to happen. His parents aren’t like that! They’re not evil people! They’re not trying to hurt Tim, they love him. They’re doing the best they can to parent him. And Tim isn’t always kind to them either, he yells and fights right back.

Bruce doesn’t know what he’s talking about, which is what Tim was *trying* to tell him earlier.

“There are a lot of signs that children who grow up in certain kinds of situations have, and despite how impressively well-adjusted you’ve trained yourself to be, Alfred and I have noticed some of them in you since we met.”

Tim shakes his head furiously, but Bruce isn’t done.

“I know them because Jason had them too. Still *has* some of them. And we were able to help him because we noticed.” Bruce’s thumb runs gently over the back of Tim’s free hand. “I don’t think anyone’s really tried to help you in a long time.”

Tim’s eyes are shut now. He’s breathing fast. Needs to get out and hide. There are some good hiding places in the manor. He knows them. He can make it.

“Can you tell me a couple of the things that they did that made you feel unsafe?” Bruce asks, and Tim, for whatever reason, *still can’t stop talking*.

“We were fighting. A couple years ago. She—my mom, and me, we were yelling, and she was mad and I was mad, and I couldn’t calm down, and I went to far, and she said she was going to leave and she did. She walked out the door. I heard her car leave.” Tim is nearly gasping for air, and Jason is rubbing firm circles on his back, making soft noises that probably would be sort of soothing if Tim had more than half a brain cell left to appreciate them. “I was afraid she wasn’t coming back.”

“Dude,” Jason says quietly. “That’s kind of really fucked up. That’s not right.”

“Today,” Tim chokes out. When did air get so hard to breathe? His hands are shaking between Bruce’s steady fingers. “When Dad was yelling, he yanked out my TV and threw it

in the hallway, and he stepped on my camera lens to punish me. But he was still mad. I don't know why he was so mad, I didn't mean to be bad, I shouldn't have given him attitude! I know better!"

"Timmers, breathe slow," Jason says. His voice is getting distant.

"He locked me out," Tim gasps. "I said I was sorry. I said I was *sorry*."

This is too much. Tim doesn't know why he's saying all this. Bruce asked, yeah, but Tim knows better. He hasn't been *abused*. It's not nearly that bad, you know? His parents are good people. They're not trying to hurt their own kid. They get stressed, and Tim isn't always well-behaved, and he has to have consequences when he doesn't behave properly. It's *normal*. But now Bruce thinks he's been abused, and so does Jason, Tim guesses, and everything is getting really, really distant now, like he's taken two steps backwards and is just watching from outside himself. All he can feel is numb, faint curiosity. The fear and anger stayed with his body.

He's not controlling what his body does right now, and that's kind of scary, Tim doesn't like that. But he's also not feeling overwhelmed anymore. That's not so bad.

Alfred opens the door and comes in with a mug of what's probably more of the good tea. Tim zooms his hearing in, catches Jason talking.

"Good job Tim, you're doing great! Nice and slow, just like that."

Tim's body is settled down now. Huh.

But Bruce is frowning. He's looking intently at Tim's face, brushing some of Tim's dark hair back behind his ear gently.

"Tim, sweetheart?" Bruce asks. "Are you with us right now?"

"Yes," Tim says, and it's flat.

"*Tim*," Bruce says, more insistently.

"B?" asks Jason. "Is—"

"Tim, talk to me buddy," Bruce says firmly. He's got his fingers on Tim's wrist, pressing into his pulse point. Tim thinks it's kind of silly. His body only manages a vague hum.

"Oh," Jason says, and he sounds sad. Tim feels sorry. He doesn't ever want to hurt Jason. He didn't mean to make him sad, with whatever is happening right now. But this is so much better than feeling everything like before. "Tim checked out?"

"I think so," Bruce responds, most of his attention on Tim's face while he rubs his hands up and down Tim's shoulders. "We pushed him too fast. It's a lot to have to realize, if he's been blocking out the truth to cope."

Tim wants Bruce to keep doing that. He feels warmer. He can maybe feel some pressure on his arms.

Alfred puts the mug on the nightstand, then leans out the door and whistles down the hallway. "Ace! Come, boy." The German shepherd pads into the room moments later, and Bruce gestures at Tim's body.

"Ace," he commands, " *druk*."

Ace hops up on the bed, as Bruce gently levers Tim down flat. Jason scoots away far enough to give Ace room, but puts a hand on Tim's ankle. Ace drapes his weight across Tim's body from left hip to right shoulder, careful and firm.

At some point, Tim starts feeling a bit more real. He's warmer, and heavy. Like something is pulling him down. Pushing him back. As several minutes pass, Tim slowly slips closer and closer to himself, until finally he can feel not just the pressure and warmth, but Ace's fur rubbing his skin, his soft *whuffing* close to Tim's ear.

Tim blinks, breathes in, and he's back.

"Bruce," he says, automatically, and *there*, Bruce is there. Bruce is *still there*.

"Hey, buddy," Bruce says, painful softness in his smile. "Glad you're back with us."

"Where'd I go," Tim mumbles.

"You dissociated for a bit, pretty hardcore." Jason's tone is nothing but factual. He stretches out on the bed next to Tim, meets his eyes calmly. "Has that happened before?"

"Uh," Tim says, intelligently. It feels like he's lagging, like when he tried to play Skyrim on the six year old laptop at Ives' old house. "Only for a second."

"Okay. Well, it sucks. It doesn't happen to me anymore, but I remember. I'm sorry."

"S'okay," Tim says, and *wow*, he's tired. Not sleepy tired. Just...existence tired. His brain doesn't want to *work*. He's like...mushy grapes. Yeah. Still edible, but like, sad and squishy. Wait. Tim doesn't want his brain to be edible. No zombies.

"Tim," Bruce says gently. "I want you to stay here for at least the night, okay? I know you love your parents. And I believe you, that they aren't meaning to hurt you or be bad. All right? No one is saying your parents are evil."

"Okay," Tim says.

"But people can love you and not intend to do anything wrong, and still hurt you. That doesn't make them bad people. But it is still doing a lot of damage, regardless of intent. That's what I think is happening to you."

"Okay."

“I’m going to talk with my lawyers and your parents, about doing kinship care,” Bruce says. He’s going slow. Tim appreciates it, since his brain is definitely *not* all there right now. “We can settle that out of court, if your parents cooperate, and if I’m listed as a family friend you’re comfortable living with, you can stay with me as your legal caretaker indefinitely. Like Dick did. Long-term foster care. Or, if you want it, we could see if your parents would do a full adoption process out of court. But you don’t need to worry about that right now, Tim. Do you trust me?”

“Of *course*,” Tim says. He’s a little offended Bruce even asked.

“Then trust me when I say that all you need to worry about is settling in here and feeling whatever you need to feel. I’ve got the legal matters covered, okay? And if your parents decide they want to take it to family court, I’m going to fight for you every step of the way. No worrying about logistics.”

“Mkay,” Tim says. Jason’s fingers are drawing heavenly circles through Tim’s hair, and Ace is squashing Tim like the world’s best blanket, and Alfred’s tea smells sweet and warm nearby, and he’s got nothing left. He’s wrung out like a ratty old dish rag.

Tim closes his eyes as Bruce presses a kiss to his forehead.

“You’re not alone, Tim,” Bruce says softly. “I’m not going to let anyone hurt you while you’re part of this family. I’ve got you.”

“I know,” Tim mumbles. “Y’r Batman.” As if that settles everything. And then he’s out like a light, completely missing the shock that hits everyone like a bolt of lightning.

Bruce blinks down at Tim. Stares at Jason for a moment. Looks back down to Tim. “Did he just say *Batman*?”

“He did, Master Bruce,” Alfred says calmly. A little *too* calmly.

“He knew? And Alfred...”

Jason shrugs at Bruce.

Bruce turns to frown at Alfred. “You *knew*? How long have you known he knew?”

“Master *Bruce*. I might remind you that while Thomas and Martha were your parents, I am the one who raised you through the majority of your formative years, and much of your early reconnaissance training. It is my entire job to know everything that goes on in this manor.”

“But...”

Jason laughs at Bruce. “He’s Alfie,” he says, as if that explains everything.

Alfred finally takes pity on Bruce. “Master Timothy never spoke with me about any of it,” he explains. “But I knew about his sneaking out, and I have been an avid follower of BatWatch

for years. Many of his speech patterns carry over. It was not difficult to put one and one together and make two.”

“Only you, Alfred,” says Bruce, running a hand down his face. “Only you.”

Tim wakes up the next morning to golden sunlight and fingers carding gently through his hair. He opens his eyes to see Dick near the edge of the bed, his head propped on one arm. Dick smiles, genuine and wide and unconditional.

“Dick?” Tim croaks. He hopes Alfred has more of that tea today, because Tim is definitely feeling the punishment of a crying dehydration headache.

“Hey, Timbit,” Dick whispers. He smooths Tim’s hair back again, fingers so gentle on Tim’s forehead. Slowly rubs out the gathering wrinkles there. “Heard you had a bad day, huh?”

Tim hates how quickly his eyes well up.

“Oh, baby,” Dick says, and then he’s scooting Tim over and clambering under the blanket with him like they’re kids or something. He wraps Tim up in a hug and shushes him gently while he cries for what feels like the millionth time in recent history.

Jason cracks the door open, then pads softly across the carpet and climbs up to sandwich Tim in on his other side. He starts reading *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* off his phone while Tim settles back down.

“I love you so much, Tim, you know that right?” Jason asks after a while.

“That’s sappy.” Tim pokes Jason in the ribs from the safety of his cocoon in Dick’s arms.

“I’ll be as sappy as I want, I don’t give a shit,” Jason fires back. He pokes Tim between the eyes, then rolls over onto his back again. “I love you. Damn.”

“Me too, Tim,” Dick murmurs, half asleep.

“I,” Tim starts. Clears his throat. “I love you guys too. You’re the best.”

Tim lies there, between the two brothers, in the morning sunlight, and thinks, *if things had to go wrong, at least they’re going partly right too.*

The situation? It *sucks*. Royally. But right now, this? This...is pretty nice. Tim is going to let himself enjoy it for a moment, while it lasts.

Sorry I couldn't get anything up yesterday. It was WILD my dudes, I made it alllllll the way to work and on the very last hill my car suddenly decided it had a hot date with a tree several yards behind us and changed plans. I'm okay, don't worry. It's all good in the hood!

I HOPE YOU'RE ALL DOING WELL PLEASE BE GENTLE WITH YOURSELVES TODAY. Drink water, eat something, take your meds, say something kind to yourself.
<3

and i can't go back, back to how it was

Chapter Summary

Tim is adjusting. Can he MAYBE stop Realizing Things yet, please? For like? Two seconds? Also, freezie pops.

Chapter Notes

This is mostly a (lower quality, sorry!!!!) filler chapter to give everyone a breather after the Massive Ride the last two were! Next chapter will be more involved again.

CONTENT WARNING: mentions of past incidents of child abuse. nothing graphically described.

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

Tim has parked himself carefully out of sight on the GCPD main precinct, fifteen minutes ahead of the time Batman and Robin usually swing in. Gordon should be out any second now.

He feels surprisingly anxious about the conversation he's about to have, although he figures it could also be nerves about being back on the streets for the first time in weeks creeping up on him. It's not like anything's changed in the time BatWatch has been on hiatus—Gotham is still as *Gotham* as ever, and no new Rogues have come onto the scene recently, thank goodness.

Although, Tim's personal life has changed a lot. There is that.

The rooftop door opens, spitting out Commissioner Gordon. Tim can see exhaustion rolling off of him in waves, *but hey, what else is new?* Gordon scans the area out of habit, then paces over the damp pea gravel and flips on the Bat-Signal.

Tim steps out of the shadows.

"Hi, Commissioner," he says quietly. Fiddles with the camera strap around his neck.

Gordon whirls around, hand on his holster, then relaxes after a beat. "Oh. It's *you*. Don't scare me like that, kid, my heart can only handle a certain quota per week. And I already work with the Bats."

“Sorry,” Tim can’t help laughing quietly. “Felt like being dramatic.”

“Hm,” says Gordon, but he’s smiling a little under the mustache. He folds his arms, gives Tim a clear once-over. “So. You’ve been out of commission for a while.”

Tim kicks at the gravel. “Yeah. Some things came up.”

“You need any help?”

Tim blinks. That’s...really kind. The commissioner sounds like he’s serious about the offer.

“Thanks,” Tim says. “But I’ve got some people looking out for me now. That’s—some stuff happened, and I guess you could say I finally realized some things. I’ve got backup now, you’ll be happy to hear that,” he offers.

“Ecstatic,” Gordon says dryly. “I weep tears of joy.”

“Also, the Bats and I know about each other now, just so you know,” Tim adds. Gordon raises an eyebrow. Tim looks away. “So. I’ll just give Batman any photos that need to get to you from now on, I guess. And not send random kids to your precinct with no warning anymore.”

“Shame,” Gordon says. “I’ll miss having feisty little hellions showing up to demand warm food and a private audience. Makes life interesting around here.”

“Sorry for your loss. But Batman’s going to start taking a more proactive approach with the street kids.” Tim’s smile is large and genuine now. “So, bummer that you won’t see them as much, but it’s going to be much better overall.”

“Yeah, I imagine it will,” Gordon muses. “Heard something on the radio about Bruce Wayne donating the money to open a couple new youth shelters.”

“That’s real generous of him,” Tim says.

“Mm. Sure is.”

“Well,” Tim says, glancing out at the city. “I need to go if I want to get in position for some shots. But I wanted to swing by and just...let you know I’m not gone, I guess. And I’m taking some of your advice. It’s nice having someone watching my back on comms.”

“Glad you were actually listening that night.” Gordon’s lip twitches up ever so slightly. “Hey, kid?”

Tim turns from where he’s about to swing himself over the roof’s edge.

“Yeah?” he asks.

Gordon hesitates. “Are you...you’re okay, though, right? Really?”

“Were you worried?” Tim grins. Gordon sighs.

"Kid."

"I'm..." Tim brushes his bangs out of his eyes, considers what he wants to say. This wig is turning out to be a little more annoying than expected. "I will be," he says finally. "I'm working on it."

"Okay," says Gordon. He takes a step back and smiles. "It's good to have you back on the beat."

Tim salutes loosely, then drops over the edge onto a balcony below.

"He's a good kid," Batman tells Gordon, looking out at the horizon.

"I know. He needs good people," Gordon returns.

"I like to think he's getting some now."

"Oh, I think he is," Gordon says, "better late than never, right?" And that's the end of that.

But Gordon could swear he catches a small Batman-smile out of the corner of his eye before he turns around far enough to allow the man to vanish into the night unseen, as usual.

Things are strange, in the weeks after Lockout Day. Not bad, necessarily, but...Tim's routine, ordinary life was basically shattered overnight. And he's supposed to pick up the pieces. But he's quickly realizing that he can't even trust himself to know *which* pieces to pick up, most of the time.

Some of them are fine, but some—he reaches out to touch them and ends up with bleeding hands and a bruised heart.

"I want to stop Realizing Things," Tim groans into a couch cushion. His cheeks are tacky and flushed from his most recent crying episode, this one brought on by a scene in the book he was reading. (Seeing as this particular book had done it to him three times already in the past couple of days, he's beginning to suspect Jason had ulterior motives when he recommended it to Tim. Just a little. Just a smidge.)

Dick pats his head gently. "There there. May I offer you a blue freezie pop in these trying times?"

Tim considers this for a moment.

"Yeah, alright," he says. He rolls off the couch and drops to the floor with a satisfying *thud*. "Want to play some Halo?"

"Okay," Dick says, and they don't talk about it, and it's all right.

Apparently, good parents are supposed to teach you to “process emotions”, and apparently, most of the time that means you have to “sit with them patiently, feel them, and then gently move on when they’re over.” Or something like that. Simple in theory, surprisingly difficult in practice.

Tim’s carefully avoiding the bigger feelings for now, unless he’s around Bruce, because he doesn’t know how to handle it yet if he starts dissociating while by himself. He doesn’t really want to know what his body will do if left on autopilot for too long.

But as Bruce keeps telling him, these things happen. If Bruce and Jason both say that it will eventually get less overwhelming, Tim believes them. He’s just got to wait.

Tim shuffles into the manor’s main kitchen, dragging the oversized blanket behind him and squinting through barely open eyes. Tim Drake may be many, many things, but a morning person he is *not*.

The only two in there are Alfred (of course), and Dick (more surprising). Tim pauses in the middle of the floor and stares at Dick for a moment. He’s sitting up on a countertop humming and chowing down on a bowl of extremely colorful cereal.

“Silly rabbit, Trix are for kids,” Tim says. “You’re a grown up, hand them over.”

Dick throws the cereal box at Tim’s face.

“I’m still B’s kid, I can do what I want,” Dick laughs.

“Why are you so freakishly *awake*,” groans Jason, walking through the door. He folds himself in half across the table top while his feet are still firmly on the floor and closes his eyes. “I oughtta call the cops on you for being this cheerful. It’s *illegal*.”

Tim snorts.

“I *am* the cops,” Dick points out serenely, and jabs his spoon back into the sea of unnaturally colorful milk.

“Omelettes will be ready in two minutes,” Alfred interrupts, before the two older boys can start bantering.

“Yes,” Jason hisses into the hardwood. Dick makes a pleased noise around a mouthful of cereal.

“Thanks, Alfred,” Tim says politely.

“It’s my pleasure, dear boy.” Alfred smiles.

Bruce walks in the door, half-dressed for work. He’s already looking over the daily paper, barely seeming to notice when Alfred walks up and begins to deftly tie his tie in a windsor knot smooth it out against the dress shirt.

“Morning, pops,” Jason slurs from his spot on the tabletop. Bruce looks up from the paper, blinks, and after a few moments of consideration, gently picks Jason up and deposits him upright in a chair. Tim can’t help but laugh from how much it reminded him of a mother cat wrangling a wayward kitten.

“Good morning, Bruce,” Tim offers, finally taking his own seat and reaching into the Trix box to grab a handful of dry cereal.

“Good morning, Tim,” Bruce says warmly. “And to you too, chum.”

Dick waves his spoon and smiles wide between his cereal-stuffed hamster cheeks, eyes crinkling up.

“Where’d the Tabasco sauce go?” Jason asks, finally coming to life a little. He heaves himself up from the chair. “Are we out? I don’t see it on the rack.”

“Look behind the Sriracha, I think it got shoved back further,” Bruce answers.

“Ah. There it is.” Jason turns around and looks at Tim and Dick. “Hey, Dickiebird, Timbo, you want sauces for your eggs?”

“I’ll take Sriracha,” Dick says, setting his cereal bowl in the dishwasher. “I like pizazz in my eggs, not boring old man hot sauce.”

“No thanks,” Tim says to Jason. “I’ve been hot sauced too many times to eat it willingly on anything besides stir fry.”

Bruce looks up.

“Hot sauced?” Dick asks.

“Yeah, you know, like soap? If someone’s too disrespectful or says a bad word or something, parents in old TV shows are like *‘I’m gonna wash your mouth out with soap, young man, raaah! Go to the bathroom!’* Except with hot sauce instead, because it’s, y’know, actually an edible food and not a cleaning agent.” Tim eyebrows pinch together slightly. “Although I think I vaguely remember getting my mouth washed out with soap once or twice too when we were at Grandma’s old house, since she didn’t have sauce. It was gross. Definitely didn’t sass my mom again that day, it was pretty effective.”

“Tim,” Jason starts, and it comes out sounding strangled. And, *oh no*, Tim realizes, with the sense of dawning shame and stress that’s all too familiar lately.

Oh No, the thing that I just said is apparently one of the things that other people Don’t Think Is Okay that I didn’t realize, and Now I’ve Made People Sad And They’re Wasting Emotions On Me, but it’s FINE, really, it is.

“It’s fine,” Tim says, a little desperately. “Come on. Hot sauce isn’t fun, but it isn’t a *bad* thing. It works! It’s even an appropriate consequence, right?”

Bruce and Alfred are trying to teach him about Appropriate Consequences lately—making sure the punishment fits the crime instead of just being pulled from a hat, or just anger. *If you're not allowed to do it to an adult or a prisoner in jail, you shouldn't do it to a child*, is a general rule of thumb Bruce taught Tim. Which, yeah, that's fair. But this is just hot sauce. It's not a big deal.

“If you're using your mouth to be disrespectful or cuss, then your mouth is what gets punished, right?” Tim says. He's fairly confident Bruce will back him up on this one. Dick looks pained, Jason looks vaguely horrified, but Bruce just looks calm. *That's a good sign*, Tim thinks.

“Tim,” Bruce says, evenly.

“Bruce,” Tim says back.

“What does hot sauce *do*?”

“It activates certain receptors and sends nerve signals to the brain that are processed as heat,” Tim recites.

“Right. And if that heat is more than an individual's enjoyment threshold, what does the sensation become?”

Tim frowns. “Uh. Painful?”

“And don't children have more sensitive senses of taste than adults do?”

“Yeah, of course,” Tim says.

“So,” Bruce says, so patiently. “If a hot sauce is too hot for you when you're older, and that's *painful*, how does it feel to you if you're younger?”

“More...painful...?”

“And if you force someone to eat something that causes them physical pain, that would be...”

“Oh,” says Tim, feeling suddenly much smaller than his age. “Oh.”

“C'mere,” Bruce sighs, and holds out his arms.

“But...soap is toxic,” Tim says, brain stuck somewhere in a skipping CD phase. Still trying to cling to his previous understanding.

“Yes, which is why *soap* is wrong. But just because capsaicin is something technically safer for humans to eat, that doesn't mean it's right to put it in a child's mouth. And it's technically a toxin to us too, anyway. We just like it much more than soap.”

“But...” Tim is still saying, sadly, and then Dick is picking him up out of his chair in a bear hug, and carrying him over to be dropped in front of Bruce. “But it wasn't a big deal,” Tim tries to explain.

Bruce just pulls him in for a hug. Tim sighs.

“Not now that you’re *big*, it isn’t,” Jason chips in from the other side of the table. He’s already cheerfully pouring Tabasco sauce on one of Alfred’s beautiful omelettes. “But you weren’t big *then*. How did little you feel?”

Tim thinks back, cheek smooshed into Bruce’s shoulder. “I don’t know,” he’s surprised to report. “It just...happened. That’s all.”

“It’ll come back at some point,” Jason says confidently. “You’re just not ready to feel it yet. That’s okay. You’ve got time.”

“Why do I have to keep *feeling things*?” Tim complains, and Bruce lets go at last and shoves him gently towards his own omelette. “This is the *worst*.”

“Give it time,” Alfred says. “This is a marathon, not a sprint.”

“I always did suck at cross-country,” Tim grumbles. But he salts his omelette anyway, and lets the family fold him into the warm, easy conversation of a Sunday brunch, and it feels a little bit like the places he been breaking are starting to grow into new wholes.

Ace has started hanging around Tim a lot more, ever since that night. Which is *great*.

“I always wanted a dog,” Tim mentions while lying on the lounge’s enormous rug during family movie night. “But Mom doesn’t like things with fur.”

“She just doesn’t know what she’s missing,” Dick says, fondly scratching a particular spot on Ace’s flank. “*What a good boy you are!* Yes!”

“Hey Bruce?” Tim asks.

“Mm?”

“Did you train Ace to lay on people?”

“Alfred and I did, yes. When Jason first came to us, he was dealing with a lot of issues too, including dissociation. Pressure helped him feel more grounded, but the weighted blankets made him feel too trapped.”

“There was. A thing, once,” Jason says, aiming for casual and almost succeeding. But there’s still a hint of pain in his tone. Tim doesn’t pry. “I don’t like being pressed in on by fabric. ‘S why I keep the cape short and narrow.”

“So we did some task training with Ace,” Bruce continues, as he reaches out a hand and slowly rubs Jason’s head. “He was originally a guide dog, so he’s a fast learner and already has a strong foundation.”

“What other tasks did you teach him?” Tim asks. He lies down and wiggles for a few moments until he’s pressed up against the dog’s solid warmth. He closes his eyes, and keeps

softly running his fingers along the short fur between Ace's ears.

"He knows 'Get Bruce,'" Jason says. "He'll find and retrieve Bruce if he's anywhere in the manor."

"And he alerts to panic attacks," Dick adds, "although no one's had one for a good while now."

"Thank god for therapy," Jason mutters. "Woo hoo."

"Thank god for therapy," Bruce agrees. "Can you imagine if we didn't go to Black Canary? Who knows what we would gotten tangled up in by now."

"Perish the thought!" Dick says in a pretty good imitation of Alfred. He clutches a hand to his chest dramatically, and topples off the hassock.

Tim laughs, and he really feels it.

Bruce has kept his word and is taking care of all the custody talk without Tim having to worry about much of it. But one day after the first few weeks have passed, right when Tim is really starting to get comfortable in Wayne Manor and feel like things will work out, Bruce knocks on the door of the room Tim's sorta-not-quite-all-the-way claimed as his own.

He looks like someone made him eat several lemons, and then wash them down with cheap whiskey.

Tim swallows.

"Bruce?"

"Tim," Bruce says, and *oh no*. That's his heavy voice. It's the *this is less than stellar news, but chin up, we'll find a way through—but yeah, this is pretty bad, sorry* voice. "We've run into a roadblock with the custody fight."

"Oh?" Tim asks. "What kind of roadblock?"

"Your parents," and here Bruce has to take a deep breath before looking Tim in the eyes, "are insisting that you come home. They said you're an unlawful runaway, and they're willing to call the police to have you removed from my home and prosecute me if we don't agree."

"Oh," Tim says faintly. And. Well. He guesses he should have expected this.

Ace and Jason, who Tim could swear can just smell when he's getting upset, quietly come through the doorway and settle down pressed up against Tim in solidarity. He absently scratches behind one of Ace's ears.

"I'm not going to force you to leave here, not ever. And that's a promise," Bruce says. "But we also can't afford to have the police get involved."

“So what’s the plan?” Tim asks. “You always have one. Hit me.”

Bruce smiles, finally. “New Jersey,” he says, slowly, “is a one-party state. Which means that there only needs to be consent from one party for a conversation or interaction to be recorded.”

Tim’s eyes widen as he processes this.

“So you want—”

“I want to set you up with a hidden microphone and camera, yes,” Bruce says. “And as soon as we get a few pieces of evidence that are convincing enough, you can leave and we’ll go to the family court ourselves. If the police get called, they’ll have to take our side based on the evidence.”

“That’s a good plan,” Tim says, approvingly.

“Yeah, except for the part where it involves you going back to the people we don’t want you anywhere near again,” Jason growls.

“They’re my *parents*,” Tim says sharply, and he’s kind of surprised by the swirl of emotions that clash within the phrase. He’s fiercely defensive, protective, in pain, *and* yearning. Yeah, they may have hurt him, even if he doesn’t like *accepting* that yet. But they’re not bad people, they’re not hurtful all the time. And they’re still his family. Even if they’re not the healthiest for him to live with, he doesn’t want to cut off all contact forever. They’re his *mom and dad*.

“Whatever,” Jason sighs. “I just don’t like it.”

“Neither do I,” says Bruce. “But the quicker we get it over with, the quicker Tim is back with us. Hopefully for good.”

“And I can use this as a chance to get the things from my room that I still want,” Tim adds. “It’s not all bad.”

“We’re going to regret this,” Jason warns. He hugs Tim fiercely, and Tim can feel the tension in the other boy’s whole body.

“Most likely,” Bruce agrees. “But the alternative is to lose Tim, probably for good. We’ll handle whatever else happens, as long as it doesn’t come to that.”

Tim lasts three days. Then he calls Bruce, and climbs out the bedroom window with two backpacks and one duffel bag, and only looks back twice.

According to Bruce’s lawyers, he racks up seven recordings of verbal abuse, one (more) incident of emotional abuse via property destruction, and his very first lasting mark from a physical hit. So that’s a nice parting gift.

It hadn't actually been any harder a slap than his mom had given him before, but Tim was just in the wrong place at the wrong time, and his head hit the cabinet door knob when tipped off kilter.

It didn't even need stitches. He was *lucky*, according to the ER staff who looked it over. No concussion, shouldn't leave a scar.

Tim just wants to go *home*.

Tim's talked to nurses and police and a social worker and lawyers, because Bruce wanted things moving forward as quickly as possible. And the logician in Tim appreciates that. But right now? He's so *tired*. Bruce carries him in from the car when they pull into the manor's garage that evening.

"I can walk just fine," he tries, halfheartedly, when Bruce first scoops him up.

"I know," says Bruce. "But as far as I can tell, your parents didn't touch you for three days. If that's how you've been living all the time for years, you must be touch starved to kingdom come and very good at hiding it. Why didn't you say anything?"

Tim lets himself melt into Bruce's hold, then. He doesn't want to ever be put down again, really. Bruce, seeming to sense it, squeezes him tighter.

"I just don't want...to be a bother," Tim says, voice very small.

Bruce kisses the crown of his head through his unruly hair. "Tim," he says, serious. "You are never, ever a bother to us. We'll keep showing you as many times as you need, okay? Just promise me you'll try to believe that as best you can for now."

"Okay," Tim says, and then whispers, just for Bruce to hear: "I love you. Thank you for not giving up on me."

Bruce pushes the door open to his bedroom, where Jason, Dick, and Ace are already waiting for them, sprawled out in a heap on Bruce's California king size bed watching episode who-knows-what of a Star Trek binge.

"Never," Bruce whispers back. "I love you too, Tim. Everything is going to be okay."

And Tim really trusts him that it will. It's small, and fragile, but it's there. For once, Tim is going to let himself believe that things aren't going to go wrong. And right now, he's got almost-brothers and a dog and the closest thing to a good parent figure he's ever known waiting for him to join the puppy pile so they can hang out, just to make Tim feel better after a terrible past few days.

Tim snuggles into the center of the bed, managing to somehow touch every one of the others.

"Freezie pop?" Dick asks him, his own lips already starting to stain purple. The theme song starts to roll for The Original Series, and Jason sings along to the instrumental music, and Bruce laughs.

“Yeah,” Tim says, and smiles. “I want green.”

And yeah, it’s been a lousy few days. But he’s got a family he’s growing into, with a place they’re carving out just for him. Tim doesn’t know what tomorrow will bring, at this point, but for right now, for this night?

He’s going to be okay.

Chapter End Notes

I HOPE YOU ENJOYED IT please remember to stay hydrated and eat something small at least, and take any meds you need! Have a lovely night/day!

My sister is having a baby tomorrow, and I'm watching a baby and then her kids in the evening, and bringing her food, so I'll probably get the next chapter up later than usual. But it'll happen!

you don't have to have it all together now (to have it all)

Chapter Summary

Healing takes time. Tim's working on it. Also, shenanigans and brotherly fun!

Chapter Notes

ONE MORE DAY and then I can finally sleep and have 10 days off work, I'm so excited. I'm considering making this into a series where I can do more fics and oneshots. If any of you have suggestions I'm all ears!

The final chapter MIGHT not be up tomorrow, if I end up crashing too early or stuck at the hospital late into the evening. But it'll be up by the end of this weekend no matter what! I'm so excited.

Chapter title is from "All Together Now" by The Likes of Us.

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

There's a clatter from the hallway. Tim shoots upright from a deep sleep as his bedroom door is slammed open straight into the neighboring wall.

"That was *YOU?!'*" Jason practically shrieks, backlit in the doorway like an angel of righteous fury. His Wonder Woman pajamas are more rumpled than usual.

"I don't know what you're talking about," says Tim, who is desperately clinging to the edge of his sheets in an attempt to not slip off the bed. "*What* was me?"

"What is going on here?" Bruce asks, looming behind Jason in a hastily-thrown-on robe. The end of his sentence trails into a yawn so wide his jaw pops.

"*BatWatch!*" Jason's voice is now at least an octave higher than Tim's ever heard it before, and *oh god. What did I do now*, Tim wonders, frantically flying through files and files of memories and nights and posts, looking for anything that Jason could possibly be mad about.

"Yes," Bruce says, with shocking patience for a man who has just been woken up at—Tim checks the clock—*3:17 in the morning*. "We have established that Tim is behind BatWatch. And knows who we are. And we've discussed this several times already, at times much more appropriate than the early morning. Go back to sleep."

“No!” Jason snaps, rounding on Bruce. His finger flies out to point in Tim’s direction. “The night with Scarecrow by the harbor. Didn’t Commissioner Gordon just mention that the kid we fished out of the harbor was BatWatch, not a hired teenager looking for quick money?” He turns back to Tim. “That was *Tim*, that night. In the harbor. Alone.”

Bruce has gone white as the moonlight reflecting on the window.

“Tim, is that correct?” Bruce asks, so, so carefully.

“Uh,” Tim says. His fists tighten around the duvet. “Yeah. I was distracting Scarecrow, for a sec? So you’d have time to get there?” He shrugs, sheepish. “I got lost.”

Bruce looks like he’s been shot.

Jason opens and shuts his mouth a few times as his shoulders start to visibly shake.

“You almost *died*,” he bites out.

“But you were there,” Tim points out. “You found me in time.”

“*Timothy Jackson Drake*,” Jason shouts in frustration, his voice deeply cracking for the first time in months.

Tim throws himself backwards off the other side of his bed, hits the floor in a tangle of sheets and frozen breathing. He frees himself as quickly as he can. He faintly notices he’s fallen into the fighting stance that Bruce has been slowly teaching him in an effort to keep him safer while running around Gotham.

“*What?*” Tim snaps back, and Bruce takes a step forward now, reaching for Jason’s shoulder. He’s promptly shrugged off.

“Do you not care that you almost *died*?” Jason asks, voice like a snapping fire.

“I care plenty!” Tim fires back. “I just don’t see the point of dredging up the past when it already happened and I came out fine!”

“Fine? You had hypothermia!”

“Which was *easily fixed*!”

“You could have gotten pneumonia! You could have *drowned*! I could have not heard the splash because I was distracted by the fight!” Jason shouts back. “What would you have done then, Tim?”

“*Died*, I guess! Is that what you want to hear, Jason? I get it, okay! It was stupid. I was an idiot. By all rights I should have died, yeah.” Tim snarls. He feels like a venomous snake, spitting poison. “At least I would cause a lot fewer problems that way, if I had!”

Tim’s voice is so loud.

He realizes suddenly that he's shaking, hot; it feels like his whole body is a live wire. Every inch of his skin feels filled with boiling blood, and the hair on the back of his neck is damp with sweat. Somehow, that's what bothers him the most.

Jason looks like Tim just struck him across the face.

"I'm sorry," Tim gasps. He drops down like a puppet with a cut string, balanced over his ankles, arms wrapped around his rib cage. He's folded nearly in half, arms smashing into his thighs. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Jason, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

There are tears leaking from his eyes. It feels like they're burning his cheeks everywhere they touch.

Everything is too *much*.

He can hear Jason sniffing on the other side of the room, and his own heartbeat, and the fan going over in the corner, *so loud*. Hears the air whistling in his throat as he sucks it in, wheezes it out, never enough. Like he's drowning all over again, in lava instead of ice.

Tim blinks, blinks again, and suddenly Bruce is in front of him, broad and steady and frowning, and Tim—*he's sorry, he's sorry, he's so so sorry, he'll do better next time, he's sorry*.

Bruce is making soft shushing noises, carefully unwinding the sheets from around Tim's feet, setting the fabric up on the bed. Jason is gone.

Jason is gone.

"Jason," Tim gasps, and he's scrambling, clawing for the door in his mad dash, but Bruce catches him solidly around the waist as Tim attempts to throw his entire body weight across the room.

"Tim, *listen to me*, listen, *shhhh*," Bruce soothes. He's got one arm around Tim's torso and upper arms, his legs wrapped around Tim's, carefully holding them down, free hand rhythmically stroking through Tim's hair, and hey, *when did they sit down on the ground?*
"Tim. Jason is fine. He's got Ace, Alfred is with him. Do you remember them leaving?"

Tim shakes his head violently. Why doesn't he remember? How did they end up on the floor?

"Okay. That's okay, Tim, it's fine," Bruce murmurs. "Can you tell me what you're thinking right now?"

Tim shakes his head even as he's already speaking. "Jason hates me," he whispers.

"Jason most definitely does *not* hate you," Bruce says firmly. Then, softer: "Why do you think that, Tim?"

"I was awful," Tim gasps. "I said a horrible thing. I shouldn't have said that. He's going to hate me now. I hurt him."

“You were not awful,” Bruce chides. “You’re not an awful person. You’re a very good person. Even good people say things they regret sometimes, things that hurt others. And Jason loves you very, very much, Tim. Something like this isn’t going to change that.”

“No,” says Tim, but Bruce doesn’t listen.

“You are good,” Bruce says into his ear, holding him tighter. “You’re really upset, right now, and you’re not thinking clearly. Jason, too. Both of you weren’t thinking straight a few minutes ago. But everything is going to be all right. You just had a little argument. You and Jason will apologize to each other, hug it out, and make things okay again. I promise Jason is not going to hate you for this.”

“What’s wrong with me,” Tim says, miserably. He can’t stop the monotone from taking over his voice.

“I think you were a little bit triggered, buddy,” Bruce says gently. “How are you feeling right now?”

“Hot.”

“Mm. Do you feel up to finding Jason and Ace? Jason should be all settled down by now. He’s used to dealing with this.”

Tim doesn’t know. He wants to hug Jason. He never wants to see him again. He wants to snuggle up on the couch and he wants to run to the opposite side of the house, far far away. He doesn’t want Jason to ever yell that at him again.

“My name,” Tim says, realization dawning. “Jason yelled my name.”

Bruce’s hand pauses in Tim’s hair for a moment. “That’s what made it get bad?”

“I guess.”

“You were stressed before that, too, though. Ever since Jason startled you by barging in. I saw, but I didn’t stop things, and I should have.” Bruce sighs. “I’m sorry Tim, that one’s on me. I *know* both of you, and next time I won’t hesitate to step in and keep things from escalating, all right?”

Tim nods. It’s not Bruce’s fault, but words are really hard right now, and Tim can’t find the energy to say that out loud.

“How about we go find Jason now, huh?” Bruce says, slowly unwrapping himself from Tim and helping him to his feet. Tim’s still shaky, and waiting for the hammer to fall. But it’s not quite as bad as it was.

“Okay,” says Tim, and they head out, hand in hand.

“I’m sorry for yelling at you, and pushing it,” Jason says, inches away from Tim’s head. They’re both being squashed, under a very happy, very snuggly Ace. Bruce is watching over

them from the couch after having tucked a blanket over them and taken the tray of late-night tea from Alfred to hold till the boys were ready.

“It’s fine,” Tim says.

“It’s not, really.” Jason’s smile is bitter around the edges. “I’m supposed to have better control than that.”

“Everyone has bad days,” Bruce pipes up from the couch. “You’re not a robot, Jason. Cut yourself a little slack.”

“Okay, *Dad*,” Jason drawls.

Tim can just see the slight upturn of Bruce’s lips as he flips a book page.

“Anyway,” Jason goes on. “I won’t do that again. I’m just...really bad when people are reckless with their lives. I’ll tell you about it sometime, but...not right now.” He looks at Ace’s big eyes, scratches a soft furry ear. “Too close.”

“I’m really sorry too,” Tim says. “I shouldn’t have yelled or said any of that. I don’t know why I said it at all.”

“You were running on autopilot,” Jason sighs. “It happens. I get it. But Tim, dude, some part of you meant it. Just so you know.”

“No,” Tim insists.

“Yes,” says Jason. “And I’ll bet you a million bucks that Bruce has already filed that information away in his ginormous brain so that he can make sure Dinah talks with you about it sometime.”

“Do you even *have* a million bucks?” Tim laughs. More quietly than usual, but still. A laugh is a laugh. “And who’s Dinah?”

“Black Canary,” Jason says. He points to himself with a grin. “And I have it on good authority that I’m now a trust fund baby, so who knows? I bet I’m filthy rich. Rumor has it that my dad is *loaded*.”

Bruce snorts from the couch at the same time that Tim laughs into Ace’s fur.

It’s a bad night. But he’s not alone. Tomorrow doesn’t have to be a bad day, too.

Tim and Jason fall asleep side by side on the floor under Bruce’s watchful eye, and don’t wake up again till Dick comes home for the weekend and throws donuts right onto their noses, like some twisted game of horseshoes. Tim and Jason stuff their faces with sprinkle donuts while chasing Dick down into the cave and around the gymnastics equipment clamoring for payback.

Tim is never going to get over how wild it is to have *brothers*.

Betting behind Batman's back is apparently a Thing this year.

Tim is perched on a low-hanging gargoyle when he snaps a shot of Robin (disgruntled, resigned) passing Nightwing (quite smug. Irritatingly smug, in fact) some bills as they stand side by side watching Batman take down Killer Croc on what is only the second weirdest Easter morning of Tim's life.

"Boys!" Batman growls. "A little help, perhaps?"

"Nah," Nightwing calls back cheerfully. "Looks like you're doing fine over there!"

"I'm gonna make you do the Fitnessgram for a week," Bruce snarls, somehow finding new depths of upper body strength just in time to wrestle Croc to the pavement and gain the upper hand.

Tim and Jason shudder on opposite sides of the street.

"I'm a grown up, B, you can't make me do *anything!*"

"I'll take away all your cereal from the house," Bruce threatens. Croc roars, and Batman tiredly yanks a muzzle up around his jaw. "No more."

"No! I'll do the Fitnessgram, I promise. I take it back, okay, I'm sorry."

"Too late." Batman shakes his head, but he's smiling. "You snooze, you lose, chum. You had your chance, and you decided to sass me instead."

Nightwing looks so devastated, Tim can't help shaking with silent laughter as he snaps the blackmail photo.

"*My Cap'n Crunch,*" Nightwing whispers, sadly. Robin pats his shoulder a few times before strolling away towards the next dark alley.

"Hard luck, Wingdings," he calls back over his shoulder. "Although...if you want access to my stash, we could always try to work out some kind of deal that would be...mutually beneficial." And Robin knows he's got his big brother, then, hook, line, and sinker.

Nightwing turns and follows, grumbling all the way.

Three nights later, Robin and Nightwing both stick around on the GCPD precinct roof for an extra minute once Batman has vanished.

"Pay up, squirts," Gordon says, rubbing his fingers together.

They pay up. Gordon grins.

"Better luck next time," he says. Whistles a few bars of an old song. "This is why you don't bet against your elders."

He pretends to miss the middle finger Robin throws up as the two vigilantes take their usual running leaps off into the dark Gotham night.

"I want in," Tim says earnestly. He steps out from behind the air conditioner. "On your side."

"You want to bet against your brothers?" Gordon raises an eyebrow.

"I want to make the safest financial investment in an uncertain market," Tim says primly.

"So. Yeah. Basically."

Gordon considers him for a moment.

"Deal."

They shake on it.

Two weeks later, Tim and Gordon are three hundred bucks richer apiece. Nightwing and Robin are scheming for revenge. Batman still doesn't have a clue about any of it.

"What are you planning to do with the money, kid?" Gordon asks.

"I've got a few ideas." Tim waves a hand vaguely.

"Care to share with the class?"

"No," says Tim, and he drops over the roof edge without so much as a goodbye.

Gordon sighs, scrubbing at the furrow between his brows. "Kid's getting more like a Bat every day," he grumbles to the empty roof, then heads back inside.

And on the balcony below, safely out of sight, Tim grins.

Tim's first session with Black Canary, once they get all the "He's not a vigilante. Yet. But he is family," business sorted, isn't great.

The second one is a little better. They're going to just play things by ear for now.

"Is it really normal to feel so wrecked after a session?" Tim asks Jason quietly while they share some sandwiches Alfred packed in Tim's backpack for that night's patrol. Jason kicks his legs as they dangle off the edge of the bank's roof.

"Can be," he says, around a mouthful of PB&J. "They were like that for me in the beginning, but then it got better. It's hard to work through stuff."

"You're telling me," Tim groans. *Is it truly necessary to process trauma?* he wonders. *Is it not enough for me to just pack it up in boxes and never look at it again, until one day, I die?*

"But listen," Jason says. "You're doing *fine*. There's no wrong way to go to therapy. And I promise, it really does keep getting easier. You'll have ups and downs, but BC and you'll find

a rhythm that works for you, specifically. If you're overwhelmed, *speaking up and tell her*. She'll dial it down until you're ready to go hard again."

"Okay," Tim says, and he means it.

He's getting better at that—actually speaking up when he needs or just wants something. It's still only maybe two times out of ten that he'll do it, but hey. Progress is progress. The first time he asked Bruce if they could maybe get some McDonald's ice cream on the way home from a gala the other week, he thought Bruce was going to cry.

The four of them all got banana splits from a fancy creamery, which was, like. Massive overkill. But Tim appreciates it anyway.

"Boys," Bruce says, stepping into the lounge with coffee firmly in hand. "Can you settle down for three consecutive seconds?"

Jason casually pokes Tim's side while the younger boy is in midair, causing him to crumple inward and land in an awkward heap with a loud *oof*.

"I dunno, B," Jason says, innocently. "*I'm* being perfectly quiet over here just waiting my turn." He jerks a thumb over in the direction of Dick, who's currently perched on a light fixture that should in no way be supporting his weight right now. "Take it up with Golden Boy over there if you've got a problem. He's the one who suggested the backflip contest."

"Did not!" And Dick sticks out his tongue. "You're the one who wanted to have a contest. I just wanted to show off my mad skills."

"Yeah, which we've seen a billion times already."

"It's my fault," Tim says, from where he's picking himself up off the floor.

"No it's not," Dick and Jason chorus in unison.

"Okay, it's not," Tim amends. "But I *did* say I was bored. Which kind of started the whole mess." He frowns. "Also, Jason owes me a Crunch bar. I totally would have beat him on that last pass. My angular momentum was better."

Bruce drops into an armchair. "I am surrounded by children," he moans.

"And whose fault is that, I wonder?" Alfred says pointedly as he steps over the threshold.

Dick grins and double-flips down off of his perch. "Perfectly dramatic entrance as always, Alfie."

"I do try."

"*Children*," Bruce groans. As if anyone is still taking him seriously by now.

"Um," Tim starts. "Did you need something, Bruce?"

“Actually, yes,” Bruce says. And now everyone settles down. Of course, Tim thinks. They’re all too well trained by Batman Obedience Lessons and unofficial Robin’s-Guide-to-the-Care-and-Keeping-(and-Reading-the-Cues)-of-Batman to not at least halfheartedly snap to attention when Bruce Has Something to Say.

“Tim,” Bruce says. *Oh golly*. “The judge wants to interview you.”

It feels like the air been kicked right out of Tim’s chest.

“I told her tomorrow would be fine,” Bruce says, carefully. “I figured you’d want to get it over with as soon as possible so there would be less time to worry. Is that all right? We can reschedule, if you want to wait.”

“Yeah, it’s fine,” Tim says automatically. Bruce frowns softly.

“Tim,” he says, walking over. He takes Tim’s face in his hands, makes solid eye contact. “Is it *actually* all right? Check in with yourself.”

Oh. Right.

Tim thinks for a few moments. Thinks about how his brain is already churning, already *dreading*. He’d love to put this off for a while longer (or forever. Forever would be great), stick his head under the covers and never deal with it. Not be responsible for his part in this process of ruining his parents’ lives and reputation.

But he also wants to just rip off the bandaid and not have the interview hanging over his head. He’s got enough to deal with as it is. And...

“Can you come with me?” Tim asks, quietly.

“Of course,” Bruce says. “I can’t go in the room with you, but I’ll walk there and back with you every step of the way.”

And, wow, doesn’t that make Tim want to cry for a hot second? When has he ever had *that* before?

Tim chews on his lip. “I’d...like to do it tomorrow, I think. You’re right. I want to get it over with.”

“Okay,” says Bruce, with a small smile, warm and real and promising *I’ve got your back, buddy, always*. “Then we leave at ten tomorrow.”

“At ten,” Tim echoes.

It feels like he’s walking to his execution, stepping off a high dive, and opening a window to fresh spring air after a long winter all at once.

Tim and the judge talk a lot longer and more openly than Tim had been expecting. *I think I got a good one*, he marvels. She’s middle aged. Quick and witty. A little snappy, a lot

humorous, and sharp on the uptake. He likes her a lot.

They talk about his interactions with his parents. His time at home. How he took care of himself, what he had help for. They talk about what his parents want for him, and how Tim has felt living with the Waynes for the better part of several months now. They talk about Ace, and Tim's nature photography, and Bruce taking Tim out for Thai food when he aced his math test.

"How do you feel about your parents, Tim?" she asks him towards the end.

Tim shrugs, a little helplessly. "I love them," he says.

"And?" she prompts.

"And what?"

"*And*," she says, leaning across her desk a bit. "What else do you feel about them? I know there's more than just that. Everyone feels more than just that for their family. You can love family to pieces and still have them drive you around the bend sometimes. Lord knows *I* do."

"I..." Tim hesitates. His gaze skitters over to the window, the file drawers, a plant.

"Nothing you say here will ever leave this room or be mentioned to anyone else," she reminds him gently. "You're safe to say what you want."

Tim takes a few deep breaths, counting the way Dinah taught him. He forces himself to stop twisting his hoodie strings around and around and *around*.

"I love them," he says again. "And I'm afraid of them. I—I love them so much, you know? They're my mom and dad. Mine. They go all over the world doing these amazing things, and helping tons of people, and I get to see the difference they make in the world. And they're so smart, and talented. Mom's really good at baking. And Dad taught me about birds a lot, when they were going on trips to jungles. And he taught me how to change a tire, and helped me with my homework, and took me to the Knights game once. And Mom patched me up and sang to me when I had a bad fall off my bike on the gravel. I love them."

Tim flips the hood of his hoodie up, one hand squeezing the fabric tight underneath his chin. He pulls his knees up to his chest, glances back up at the judge. Her expression has not wavered. She's still open, attentive, just calmly listening.

Tim swallows. "I feel like I'm betraying them," he says quietly.

"I only need you to tell me your truth," she says, matching his tone.

And.

Well. Isn't that a funny way to put it? *My truth*, Tim thinks. He's twisting the hoodie strings into knot after loop after knot. *There's always just been the truth, right? Something IS the way it is, regardless of what I feel. If my parents are right, I'm wrong. If something bothers me that they did or said, that's my problem for taking it wrong or too hard. That's how it is.*

Except...if it isn't.

When Jason is upset or hurt because of something, Tim muses, Bruce doesn't tell him he's taking it wrong, or being too sensitive. He just...listens. He accepts whatever Jason is feeling and helps him work it out. Like, that's Jason's true feeling about it, regardless of if Bruce or I or someone else thinks the same way about the situation. Even if it's something I could have been fine with and not batted an eyelash, Bruce doesn't say that Jason just shouldn't be stressed about it. He's like "yeah, okay, let's see what we can do to make this better." Jason's allowed to experience what he experiences. Even if it involves him feeling hurt by something Bruce says or does. So...Tim guesses he is, too. No matter what his parents have taught him in the past.

"They hurt me," Tim says, a little louder now. "I didn't realize how much they were hurting me before. They keep *leaving*," and he wishes his voice wouldn't keep cracking at the stupidest times. "I feel really bad for dragging them into this mess when they didn't even do anything really bad," he says. "But...every time I think about going back home, I just get so tired. I know they'll be really mad, and I'll be miserable while they are, and then they're just going to leave again anyway no matter what they say. Because I'm not worth staying for."

"Honey," the judge says then. "You listen real closely, because I'm only going to say this once, and I want you to remember it."

"Okay." Tim sits up, focuses.

"Love, real love, healthy love? Is not *draining*. It doesn't leave you feeling tired. Love isn't supposed to make you miserable, kiddo. I know your parents aren't bad people. They clearly do a lot of good for the world, from everything I've heard. But that doesn't mean they're good for *you*. If you've been hurt, you've been hurt. You don't need to make apologies or explain it away because it's done by people you love and want to protect, okay? You remember that as you keep going through life."

"Yes ma'am," Tim says, quietly.

"Okay," she says. "I think that's everything I needed to hear, unless you've got anything you want to add."

Tim shakes his head.

"Then scram, honey," and she smiles at him. "You've got a nervous guardian waiting out there who I bet wants to give you a pretty big hug."

And Bruce really, really does. They don't leave the courthouse for a solid ten minutes. Tim is happy to just let Bruce take over for a while while he hides away in the depths of Bruce's warm chest and thick sweater folds.

"I got you, buddy," Bruce tells him, after a minute.

Tim smiles into the ribbed knitting. Alfred's careful handiwork. "I know, B. I trust you."

Bruce squeezes just a little bit tighter.

At the end of all the long, drawn-out fighting (and lawyer back-and-forths and court appearances and Strongly Worded Emails), the verdict comes down in early May while Tim is at school. Jason is sent by the office to come pull Tim out of a lecture on how the Prohibition led to the rise of organized crime in America, and when Tim sends him a questioning glance as Jason drags him by the arm down the hall, stone-faced and brooding, Jason just says, “Judge decided.”

Tim gulps. There’s only one thing that a judge was involved in that had anything to do with Tim right now. He’s suddenly not sure he wants to know.

They reach the office to find Bruce there, already waiting in front of the reception desk. Tim has, by now, worked himself into a mild panic.

“Bruce,” he says, stopping just inside the threshold. Jason is looking at him with a little bit of concern.

“Hey, Tim,” Bruce says. He sounds solemn. *Oh, god. No.*

“Bruce,” Tim says, desperately. “I—um. It’s okay. I know you tried really hard, I appreciate everything so much, it’s okay, really, I’ll be okay, it’s—it’s—it’s fine, they’ll be better this time around. And I know more, and I’m not alone anymore the way I used to be, so—” Tim realizes he’s started to leak a few tears. Bruce looks stricken.

“Oh, no,” Bruce says, striding across the small gap to kneel in front of Tim and take his shoulders in a firm grip. “Tim, baby, no, I’m so sorry. I should have realized you’d think the worst. It’s okay.”

“What,” Tim croaks.

Jason comes over and wraps Tim up from behind. “It’s okay, baby bird,” he says. “Scout’s honor.”

“You’ve never been a Boy Scout a day in your life,” Bruce says fondly.

“What,” Tim says again. Because it sounds like they were trying, in a really stupid, roundabout way, to say—

“The judge ruled in our favor,” Bruce says, finally, the corners of his eyes crinkling up in a big, real smile. “Long term placement under my care, buddy. You’re not going anywhere.”

“You’re stuck with us now!” Jason crows, as if Tim had ever wanted anything different.

Tim stares.

“You don’t ever have to live with your parents again, Tim. You get to stay.”

And now Tim is bursting into tears, burrowing into Bruce's shoulder, and laughing through his hiccups at the same time. Bruce and Jason and Tim are all tangled up on the floor of the school office, laughing and crying together, and Tim can't believe how lucky he is. It's finally starting to be over, one piece at a time. And this is a particularly big one.

"Welcome home, Tim," Bruce whispers. "Welcome to the family. Although this is really just a formality. You're already on the Christmas card." And they're all off and laughing all over again, as if they're never going to stop.

Chapter End Notes

MY SISTER'S NEWEST BABY IS HERE AND THERE IS NOW AN ENTIRE NEW HUMAN PERSON IN MY LIFE FOREVER, THAT'S CRAZY (thank you for all the lovely well-wishes!!)

I hope you're all hydrated and fed and if you have any meds you need to take, please go take them! Be gentle with yourselves today. ESPECIALLY those of you dealing with finals this week!!!! You've got this, I believe in you! Take care of your health as much as you can afford to. <3

you've come so far, you know who you are

Chapter Summary

Tim has a real family now. It only goes up from there. (feat. HSM, costume shuffling and new hair)

Chapter Notes

THANK YOU ALL SO MUCH FOR READING ALONG AS I WROTE THIS WILD THING. I had no idea what I was doing when I started it, and basically spent the past few weeks churning out chapters in a fever dream of sleep deprivation, and you have all be SO KIND AND ENCOURAGING, and I want to thank you for all the wonderful comments and messages. You 500% kept me so motivated to keep going with this.

Chapter title is from "Unbreakable" by Birds of Tokyo.

Credit for the BatWatch idea goes to ZervaWyte who I love very dearly as always

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

There are good days and there are bad days.

And slowly, slowly, Tim's building a space in this new family of his own.

Tim wakes up to a bang and a crash, and also what sounds suspiciously like a basketball being dribbled, and he drags himself over to crack the bedroom door open just as Jason does the same across the hallway.

They stare at each other, then over towards the stairs. And then suddenly the dribbling gets louder, a stereo blasts out, and *Dick* is dancing down the hallway singing at the top of his lungs.

“WHAT TIME IS IT? *SUMMER TIME!* IT’S OUR VACATION! WHAT TIME IS IT?”

“*Too fuckin early,*” Jason moans, completely in tune, as he slumps against the doorframe, eyes drooping shut. Tim laughs under his breath.

“Richard,” Bruce says from further down the hallway, voice raised slightly to be heard over the loud music.

“Good *morning*, father dearest,” Dick says, beaming. Tim feels like he ought to squint against the radiance.

“It is five thirty in the morning, Dick,” Bruce points out with remarkable patience.

“It’s *summer*,” Dick says, and then he’s singing along again.

Tim frowns. “You don’t even go to school, though...?”

Bruce pinches the bridge of his nose, visibly counting to ten. He’d only gotten back from patrol a few hours earlier, long after Jason and Tim had passed out on the couch surrounded by popcorn kernels, melted ice cream, and several DVD cases, in celebration of the school year’s end. He roused them just enough to herd them up to bed, then fell gratefully onto his own enormous mattress—blessedly free of any interlopers, he checked—and passed right out.

Dick turns around and chucks the basketball to Bruce without warning, then cartwheels over to Jason, catching his brother’s face between his hands.

“Go get dressed, buddy,” he orders. “We’re going on an adventure.”

“Dick,” Jason moans. He’s trying for a pitiable pout. Tim thinks he looks more like a disgruntled cockapoo, but. A+ for effort? It’s early, after all. Tim probably looks like a newly minted member of the Adams family, himself.

“Clothes. Then head for the Thunderbird, we’re riding in style,” Dick says firmly. He crosses the hallway and yanks Tim into a hug. “You too, baby bird.”

“What we gotta dress for, then?” Jason grumbles, scrubbing at his eyes. Tim can see him yanking drawers open with more force than usual.

“Grammar, Jason,” Bruce chides.

Jason sighs *loudly*, head tipped back and eyes on the ceiling, for *six entire seconds*.

“What do we need to be dressed for,” Jason grits out at last.

“Active clothes. Casual.” Dick turns to look at Bruce. “You too, big man.”

Bruce shakes his head, but disappears back into his room anyway. They can all hear the closet door hinges creak open.

“*And* you, baby bird,” Dick says, stepping over to give Tim a noogie. “*Get.*” Tim could technically have ducked away, but. It’s kinda nice to be noogied by an experienced big brother, sometimes.

So Tim goes. Gets dressed. Attempts for all of ten whole seconds to tame his increasingly-wild hair—is *there something in this house that just makes every occupant’s hair go crazy?* Tim wonders. *Does vigilante-cowl-crazy just...permeate the very air we breathe?*

Or maybe Tim just forgot what it was like when his hair is grown out past a close trim. He's kind of wondering how long it will take Bruce to get annoyed at him for having his hair too long, since it's been three months and the man still hasn't said a word.

He'll find out, sooner or later. This kind of hair isn't proper for a young man in high society. Tim knows that. It's only a matter of time.

"Dude," Jason says, when they're lying on Jason's bed one afternoon in some sunbeams, lazily ricocheting a bouncy ball off of the room's corners as "training" or whatever. "Dick had a *mullet* once. The most B did was sigh a few times, and make one single comment about 'parties in the back' being an interesting vintage choice, and that was *it*. I don't think he cares, as long as we're happy with how our hair looks and keep it clean."

"Hm," Tim says, noncommittally.

So it becomes sort of an experiment.

Bruce never says a word, but once Tim's fast-growing hair is tickling the bottoms of his ears, Bruce hands him some scrunchies and offers to teach Tim how to French braid some pigtails or a waterfall.

Tim says yes.

Bruce kindly doesn't comment when Tim starts to cry in the middle of their tutorial time, just stops to clip Tim's hair in place for the moment and haul him up into Bruce's lap for a long hug.

"You don't have to," Tim sniffs at Bruce, his cheeks still soaked. "You know that, right? I've been doing it myself for like. Forever. I don't really care about my hair. I just..."

"You're pushing boundaries to see when I'll snap," Bruce says, kindly. Tim flushes, and hates the burning-ears feeling with a passion. Bruce's fingers dig into the sides of Tim's lower neck, trying to work away some of the tension building there. "I know. You're not my first rodeo. It's not a problem, buddy. As long as you don't endanger yourself by trying to take the Maserati for a joyride or harass your brothers too much, you just keep doing what you need to for now. I won't be mad. Especially not over something as much of a non-issue as *hair*, in the grand scheme of things."

Well. He is Batman, Tim supposes. Of course Bruce saw right through him.

"You're allowed to, though, you know."

"What?" Tim croaks.

"Care about your hair." Bruce clarifies, smiling at him. "It's *your* body. Your hair. You should always feel comfortable in your own skin, and wear your hair however makes you happy. It's okay to let yourself want it to look a certain way, even if it's not what someone else prefers."

They're quiet for a few moments as Tim thinks about that.

"Mom never liked my hair to be longer than a couple of inches," Tim says quietly. "I just...didn't really let myself think about it that much, except to go 'oh, oops, it's getting long, better go get a trim.' Because it didn't *matter*. I already had a haircut and that was that."

"Well," says Bruce. "Are there any hairstyles you *like*?"

"I haven't really looked." Tim pushes himself off of Bruce. Smiles tentatively. "I guess I could start window shopping?"

"Sure. Find some pictures, try out some looks. Dye your hair blue for all I care, bud. You're thirteen, you've got plenty of time to experiment. This phase of your life is all about reinventing and finding yourself anyway—you're going to build yourself into your best self and I can't wait to see it." Bruce frowns. "Did I just *parent* you? Did that last sentence really come out of my mouth?"

"Yeah, I think you did," Tim laughs. "B, I hate to break it to you, but you are, in fact, a parent. And, uh, if we're being honest right now, I think you're doing a pretty great job of it. You know. For what it's worth, coming from someone who wouldn't know much about parenting if it bit him in the ankle."

Bruce kisses Tim's forehead.

"Love you, Tim," he says warmly.

"Love you to, B." Tim says. "Thanks. For..." He doesn't finish the sentence. Doesn't quite know what he means to say there. Everything? Doing his hair? Being the parent Tim hasn't ever had? Caring? Holding Tim and never acting mad, even when he must be feeling it? Being Batman? Dealing with all of Tim's messes?

It's okay. Batman gets what he means anyway. He's good like that.

Tim settles on growing his hair out *just* long enough for a small bun with wispy sides. And it turns out his hair has been curly all these years, not just unruly. He never *knew*.

"Well," Tim says, staring contemplatively at the wafer cookie in his hand. "That explains why it's always been a nightmare to try to make it lie flat. It hasn't been straight a day in its life."

"Like me," Jason says casually around a mouthful of lemon ice.

Tim nearly chokes.

"Come on," Jason says, thumping Tim on the back, as if he didn't just throw out a pretty significant piece of information seconds before. "Let's go to my bathroom. I'm going to teach you how to use hair gel to work *with* your hair instead of plastering it down, crying and screaming and as crunchy as a boy band from the mid-90s."

Summer means no school. And no school means *Babs is home* . Oracle has signed off, and Batgirl is back in business.

Tim comes back early from his nightly surveillance routes so he can surprise Batgirl on her first night back on regular patrol in months. The family has, so far, *not* told her about the new addition to the Wayne family, and Barbara generally leaves Bruce's personal files alone. So Tim is still a complete unknown. He's perched on a stool next to where Alfred mans the Batcomputer in Bruce's enormous rolling chair.

"So," Nightwing begins as he and Batgirl hop off of the motorcycle they just rode in through the Batcave's entrance. "Bruce may have *possibly* taken another little stray bird into the nest."

"Really." Batgirl sounds amused.

"Mm hm. He's a good one," Nightwing says fondly. "You've actually run into him before, you know."

"Have I?"

"Yeah. You know him by a different name though."

"Hi Dick!" Tim chooses this moment to cheerfully hop off the stool and walk into their line of sight.

"Baby bird!" Dick sweeps Tim up into an enormous spinning hug, so tight that Tim feels his back crack. He can't help the near-giggles that are slipping out of him until he's finally set down again. Nightwing keeps an arm slung around Tim's shoulders.

"Batgirl, meet Tim," he says proudly. "Tim, Batgirl."

"It's an honor to meet you, Miss Gordon," Tim says politely, as they shake hands.

Batgirl jerks back as if she's been burned. She glares at Nightwing.

"You *told* him?"

"Nope!" Nightwing says cheerfully. He's now taken off his domino, rubbing at the bright red skin where the adhesive has peeled away. "Tim here figured all of us out ages ago. We didn't spill any of the beans."

"If it helps," Tim offers, "It took me like, a *whole nother* year to realize who you were after I figured out the others."

Babs does look slightly mollified.

"How?" She demands.

Tim grins. "Nightwing has a very distinctive skillset. I recognized his quad flip on TV when I was little, and put two and two together."

“That’s our Timmers,” Dick says fondly, ruffling Tim’s hair. “Too smart for his own good.”

“I made cookies, if you want?” Tim says to Babs. She’s now taking off her cowl. “White chocolate cranberry. B said they’re your favorite.”

“Oh, god,” Babs says, smiling now. “ *Yes* . Absolutely. And how old are you? How long have you known?”

“I’m almost 14,” Tim says. “Uh, figured it out when I was nine. I never told anybody, though.”

“But that’s not all,” Jason says gleefully. He must have slipped back into the cave on the electric bike. Tim kicks himself for not noticing. Bruce would be disappointed in his lack of situational awareness; he’s been working so hard on it lately, trying to improve on what he’s already picked up from years of running Gotham at night.

I’ve got to do better, he thinks. I can’t let anyone down.

“Come on, Tim. Tell her what else,” Jason prompts.

Tim sighs.

“Uh,” he starts. Clears his throat.

Babs has half of a cookie stuffed in her mouth, looks like a chipmunk, and has one of the worst cases of cowl-hair he’s seen yet. He shouldn’t be this intimidated.

“I, uh. I’m actually. You remember how Dick said a minute ago that we’ve actually sort of crossed paths before?”

“Mm hm,” Babs nods, around another mouthful of cookie. “These are *great* , by the way.”

“Thanks,” Tim says, perking up slightly. “Alfred and Jason taught me.”

She gives him a thumbs up.

“Anyway,” Tim continues. “ *Well*. I’m actually BatWatch?”

Babs inhales so hard she chokes on cookie. Bruce chooses that moment to roar to a stop in the Batmobile, drowning out her coughing sounds until the engine finally shuts off.

“Oh, *nuts*, B,” Babs wheezes at him with wide eyes. “You sure know how to pick them, don’t you.”

“Are you okay?” he asks, concerned. Babs waves him off.

“Fine. But he,”—she points at Tim—“is possibly not. Are you *crazy*?” She’s addressing Tim, now.

“No more than *I* was for whacking Batman with a tire iron while malnourished in a dark alley, standing next to the tire I had *clearly* just jacked off of his super fancy war machinery a car,” Jason says.

“Or me, when I was running around on my little Robin Hood crusade to avenge my parents like I was Inigo Montoya it something before Bruce found out and took me in,” Dick adds, grinning. “*Tim* here at least managed to stay out of sight and off B’s radar for the past few years. That’s more than you can say about any of us.”

“Did you have backup?” she asks Tim, still reeling.

“You didn’t, in the beginning,” Tim points out reasonably.

Babs throws her hands in the air. “This whole family is crazy,” she hisses. “Oh my *god*.”

Bruce chuckles quietly.

“You,” Barbara says, jabbing a finger at Tim. “On the one hand, holy shit. Great job. You run a fantastic blog, even if tumblr is a less than ideal platform—”

“I couldn’t pay for a domain name!” Tim protests. “I was *ten*! I can’t open bank accounts by myself yet.”

“*You do a great job*,” she goes on, “but on the *other* hand, don’t ever do anything like that on your own again. You could have *died* . Or worse.”

“Yes yes, we’ve been over that several times,” Jason says hastily. Dick wraps both hands around Tim’s shoulders.

“And *you*,” Babs growls, whirling on Bruce. “You’d better be teaching this kid how to defend himself. If you can’t keep him off the streets, you’d better be damn sure he’s prepared for them.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got a Bat-Panic Button,” Tim says, helpfully. “And Bruce has been teaching me for months now.”

And he has.

Tim isn’t a blank slate when he comes to the Waynes, which is both a good and bad thing. He has some bad habits and shortcuts that need to be fixed. But he also knows the basics of freerunning, and has taken enough martial arts courses on his parents’ (unknowing, unnoticed) dime to hold his own in basic fights.

“Good,” Bruce says approvingly, the first time Tim manages to block five strikes in a row. Jason and Dick clap from the edge of the mats. “Now we aim for *ten*, and one contacting strike of your own. Go.”

Tim works hard. It’s *wonderful* . Bruce knows intimately what muscles and tendons to train if you plan on climbing and crouching and freerunning around a city. He has the equipment

that's best for it. And Dick and Jason teach Tim simple gymnastics moves, the basics of street fighting. After Tim asks one too many questions, Bruce takes him to an unused cavern in the cave system so he can learn about the physics of grappling firsthand.

Tim can hardly move his arms for a few days after that.

And slowly, Tim gets a little stronger, a little faster, a little more confident on his feet. But no one needs to teach him how to be comfortable slipping through the shadows. He's got that one covered on his own.

"Bruce has probably shed a manly tear or two over you while planning training, you know," Dick says while he and Tim wait their turn for one of the ramps at the skatepark. "It's like, *my new kid already knows some freerunning, has no fear of heights, and actually bothered to learn the proper foundations of martial arts in class instead of wanting to jump straight to the cool kicks? I'm being #blessed.*"

"I cannot believe you just said 'hashtag blessed' out loud," Tim moans, pretending to whack Dick with his skateboard. Dick laughs. "As if Bruce would ever say that."

"You'd be surprised," Dick says, darkly.

"TIM," Jason hollers, jogging in their direction and waving something around. "Did you put sunscreen on?"

"No??"

"*Tim*," Jason scolds. He turns Tim around by the shoulders and starts rubbing the sunscreen lotion around Tim's face himself.

"The highest risk of lifetime skin cancer occurrence comes from childhood sunburns," Jason says, scrubbing fingers hard into Tim's forehead. "You're paler than an albino sphinx cat, you dumb little night gremlin. You're gonna burn bad if you don't put on sunscreen, and then you're gonna get skin cancer like, seven times, and it's gonna be miserable, and then where will we all be?"

"Ok, *momma bird*," Tim snorts, half bewildered and half loving the contact.

Jason pauses mid-reach, some of the sunscreen dripping off of his fingers onto Tim's sneaker. Dick cracks up laughing so hard he doubles over.

Jason blinks. "What?"

"Ok, *momma bird*," Tim says, more confidently this time.

"Did you just. Did you ok boomer me?" Jason sounds like he can't quite decide whether he's bewildered or mad.

"No, no," Dick wheezes out. "He's saying it fondly, not, like,—" Dick waves a hand vaguely. "Dismissively. It's just. Little wing, you really sound like a mom right now."

“Well, Alfred is my bro,” Jason says, finally getting back to slathering Tim in far more sunscreen than is probably necessary. “I learned from the best. And it’s because I *care*, damnit, you little heathen,” Jason says to Tim. “Because people *should* care about you, even about the small things, even if it’s aggressively. Damn. When did I go so soft? Fuck you!” The effect is ruined by the fact that he’s now pulled Tim into an enormous hug.

“Jay,” Tim squeaks. “Can’t breathe.” He awkwardly pats Jason’s back.

“Serves you right,” Jason sniffs. “Stop making me worry all the time.”

“Oh, it’s way too late for that,” Dick says cheerfully, giving them both noogies despite their very vocal protests. “You’re a big brother now, Jayce. It’s your job, you’re gonna care forever.”

Brothers. Tim has *brothers*. They remind him almost every day, now, and every day, he’s still in awe.

“Hey Tim,” Jason says one day towards the end of September. Tim puts down the wooden staff he’s been practicing with and uses the hem of his tank top to wipe off his forehead. He walks over to where Jason is on the other side of the mats, leaning against the boxing ring. Jason tosses him a water bottle. Tim gratefully cracks it open, takes a swig.

“What’s up?” Tim asks, drizzling a little of the cool water on his head.

“You’ve been getting a lot better with that whacker,” Jason says approvingly.

“Uh huh,” Tim says. “But you didn’t come over just to say that.”

“No, I didn’t.” Jason smiles, but something about it looks a little off, a little wistful. “I...I wanted to talk with you about something. Not anything bad,” he adds quickly, as Tim tenses beside him. “I promise. It’s just important.”

Tim forces his muscles to relax, one group at a time, toes to hips to shoulders to neck. Breathes deeply like they taught him. *It’s okay*.

“Okay,” Tim says softly. He sits down, Jason following him to the floor. As always, Jason’s feet start kicking back and forth where they dangle. Tim’s lips tick up in a smile.

“You’re 14. You’ve got time still. But I’m 17 now,” Jason sighs. “I’ll be headed to college next year, if everything goes well—”

“Which it *will*,” Tim says. “You’re brilliant. They’d be stupid not to take you.”

“Yeah, well, don’t count your bats before they fly,” Jason counters. “I just...I’m trying not to get my hopes up too early. I still have to write my stupid personal statement essays for applications first.”

“Fair.”

“Anyway. I’m not going to be in Gotham, probably, while I’m going to school. And I’m almost grown up, at least kinda. Dick had this happen too. I don’t—Robin doesn’t.” Jason sighs quietly, more of a huff than anything else. “Robin doesn’t quite *fit* anymore. I love it, but it’s not me. I’m bigger now. Not as...not as bright.”

“That doesn’t make sense.” Tim frowns. “You’re Robin. You have been for years. Of course it fits, it’s *you*.”

“Your *face* doesn’t make sense,” Jason snips back, fondly. He drags Tim into his side, holds him close. “And you’re right. I have been Robin for ages now. And that’s the problem. B is fine as Batman, because he chose it and built it and has made it what it is. And I’ve helped shape Robin for the past several years, but it was a role I stepped into, not a role I made. Does that make any sense?”

“Yeah, I think I see what you mean,” Tim says. He looks up at Jason, head resting on his shoulder. “You don’t feel like it was made for you, like it can only grow so far and you’re more than what Robin does now. Like Dick.”

“Exactly, baby bird.” There’s a note of pride in Jason’s voice.

“But who’s to say what Robin can be or not?” Tim asks. “Robin can grow too.”

“I don’t *want* to stay in the same spot, though, Tim,” Jason says softly. “I get it now, why Dick didn’t just keep Robin and stay as Batman’s partner. It’s just time.”

“Jason,” Tim starts, concerned. He tries to pull away, but Jason hugs him tightly.

“I’m giving up Robin, buddy. I’m going to be someone new.”

“No,” Tim protests, and *wow, why is he this upset?*

“Yes,” says Jason, so gently. He doesn’t let go of the now-squirming Tim. “Tim. It’s okay. We all have to grow up sometime, right? No one’s forcing me to do this. I want more freedom, more independence. And B would let me go on my own with Robin if I really wanted, but it’s not the same. It’s not what Robin is for.”

“Exactly,” Tim says, hotly. “Jason. You can’t. *Please*. Batman *needs* Robin.”

“You’re right,” says Bruce.

Jason and Tim both shriek and nearly fall off the mat. As they try to catch their breath, Jason clutches his hand to his chest and glares up at Bruce.

“Nice to know you can still sneak up on me and scare the living *bajeezus* out of me, B,” he says. “*Gorram*.”

“Sorry,” Bruce says, not sounding very sorry at all. The corner of his mouth twitches.

“Bruce,” Tim says, pleadingly. But Bruce shakes his head.

“Hear Jason out, Tim.”

“I don’t know what I’ll end up being for real,” Jason starts again. “Might stick with this, or maybe I’ll go through a few different costumes while I figure things out over the coming years. But I’ve got to be my own hero, bud. I’m hanging up Robin. From now on, I’m going to be Flamebird. Figured it’ll make a nice matching set with Dickiebird.”

“You—” Tim takes a deep breath. “Okay. That’s. That’s pretty cool. Please tell me you have a costume already?”

“ *Oh* yeah.” Jason grins.

“I want to see it.”

“Of course. Tonight. You can see the grand debut.”

“But *Robin*,” Tim says, again.

“Is *my* concern,” Bruce interjects. “It’s okay, Tim. Jason needs to move on, keep growing. And I have a person in mind already, if they’re willing.”

Tim’s brows furrow. “Who?”

“You.”

Tim blinks. The cave is near silent for a few seconds, the only sounds a faint echo of water and the occasional rustle of bat wings.

“Me,” Tim says flatly.

Bruce nods.

“You want me—but I’m not—what?”

Tim’s a skipping record, a dusty Sega Genesis cartridge, cannot read, cannot process, cannot compute.

“Tim,” and Bruce reaches out, takes him gently by the shoulders. Looks him right in the eyes. “I want you to be my Robin. I think you’ll do a fantastic job of it, if you want to. I’d be honored to have you as my partner.”

Tim stares for a moment, then bursts into tears. Bruce immediately scoops him up, making nonsense shushing noises, and.

“It’s okay. It’s okay, bud. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“You *want* me,” Tim sobs. Bruce’s arms are around him, strong, enveloping. Jason’s hand finds Tim’s forehead, his sweaty hair, Tim can tell. Tim knows all their fingers by heart now. “You *want me*.”

“Always, buddy. Always,” Bruce murmurs.

“We love you, Timbo,” Jason says. “If anyone’s gonna be Robin after me, I’d love for it to be you. There’s no one better suited.”

“Are you sure,” Tim asks, between quieting cries.

“Positive,” Bruce says, and drops a gentle kiss on Tim’s nose. “I trust you.”

“Okay,” Tim sighs. “Okay. If you’re sure. But we gotta do something about BatWatch. I can’t just leave people with no information. They need it.”

“We’ll figure it out.” Bruce smiles. “Everything is going to be okay, Tim. We’ve got you.”

Tim shoves his face into Bruce’s old tshirt, breathes in the scent of his lotion and wound ointment and conditioner and everything uniquely *Bruce*.

“I love you,” Tim whispers.

“Love you too, Timmy,” Bruce says, and.

And and *and*.

Tim *hated* being called Timmy. Jason knew. Alfred knew. Jason told Dick. Dick knew. He’s not sure anyone ever told Bruce, per se, but the man clearly picked up on it after no one else ever used the easiest nickname they could have thrown around for Tim.

Tim doesn’t like being full-named because it was what he’d been called when he was in trouble and about to be punished. But he doesn’t like *Timmy* because it was what he’d been called when he was tiny, when he’d been naive and thought his parents would always come home and wanted to see him. When he was small enough and cute enough that they’d pick him up still, and carry him when his little legs were tired and couldn’t keep up. When he was small enough to get away with babbling about types of clouds, and it was called cute. When he made people like him just by having big eyes and a small voice. When his parents seemed to still love him, when he felt warm, when he felt safe. Timmy was everything he felt like he’d lost.

But when Bruce says it now, it doesn’t hurt the way it used to. It doesn’t burn. There’s no painful reminder of all the things he longs for that he’s not going to have again, but can’t seem to sever the last thread of hope for.

When Bruce says it, all Tim feels is loved. All Tim feels is warm.

All Tim feels is home.

I know the update schedule has had some gaps over the past year, the post begins. I’m sorry for all my absences. But I’m glad you’ve all been enjoying the regularly scheduled updates for the last several months!

Unfortunately, Tim goes on, I'm really sorry to say that...well. I can't guarantee that there won't be more interruptions. So much has changed in my life so quickly in this past year that it's really a struggle to keep this up. I'm doing my best, but please, please I really recommend you all go follow GCPD's new Gotham Updates twitter account. I can't guarantee I'll be able to get timely updates on developing situations on BatWatch as quickly as is needed. But I'm working closely with the police and other emergency services on this, and I promise it's going to be good. Make sure you turn alerts on for when they post, because if they tweet, you need to listen!

"Done," Tim says, closing the web browser. He kicks away from the Batcomputer, rolling across the cave floor until he's stopped by Bruce grabbing the back of the chair.

"Tim," he says, a smile in his voice. "You've got to stop taping your name to the back of my chair."

"Make me," Tim says cheerfully.

"You tell 'im, baby bird," Jason calls from over by the lockers. "Stick it to the man!"

"Respect your elders!" Bruce hollers back.

Tim laughs.

"I assume that everything is going smoothly according to your plans so far?" Alfred asks Tim.

"So far," Tim agrees. "Two more nights of this, and then it's time."

"As long as you don't get reckless tonight or tomorrow," Bruce warns.

"I *know*, B."

Bruce places his hand gently on Tim's head for a moment. "I know you know. I just worry. I'm your guardian, it's my job."

Tim smiles at him. "I'll be okay, Bruce. I promise. I've learned from the best."

"Time?" Tim asks, nearly vibrating where he stands. The early December breeze is definitely picking up; it's not going to be long before winter hits for real.

"Time," Bruce confirms with a smile.

Dick and Jason both give him a thumbs-up.

"Here we go," Tim mutters, and hits the button to publish.

Sorry, guys. This is BatWatch's last night. I'll still take some photos, but they'll be routing through Gotham Updates now. I'll just be a freelancer when I have the time.

The comments start rolling in, and Tim feels a little bad watching people get worked up. But not bad enough to stop.

“Ready?” Tim asks, turning to Jason.

“Hell yeah,” Jason grins. “Let’s go!”

Tim expertly snaps the shot mid-leap—him in the new and improved Robin costume, and Jason as the iridescent Flamebird. They’re clearly in midair, hair flying up in defiance of gravity, and Nightwing is photobombing in the corner with *rock on* hands. Batman is clearly standing on the rooftop behind them, cloaked and intimidating. But there’s a faint softness in his expression, just the hint of fond exasperation.

Gotham’s skyline lights up deep and bright and beautiful in the background, Bokeh effect in full force. The Bats are backlit by the shine of the city they love. It’s often hard to see how beautiful Gotham City truly is, for everyone who’s stuck on the ground.

After swinging to a safe perch, Tim spares a few seconds to edit, tweaking exposure here, softening contrast there, and posts the photo, captioned with *Guess who’s official! See you on the streets. :)*

You little SHIT, Oracle comments seconds later. *I hope you’re happy with yourself. You could have warned me. But I’m proud of you, Robin. You’re gonna do great.*

You are well loved by many, Robin, Agent A posts soon after. *Don’t forget that.*

There’s a flutter behind Tim, and he turns to see Batman smiling. Tim slips the phone into one of his hidden pockets.

“B,” he says happily.

“Robin,” Batman replies, warmly. “Are you ready to go?”

Tim looks out over the city, his city. His to protect, his to watch, his to call home. He looks back at Batman, who he gets to call it home with.

“Yeah, Dad,” Tim says, feeling more content than he could imagine was possible a year ago. “Let’s go.”

And Tim believes Bruce, now. Things aren’t perfect, and they’re never going to be. He still has bad days, he’s still got a lot of scars. But..

He’s got his family, as weird, and crazy, and *unusual* as they are. And after all the years of wishing and longing from afar, *Batman’s* got Tim, too, whenever Tim needs it, as Robin or BatWatch or just plain Tim.

As many times as he needs. As many times as it takes.

And Tim is going to be okay.

Chapter End Notes

This became a really personal story for me in a lot of ways I hadn't planned, and I know it's brought up a lot of emotions and realizations for some of you too. **I want you to know that you can always message me on my tumblr (@goldkirk) if you need to talk, or text the Crisis Text Line (which you don't need to be in whatever you think is, like, a "deserving enough crisis" to use—it's for EVERYONE who needs to talk about something) at 741-741. It's great.**

I'm continuing this through some one shots and maybe a chapter fic or two (if you have unanswered questions, they're probably going to be answered in those), so stay tuned to this series and thank you for all the love and joy you've brought to my life recently! I APPRECIATE YOU.

Happy Hanukkah, Merry Christmas, Happy Kwanzaa, Happy Holidays, please remember to drink something, eat something, and take any meds you need! You're amazing. <3

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