

The Art of Bird Metaphor

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The Art of Bird Metaphor

by [lowflyingfruit](#)

Summary

Batman works alone. Everyone knows that. What Jason's learning is that he also has a penchant for picking up strays. And while Jason's just your common or garden Gotham street rat, Bruce's other stray, Richard, is an ex-assassin for the Court of Owls. An ex-assassin for the Court of Owls who hates Jason's guts.

Adjusting to life in Wayne Manor was hard enough already.

Notes

Yeah, yeah, I already wrote a Talon AU. Turns out I want to write the other type of Talon AU too, the kind where Dick was intercepted by the Court as a child. And it also turns out that I wasn't done writing about the Bruce/Dick/Jason relationships.

As for your warnings, this chapter contains mentions of underage prostitution and child sex abuse.

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

Sleepless Night

The ride was quiet. Scary quiet. A car like the one Jason was in should have made a *lot* of noise. Instead, it just kind of hummed along, not much louder than a normal car.

Still louder than the man in the driver's seat.

The same sort of thing should work there. The Batman was a big guy, Jason was all the more aware of it now that he was sitting two feet away. He was more than a head and a half taller than Jason, and something like twice as wide. He hadn't made a sound when he'd snuck up on Jason stealing his tires. Even his voice was quiet. Deep like he'd dredged it up from the bottom of his lungs, but quiet.

Shit, what did you even *say* in this situation? Jason was too scared to look at him properly. The Bat *said* he didn't kill, and yeah, Jason had never heard otherwise, but that could just mean he was never caught. This was feeling more and more like a kidnapping, even if the Bat had said he was taking him somewhere safe.

Outside the window, the city lights were fading away, and it was too dark to see what was out there. Jason had lived in Gotham all his life and he didn't know where he was.

It sure didn't look like they were going to the police. Or Social Services, or any of the shitty agencies Jason had spent most of his childhood dodging. He dared to ask "Where are we going?"

"Home," the Batman said.

"What, *your* home?"

"Yes."

"The *fuck* I am," Jason snapped. "I don't whore myself out for anyone, got that? Let me out, right now!"

Batman glanced his way. He seemed neither surprised nor insulted. "I am no child molester," he said. "We are going to my home because your previous residence was...inadequate. You can stay with me until I find something better for you."

Jason snorted. "What, I jack your tires and you take me home like a stray kitten?"

"Close," Batman said.

He turned the wheel of the car hard, taking a tight curve Jason hadn't even *seen* on the road ahead, he was so distracted. It felt like they'd gone a bit off road. Another tight curve, and they were coming in under something. A short drive through a short tunnel, and Batman hit the brakes.

Lights came on, and Jason realised that they were in a cave. An honest-to-god cave, that someone had installed lights in. "Holy crap," Jason said.

"Home," the Batman said, sounding a little happier. He didn't open the car doors, though. "Before I bring you inside, there's just one thing."

"Your girlfriend doesn't know about your secret identity?"

"This is serious," Batman said. "I look after another young man. Like you, his life has been

difficult. He is very protective of me and the third resident of the house and he will likely not warm up to you quickly. He also comes across as...odd.”

“Oh yeah?” Jason asked. “I’ve met weird people before.” His eyes slid across to Batman as he did so. It didn’t get much weirder than dressing up as a bat to fight crime. Jason could cope with weird. Even if that weirdness was being over-protective of *Batman*.

Batman ignored the jab and continued on. “He hasn’t had much experience with socialising for many years and has difficulty with new people. If he reacts strangely to something, I would ask you to be patient with him.”

“Sure,” Jason said. Be nice to the kid who was here first. Made sense. If this was safe, he was still getting food and a roof over his head for a few days at least. What was there to fight over? Not a big deal. He thought.

With a last look over him, probably making sure to himself that Jason wasn’t lying, Batman opened the car door and let Jason out.

The place was *huge*. They were parked in a flat, empty space with a few other cars and bikes and such nearby, and racks and racks of tools. There were, like, a dozen spare tires. If Jason had managed to take the in-use tires off the car without getting caught, he would have only inconvenienced Batman. He’d definitely picked the right person to rob. Beyond the cars were all sorts of computers and worktables, interspersed with the most *random* objects. Like a dinosaur. For some reason. And a giant penny. Also for some reason.

Batman started walking further in, and Jason followed close behind, passing by spare Bat-suits and benches with bits of electronics strewn all over it and a locked glass case full of bright green-and-purple toys. Jason looked up and saw ropes, everywhere, like a giant net. It was so big, and kind of dorky (that dinosaur, seriously), but at the same time he couldn’t help but think it was kind of cool, too.

They’d just got to a set of training dummies, giant punching bags, and weights, when a British-accented voice nearby said, “I see you’ve returned, Master -“

The voice broke off. “Oh dear,” the man finished, coming into view. Old guy. Thin. What hair he had was silvery-grey. And even though it was the ass end of night, his old-fashioned, pinstriped suit was perfectly creased. Jason inched just that bit closer to Batman.

“It’s all right, Alfred,” Batman said, and took off his helmet-thing. Jason had just a second to realise *holy shit I’m finding out who Batman is* before he actually saw. To his shock, the dark-haired, blue-eyed man beneath was actually familiar. Jason had seen him somewhere, he was sure of it. “Jason will be staying with us until I can find him somewhere safer than his previous residence.”

The old guy, Alfred or so Jason guessed, raised an eyebrow. “I see,” he said.

“Jason, this is Alfred Pennyworth. He’s the butler here. If you need anything - food, clothing, where something is - just ask him. Alfred, this is Jason Todd. He was trying to steal my tires earlier.”

A corner of the butler’s mouth twitched, just for a second. “Indeed? Well. It is good to meet you, young man. Do seek me out if you need anything.” To Batman, he said, “If you will excuse me, I must prepare a room for our new arrival. You know where the food is kept. Don’t neglect to introduce yourself, Master Bruce.”

Jason decided he liked Butler-man. Didn't know if he trusted him yet, but he liked him.

"Wait a second, Alfred," Batman called. "Have you seen Richard?"

Alfred stopped briefly on his way out. "He was rather distressed to learn you were hunting down half the Penguin's gang by yourself," he said. "I instructed him to work off his emotions. I daresay you'll find him in the rigging somewhere."

The rigging - the rope stuff above them? Jason looked up. Nothing but darkness and rope.

"There you are," Batman said. He turned. Jason turned with him.

There was a guy standing behind them. Maybe eighteen or so? Jason didn't know. He looked like a paint factory threw up on him - his shoes were a weird fluorescent yellow-green, his leggings cherry red, and his sweatshirt an ocean blue. Jason's eyes hurt just looking at that colour combination. And, incongruously, above the cheerfully hideous combination was a face that could have belonged to a movie star and an ice-cold blue-eyed stare fixed squarely on Jason.

Better to look at the ugly clothes than to meet those eyes.

"You heard," Batman said calmly.

Richard, or whoever, didn't say anything and instead jerked his head in an affirmative manner.

"He needs help," Batman continued. "Like you did. He's not going to hurt me, he just needs a place to feel safe. I need you to make him feel welcome here too."

No response except for more silence and staring. Richard had all the animation of a statue. When Batman had said 'odd' he'd been understating it. In spite of himself Jason was a little worried. Not scared! No way he'd be scared of a kid only a bit older than him who dressed like that. Just worried.

"I'll talk to you about this later," Batman said, as though that was normal behaviour. "You choose where. But we will talk."

Another affirmative jerk of the head, this time followed by Richard spinning on his heel and stalking off. Not being stared at like that was a hell of a relief. Jason was starting to have second thoughts about this. He hadn't even heard Richard approach them. You expected that from Batman. Nobody else.

"Come on," Batman said. It was strange hearing his voice without the growl, and seeing his face. "Let's get you some food and then to a room."

Instead of getting changed, he threw on a bathrobe over the Batsuit. It looked ridiculous. Jason had stumbled into a house of fashion disasters.

Jason followed. He'd made his decision. He'd have to stick with it, for tonight at least. Though if any of them turned out to be the bad sort of creeper, he'd have to run, obviously. One thing was for sure - he didn't have any plans to sleep tonight.

He risked a glance backwards as he followed Batman from the cave. Richard was checking the tires.

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When they got to the top of the elevator, which opened into a huge-ass library, it finally dawned on Jason. “You’re Bruce *Wayne*,” he said. “Right?”

“Right,” Batman said. “Call me Bruce, please.”

“If you want.”

“I do. But first, you should have something to eat.”

Jason was about to refuse when his stomach rumbled loudly. He’d gone for longer without food, but it wasn’t often that people just *offered* it to him. “All right,” he said. He didn’t want to look too desperate.

From the huge-ass library, Batman - Bruce - led him through a bunch of fancy hallways with shiny wooden floors and portraits along the walls. Occasionally they passed a window, which looked over a dark expanse of nothing. Somewhere in the distance there were lights. It was creepy.

But he promptly forgot about the creepiness when Bruce opened the door to a big, well-lit kitchen. Most of the stuff in there Jason had only seen on TV. Figured. Bruce Wayne wasn’t cooking his own meals on a hotplate, after all. The fridge was the size of his mom’s closet. Bruce grabbed a plate under plastic wrap and stuck it in the microwave. At least Jason had seen one of those in real life before. And when the plate was set in front of him, the vegetables sure didn’t taste like they came from a can. There was almost too *much* flavour.

Even so he wished it was the sort of thing he could stick in his pockets for later.

Bruce - no, he couldn’t do it, he was sticking with calling him Wayne - ate with him, and Jason didn’t know what to say. It was Batman. Fucking Batman. And yeah, Jason knew that his tires jacked like almost any other tire, but it was still strange to see the man himself unwinding after a night of work. Fancy kitchen and fancy food aside, it was almost like when his own dad came back home and all he wanted was a beer.

He didn’t think Wayne knew what to say to him either. Until Jason finished his plate of warm green bean salad, and Wayne asked, “do you want anything else to eat? Dessert?”

Well, while Jason was getting free food... “All right,” he said.

Even Wayne looked a bit lost in his massive kitchen. Jason awkwardly stayed where he was as Wayne rummaged through the closet-sized fridge. “Sorry,” he said, still pushing around jars and packets of who knew what. “I could have sworn we had cake somewhere.”

“We do,” the butler guy, Pennyworth, said, appearing from nowhere. Jason jumped, then tried to pretend he hadn’t. House of fashion disasters and ninjas. “Whatever are you looking in the fridge for?”

“There’s dairy in the frosting.”

“It tastes better at room temperature, and with Master Richard on hand, long-term storage is not an issue. The cake is in the pantry. Look for a container with a green lid.” The butler turned to Jason. “Would you like a drink, young sir? Milk, juice, tea?”

“Water, please.”

Pennyworth actually poured him a glass from a bottle in the fridge and brought it over to him, while Wayne emerged triumphantly with a container of cake. The butler relieved him of it and cut two small slices, delivering both to the table for Wayne, and Jason himself.

He was being waited on. It gave him a kick, because wow this was new, but it felt awkward as well. Jason wasn't the sort of kid who got waited on. He knew that.

While they ate (Jason trying not to cram the entire slice of incredibly delicious cake into his mouth whole), the butler said, “I have given Master Jason the room two doors down from yours.” To Jason, he added, “we have little appropriate spare clothing on hand, so unfortunately the only pyjamas I am able to provide you are Master Richard's hand-me-downs. I am aware his fashion sense is unique.”

Sorry I can only give you clothes that are shit-ugly, Jason translated. He'd dealt with worse. “Thanks,” he said. Even shit-ugly clothes could keep you warm.

“If you are done eating, I can show you to your room directly.”

“Actually, Alfred, I thought -”

“You will do no such thing, Master Bruce. Rules are rules. You will go downstairs and change.” The butler said it so sternly it was clear he expected to be listened to. Jason took note. “I will ensure Master Jason gets to his room.”

Jason glanced towards Bruce. “It's all right,” Wayne said. “Alfred will get you there just fine. And he's right about the rules. No Batman things above stairs. You understand?”

When he put it like that, yeah, Jason got it. It made sense. And unlike creepy Richard back in the cave, the butler didn't give off any real murder vibes.

Which wasn't to say he couldn't take Jason apart. He was Batman's butler and bossed Batman around like a mom might. He probably could take Jason apart. But Jason didn't think he would, not unless he caught Jason stealing the silverware.

That was an idea, actually.

“I get it,” Jason said.

“I'll be two doors down from you, and I promise, nobody will go into your room without your invitation unless there's an emergency.”

They better not. If they tried, Batman or not, Jason would fight with all he had.

“You will be safe here,” the butler added. He cocked his head, and Jason took that he was supposed to follow. Reluctantly, and with one last nod from Wayne, he did.

The hall beyond the kitchen was more of the same. The house, which Jason realised had to be Wayne Manor, was unbelievably huge. He could hardly get his head around it. He definitely couldn't absorb the fact that he'd actually decided to stay here overnight. According to the magazines Jason saw on convenience store displays, that was the province of supermodels and the like. Jason sure wasn't a supermodel. He tried to focus on the turns the butler was taking. It was all but hopeless. The place was too friggin' huge. Who needed a house this big anyway? Only three people lived here!

“This will be your room for the duration of your stay with us, Master Jason,” the butler interrupted his train of thought. “Unless you find another unoccupied bedroom more to your liking.”

When he opened the door, Jason’s mind boggled. The room was as big as his mom’s whole apartment. The bed alone was bigger than their kitchenette. Way bigger.

In the end all he could say was an awkward “Thanks.”

“You’re quite welcome,” Pennyworth said. “Do not hesitate to call if you need anything.”

He left and left the door open. Jason wasn’t sure how he felt about that. On balance he thought he’d rather have a door between him and the Bat-strangers. Even if they could all open the door sneakily, it was something. So he shut it. There was an armchair under a reading lamp in one corner; he dragged that under the doorknob to be a bit safer. That’d probably have to do.

On the bed, aside from some temptingly thick blankets, were the promised clothes (not as ugly as Jason had feared), plus a fluffy towel. Jason frowned at it for a few seconds before realising that the door he’d thought led to a closet, led to a closet that led to a bathroom. A private one.

It was getting to the point where Jason wasn’t sure he should use any of this stuff. He was the next thing up from a street rat, always had been. He got chased out of low-end department stores ’cause he was too scruffy.

On the other hand, he knew perfectly well that rich people expected kids like Jason to be grateful for what they got. Would Wayne be offended if Jason didn’t shower and sleep?

Jason suspected he was out of his depth here.

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Alfred had arranged that situation so that Bruce could go downstairs and explain things to Richard. Properly. A few seconds weren’t going to be enough. When it came to being cared for and respected, Richard needed a lot of explanations.

It was something Bruce struggled with, but he owed it to Richard to try. To Jason as well, as long as the younger boy stayed in the house; he knew perfectly well how frightening Richard could be sometimes.

The cave appeared empty when he returned. Not unusual. Richard had been trained very well in stealth. “Richard?” he called towards the ceiling, his charge’s preferred refuge in times of stress.

No response.

He was probably angry, Bruce thought. The Court had beaten their chosen assassin viciously at any sign of anger or dissatisfaction, attempting to train the expression out of him. Now Richard tended to hide when he felt such things for fear that Bruce and Alfred would do the same. And Richard hated intruders. If he had his way, the only people allowed to set foot in the Manor (aside from Bruce and Alfred) would be Clark, Diana and her sister, and his friends Koriand’r and Garth. On good days he might be prepared to make an exception for Jim Gordon.

Bruce went to shower and change, hoping that if he resumed his usual post-patrol routine Richard

would show his face and let Bruce explain. When he finished, there was still no sign of him. Ignoring his own tiredness, Bruce sat down to do reports in the hope Richard would interpret that as availability.

Hunting down the ex-Talon was not a good idea. Bruce had learned that the hard way, in the weeks after he'd brought Richard home in the first place.

Resigned but determined to get this right, Bruce settled in for a long night-slash-morning.

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In the end he didn't use the bed. Jason didn't think he could stand to. It was so soft it looked like it might swallow him whole. Instead he grabbed a blanket and sat on the floor, so he could see the window and the door both. If anyone came in he'd know about it. He didn't quite trust anyone here enough to sleep yet.

Nobody came to bother him. Not that Jason knew of anyway. Good sign.

The issue of using the bathroom was settled when Jason was just starting to see a tiny amount of grey in the dark sky outside the window. His stomach cramped up with a vengeance and the choice was bathroom or shit on the floor. *That*, Jason knew not to be conflicted about.

When he headed back into the bedroom, he saw a glimpse of a blue sweatshirt outside the window.

Jason dashed over, but there was nobody there... anymore. He knew, though. That Richard guy had been watching him. He didn't know how long for. It could have been all night.

If he'd been worried that he might fall asleep before, he wasn't now. Jason set his back to the bed and focused on the window.

A Thief In The Daylight

Chapter Summary

Regular meals? What are they?

Chapter Notes

Nothing in the chapter not warned for in the tags.

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

At roughly nine in the morning, Bruce gave up for the time being. If Richard was going to come down and talk, he would have done so. For now, he needed breakfast. He could use a nap. And he most definitely counted himself lucky that it was a Sunday, with no need to go into the office.

It might be that he had to take Monday off in order to get Jason's affairs organised. That could be arranged.

Stifling a yawn, Bruce headed towards the kitchen. He could hear Alfred bustling around in there. From the sizzling and the slight clinking, he was cooking a full breakfast. When he poked his head through the door, however, there was nobody but the butler there. "No sign of Richard or Jason?" Bruce asked.

"Richard has retrieved some breakfast," Alfred reported. "Or I assume so, since there was a bowl of cereal on that bench ten minutes ago."

Bruce frowned at the bench Alfred was pointing a spatula at, devoid of any trace of cereal. "He didn't stay to eat it?"

"I haven't seen him since last night, Master Bruce."

"Neither have I. He wouldn't come down from the rigging."

"You did give him rather a shock."

He wasn't imagining the reproof in Alfred's voice. That only made Bruce frown more deeply. "I couldn't just leave Jason there," he said. "You saw him."

"Indeed," Alfred agreed. "I am cooking breakfast for him, after all. Nevertheless, you know how Master Richard feels about strangers."

"Jason's just a boy," Bruce said helplessly. He *couldn't* have left Jason to his prior situation, no more than he could have Richard to his. Granted, those situations had been very different. Where Richard's story was sensational to the point of outlandish, orphaned trapeze artist to brainwashed child-assassin of a secret society, what little Bruce had seen of Jason's life was depressingly mundane in its deprivation. "No threat at all."

Alfred shook his head. "It's not me you have to persuade of that, sir. Would you be so kind as to retrieve Master Jason so I can see if I can convince him to eat some sorely-needed food?"

Wordlessly, Bruce obeyed. It was all but given that Alfred had a better idea of the immediate needs of the people in his care than Bruce himself did. Breakfast would do Jason good, and Alfred had cooked up a veritable mountain of food. He had no doubt that Jason could eat it. Teenage boys always needed food.

He knocked three times on the door to the room they'd given Jason, noticing that no light, artificial or otherwise, could be seen underneath. "Jason? It's Bruce. Breakfast is ready if you want to come downstairs."

There was a bit of scrambling, and then there was the sound of a heavy weight being pushed away from the door. Only then did the door actually open, to reveal Jason in the same clothes as he'd been wearing the previous night and dark shadows under his eyes. Behind him, Bruce could see a blanket on the floor. "I hope I didn't wake you," Bruce said. "If you need to sleep more, I can come back in an hour."

"No!" Jason said, no doubt more hastily than he'd meant to. "I'm fine. Breakfast, yeah. Breakfast sounds good." He glanced hurriedly back towards the window.

"Is there a problem?" Bruce asked, suspicion dawning.

Jason's eyes narrowed, his jaw set, and he was obviously lying when he said, "No."

If Jason didn't trust him enough to tell yet, Bruce wasn't going to push it. That could do more harm than good, especially when he was fairly sure already what the big problem might be. "If you're sure," he said. "If there *is* a problem, you can tell me. But anyway, breakfast."

At least Jason trusted him enough to follow him back to the kitchen. Alfred greeted him and piled Jason's plate high with mushrooms, spinach, tomatoes, eggs, and sausage, all to be washed down with milk. Jason tucked in happily enough, which was good to see. He was even more worryingly skinny in the light of day.

"Where do I get the bus back to town from here?" Jason asked, after a dozen mouthfuls.

"You want to leave?"

Mouth full, Jason looked at him as if he was stupid.

"You're welcome to stay," Bruce said, as he had the night before. "I have no intention of sending you back to the streets. And I don't mean to send you to CPS, either. I know ways to find you a safe, stable home. Or I could send you to a boarding school, if you prefer."

"I haven't been to school in years," Jason said.

"From the ingenuity you showed with my tires, I doubt organised education should pose too much of a problem for you," Bruce replied.

Jason swallowed hard, and said, "I want to stay in Gotham."

"Then that's what will happen," Bruce said. "When you're finished eating, I'll show you around."

"I'm done," Jason said. To Alfred he said, more awkwardly, "Thanks."

“It was my pleasure,” Alfred said with immense dignity. “Should you desire more food outside of mealtimes, there is always the fruit bowl. Help yourself.”

Immediately, Jason stuck an apple into his coat pocket. No doubt he’d try to hoard some food later, common enough behaviour for a child so food-insecure. They’d have to discuss that and ensure Jason was only hoarding non-perishable goods.

Together they set off through the manor again. It was all too easy to see that Jason was intimidated by the size and evident wealth of the house, the decoration of which, between the occasional suit of armour and the many, many portraits, had given generations of Wayne children nightmares. There wasn’t much Bruce could do about it except do his best to help Jason feel welcome in spite of it. Keeping the tour to the important rooms, the living areas, was probably a good idea.

The tour only got as far as the library. Jason’s eyes all but dropped out of his head at the sight of so many books. “I thought the place we came out last time was a library,” he said.

“No, that was the study,” Bruce said. He didn’t think Jason even heard him, he was so absorbed in his exploration. Nor could he bring himself to suggest that they should continue the tour. He’d leave Jason to it. It wasn’t often this place saw someone so happy that it existed.

Besides, Bruce had caught a glimpse of a blue sweatshirt outside the window, and he still had to talk to Richard. Urgently.

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One of the first things the Court had taught him was patience. He was Talon. Talon had no need for entertainment. Talon had no need for respite. Talon simply watched and waited for its prey, for as long as it took.

Richard wasn’t Talon anymore, but the old lessons stayed with him.

He didn’t know why Bruce would bring a stranger into the house like this. It didn’t look like it was needed, which was why Bruce usually invited people in and why Richard tried to tolerate the intrusions. And the boy was a thief. Bruce had told Alfred that. Size didn’t matter. Richard had killed when he was smaller than that boy. A thief was a threat.

Bruce had taken Richard from the Court, gave him food and shelter and clothing and training. He was kinder even than the Court, since he let Richard wear what he liked and learn things other than killing. Bruce let him be more than Talon. Richard owed it to Bruce to protect him. That was how this *worked*. He knew Bruce didn’t understand. It was no excuse to be slack in his duties, however. He was *happy* to protect Bruce. Bruce deserved his best.

Even if that meant protecting Bruce from himself.

So Richard had tailed the boy all night, keeping a careful watch on him. Just in case. He moved when the boy moved. He stayed outside when the boy had been assigned a room. All night.

When the boy had rushed from the room near dawn, Richard had allowed him a glimpse as he resumed his original perch outside. Just so the boy knew he was being watched. While the boy searched in vain for any sign of Richard, which he wouldn’t find, he wouldn’t be able to plot against Bruce.

He'd only broken off his watch once, for mere minutes, to get food for himself. Bruce and Alfred rarely required him to eat certain foods in certain places, as even his parents in the fuzzy, happy days before the Court had, but only required that he did not neglect those needs. Sometimes Richard thought longingly of the abilities of true Talons, who needed neither rest nor food. That would be useful at the moment. He was starting to tire.

He watched as Bruce started to show the boy around the Manor, as once he'd shown Richard. He shadowed them down the corridors, staying above the windows but keeping them in sight. They stopped at the library, to Richard's dismay.

Richard could read. He'd learned with his parents. The Court had continued that training, with street signs and correspondence and text messages, since they could not allow their weapons to be stopped by the written word. Books, though, were forbidden to Talon. When Bruce had brought him here for the first time he'd refused to set foot beyond the door. He still never went into the library if he could help it.

But the boy's jaw dropped when he saw the library, and Bruce smiled at the reaction. He looked happy that the boy was so impressed. He kept smiling as the boy headed into the shelves.

A hot, unfamiliar feeling coiled in Richard's stomach, jabbing at him from inside.

After a few seconds he couldn't bear it and darted away. Not far. He still had to watch. Just far enough, long enough, for whatever that feeling was to go away. He wanted it to go away.

He wanted Bruce to stop smiling. He'd *never* wanted that before.

After a few minutes, he heard Bruce calling, "Richard."

Richard didn't move. He still felt odd and he didn't want to talk to Bruce. Instead, he moved back to where he could see the library. The boy had found a book and was reading it. He looked happy too.

"Richard."

Bruce was behind him now. Not many people could tell when Bruce was sneaking up on them, but Richard could. It was easier when Bruce was wearing hard shoes. He didn't turn around. He didn't want to. It didn't sound like Bruce was smiling now. He didn't know how to feel about that.

"Have you been watching him all night?"

"Yes," Richard said.

"He's a guest here," Bruce said. "He needs help. Not someone stalking him."

"He tried to steal from you. I saw the marks on the tires." Richard could feel a scowl trying to form and suppressed it. Talon wasn't supposed to be angry. Especially not with someone above him.

"Out of desperation, not malice."

"Desperate isn't safe either." The boy wasn't moving, too busy with the book he'd chosen. He hadn't noticed Richard at all, even after his hasty move back. He wasn't sure the boy had noticed *Bruce* leave. "He could do it again."

He heard steps behind him, and felt Bruce draw as close as he could while Richard was on his narrow ledge. "What if he does?" Bruce asked. "I have plenty. More than plenty. There's not much

he could take that I couldn't replace or that I'd actually miss if it was gone."

Richard turned to look at him, studying his face carefully for any sign of insincerity. When he found none, he said, "It's not right. You brought him here. He owes you."

"He doesn't," Bruce said firmly. "And I accept the risk. I want you to stop watching him. Please don't try to scare him."

The thought put ice down Richard's spine. A stranger in the house that he wasn't allowed to keep an eye on? Bruce had never stopped him from watching the guests before. The thought was mixed with another unfamiliar emotion. What was so special about the boy, anyway? "Fine," Richard said. "I'll stop."

"Thank you." The concession didn't make Bruce smile at him. "Will you join us for dinner tonight?"

"Is it an order?"

"No. I would like you to eat with us, but you don't have to."

Richard considered it. He preferred eating with Bruce, and he liked Alfred's cooking. "Maybe," he said.

"He seems like a nice boy," Bruce offered. He smiled a bit crookedly, which made that hot, awful feeling in Richard's gut come back. "You might like him."

Richard nodded, and slunk back inside. Bruce shut the window he'd climbed out of after him with a final-sounding *click*.

It was hard enough to stay in the cave when Bruce went out as Batman, under strict orders not to follow and assist. Richard had been asking for *years* if he could come along, but Bruce refused. Alfred enforced his orders too. No matter how hard Richard trained in non-lethal skills, Bruce wouldn't let him.

Working up the courage to disobey was difficult because he didn't *like* it when Bruce or Alfred were angry with him. He hadn't liked it when his masters in the Court had been angry with him either, of course, but that was only fear. Disappointment was worse. What was more important than not making Bruce and Alfred angry, however, was making sure Bruce and Alfred were safe.

Bruce wasn't thinking clearly. That was obvious. And Alfred was going along with this for whatever reason. He didn't like lying and he didn't want them to be angry with him, but this was more important. Richard was *never* going to like someone who stole from Bruce.

—

Jason only noticed how much time he'd spent in the library when a shadow fell right over the page. The sun had risen high enough that it wasn't streaming through the window anymore. When he looked around, he noticed Wayne wasn't there anymore. He was alone in the room and hadn't even noticed.

Or he might not be alone. Jason inched over to one side of the window and peered out, looking as

close to the building as he could. Jason was sure that if Richard was looking through the windows at him, he'd be able to see those ugly goddamn shoes, at least. No sign of them, or of the person wearing them.

Regretfully, Jason put his book back on the shelf and went to see if he could find the kitchen. Pennyworth had said he could eat from the fruit bowl whenever he liked. So he would, and he'd keep the apple in his pocket for later.

Three wrong turns later he was back, staring awkwardly at the butler-man's back.

"Come in, Master Jason," Pennyworth said, because of course he'd noticed Jason. The house was full of ninjas. "There's some lunch waiting for you."

Jason inched inside. The butler stepped to the left, giving Jason a clear view of a plate of sandwiches. "That's for me?" Jason asked.

"As I said. Take a seat and I will bring it to you momentarily."

"I can get it," Jason said. Being waited on once was nice, but he didn't know if he liked the idea of someone doing it all the time. It was a plate. He could carry it. "What's in them?"

"Having failed to ask your sandwich preferences, I have prepared several varieties. A sample plate of sorts. From left to right, you will find roast beef and caramelised onion, smoked salmon and cucumber, a roast vegetable medley, and finally the classic ham, cheese, and tomato."

"And they're all for me?" Jason asked, staring down at the full plate. He'd had a good breakfast, and this was just *so much* food.

Pennyworth brought him a tall glass of orange juice. "If it's too much for you to eat right now, I will cover the rest and keep them for you to eat later. If you do not like them, or heaven forbid are allergic to any of the ingredients, someone else will eat the leftovers. The food will not go to waste."

Jason wasn't sure he believed that, but he said, "Okay," and started eating. He was hungry, after all, and it was all *really* tasty. "How do you get them to taste that good?" he asked a few minutes later, accidentally spraying a few crumbs and a shred of beef on the table. "I've had sandwiches before, but most of 'em were kind of soggy."

"Using the right bread is the starting point," Pennyworth said. While Jason chased down every last stray crumb, the butler kept explaining the art of a good sandwich. He'd had no idea sandwiches could be so complicated. Seemed worth it though. Jason had never eaten so well in his *life*. When he was done, the butler frowned. "I apologise for talking your ear off, Master Jason. Thank you for listening so attentively."

"Um, no problem," Jason said. He'd got sandwiches out of it.

"Now, for dinner. It will be in the small dining room, which is through that door there. Someone will come get you when the meal is ready, but just in case, it will likely be served just past six. Otherwise, make yourself at home. If you will excuse me, I have duties elsewhere in the house."

Jason didn't say he *couldn't* go. Who was he to do that? Besides, now that he'd eaten he felt full and sleepy. He hadn't got any real rest for the last day and a half. There had to be somewhere he could go where creepy Richard wouldn't be able to watch him from any windows.

He hesitated by the pantry on his way out. Pennyworth had said that if he was hungry, he should

go to the fruit bowl. He still had the apple in his pocket, but fruit didn't keep. There had to be something in the pantry that wouldn't be missed and wouldn't go bad, in case he had to leave in a hurry or got hungry.

A lot of the stuff in the pantry looked like ingredients for other things. Flour, sugar, spices, oils, uncooked rice and pasta. Jars of fruit and vegetables with handwritten labels saying how long they'd been preserved for. There were no chips, no crackers, no granola bars. Nothing like that. Jason found the rest of the cake from last night, but he didn't dare take it no matter how tasty it was. That seemed like the sort of thing that would be noticed if it went missing.

Right at the back there was a lone box of cereal. It was bulkier than what Jason had been hoping to stash, but it'd have to do. He shoved it under his jumper and went to drop it off in his room, looking for possible hiding places to sleep in as he went.

Chapter End Notes

You guys get an update this fast because I clicked on a fic that turned out to contain Dick-bashing. The only outlet for my irritation was to write fic that doesn't bash characters. I also have a sizeable chunk of the next chapter done...featuring Dick in a new terrible outfit. Thanks everyone for your comments, bookmarks, and kudos!

Impact

Chapter Summary

Jason gets hit hard.

Chapter Notes

No chapter-specific warnings.

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

A knock on the closet door woke him. “Jason?” Wayne asked. “Are you in there?”

His neck was killing him and it had got too stuffy in here. Jason didn’t bother lying. Or saying anything. He scrubbed the sleep from his eyes and carefully nudged the door open with his foot. When he saw that Wayne was standing well away from him, he slid out the whole way. “How’d you know?” he asked.

“A corner of the blanket was sticking out.”

Jason scowled. That was careless of him. But nobody had taken advantage of it, that he knew of. That was good.

“It’s dinnertime,” Wayne continued. “Would you like to come down to eat?”

“Is all you do around here eat?” Jason asked. This would be his fourth meal in twenty-four hours.

Wayne’s eyes crinkled up at the corners. He didn’t quite smile. Jason supposed the Batman wasn’t a smiling sort of person. “Yes. That or sleep. Most of my business is elsewhere.”

That just led to another question, the one that had been bothering Jason all day. “Why do you have such a big house then? What’s it *for*?”

“I don’t know if I’ve ever thought about it as being for something,” Wayne mused, turning away and starting down the hall, Jason following in his wake. “It’s my parents’ house. The family’s lived in it since it was built. These days the house is mostly for entertaining. I think Alfred gets a modest profit from the kitchen gardens and the orchard, too, once the gardeners have collected what we need for ourselves here.” Jason could feel his eyebrows rising, and the creases around Wayne’s eyes only got deeper. “I’ll show you in the morning,” he added.

It was a good thing Wayne had come to get him, because Jason quickly realised that he was totally lost. Again. He was doing a great job of casing this place. Eventually, a set of narrow stairs spat them back out near the kitchen, and from the kitchen Jason knew where the dining room they were supposed to be using was.

The table looked like it was for eight people. Three places were set, one at the head of the table, one at the first place to the right, and a third almost at the foot of the table. “Whose is that?” Jason

asked, looking at the removed place. "Is the butler eating with us?"

"No, that's Richard's place. He said he might come down for dinner."

Personally, Jason hoped he didn't. Wayne sat at the head of the table. Jason took his cue and the seat closer to Wayne. He turned to see where Pennyworth was, and whipped his head back around when he heard a soft, deliberate *clink*.

Richard had appeared, and moved all his cutlery directly across from Jason. His face was no more animated than it had been the previous night, not any friendlier. Jason swallowed hard and dropped his eyes to Richard's blue-striped turtleneck.

"Richard," Wayne sighed. "I told you not to try to scare him."

"I'm not trying," Richard said. His voice was expressionless as his face. "It's not my fault if he's scared."

"Do we need to -" Wayne began, but Jason didn't find out what Wayne and Richard needed over the pounding of blood in his ears. To hell with this jackass. Jason looked Richard in the eyes and said, "I'm not scared of you."

"You're lying," Richard replied. Out of the corner of his eye, Jason saw Wayne tense. "I can see your pulse. Like a frightened mouse. You don't look me in the eye. You're scared."

Jason opened his mouth and he clenched his fist around his spoon.

The room dissolved in a rush of dark wood, patterned cream wallpaper, and soft lighting, only to resolve with a thump that knocked the air out of him. He gasped for breath, but there was something cold at his throat, and something digging into his sternum.

He was on his back, he realised. There was a knee in his chest and a butter knife at his throat, the fist that he'd clenched pinned to the ground with an iron grip, and he was staring up at Richard's impassive face.

Point of the dull knife digging into the soft skin under his jaw, Jason deliberately met Richard's eyes and repeated, "I'm not scared of you."

"Richard!" Wayne snapped. Richard didn't move a muscle. "He wasn't attacking."

The blunt butter knife didn't ease up, point firmly under his chin. Jason didn't dare move any more. Enough force and it'd stab him just as dead as a sharp knife would. Richard looked up at Wayne for a moment, head tilting towards Jason's fist, still closed around the spoon.

"Yes, I saw. It wasn't an attack. Let him up."

Knife and knee slowly withdrew as Richard obeyed. The grip on his wrist was the last to ease. As soon as it did Jason wrenched his arm away and scrambled to his feet. "What's your problem, psycho?" he snapped. He definitely was more angry than scared now.

"Richard, sit down," Wayne said. "You overreacted. Jason, Richard is not 'a psycho.' If either of you make one more wrong move you will be eating plain steamed chicken and vegetables in your rooms, no dessert."

It seemed to work on Richard, 'cause he vaulted back over the table. As he did, Jason saw that this time his leggings were emerald green, and he was wearing fluffy orange slippers. Jason had just

been taken down by a guy wearing fluffy orange slippers. Good thing nobody he knew would ever find out about this. For his part, Jason didn't care if he ended up eating plain chicken and vegetables. It beat not eating. He put his chair back upright anyway. No point pissing Wayne off too.

Once they were back in their seats, Wayne said, "Now, are we going to eat dinner in peace?"

"I for one could do very well without seeing this food distributed across the room in a fistfight," Pennyworth said. He'd appeared out of nowhere too. Because that was what people in this house did. Jason had to get Wayne to teach him the trick. "Cauliflower soup, anyone?"

For the rest of the meal, Wayne kept the conversation light, asking Jason what he was reading (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*) and why (because the community theatre was warm during performances and it was easy to get into their attic, and Jason had liked *Much Ado About Nothing*). "Shakespeare is Alfred's thing," Wayne said. "He performed in a few when he was younger. You prefer the comedies?"

"Yeah," Jason said. He'd only heard *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet* from his hiding place in the theatre attic, and he hadn't liked either. Who wanted to go to a play only to see their favourite characters die?

"Richard does too. I'm outnumbered."

"Figures you like all the grim monologues," Jason muttered, and Wayne laughed.

All through the rest of the meal, Richard didn't say another word. Jason could feel the cold dead eyes watching every twitch of his fingers anyway.

—

"I want to go with you," Richard said after dinner, as he and Bruce headed down to the cave. The boy was upstairs still, and Richard could tell that Bruce wouldn't be going out at all if Alfred hadn't reported that Gordon had put the signal up as soon as it got dark.

"My answer's still no. It's too dangerous."

"I know how to fight," Richard said. If there was something the Court had taught him, it was that. Bruce had only improved on his skills, teaching him how not to kill. He was good at it all. He wanted to protect Bruce. He wanted to be a hero like Bruce and Clark and Diana were. He wanted to prove that he could be. He and Donna and Garth and Kori had been talking...but he wanted Bruce's approval, if he could get it.

Bruce sighed. "It's not too dangerous for *you*," he said. "You're...wound up. I can't let you. No."

"I am not wound up." He wasn't going to kill anyone. Not ever again. He was *more* than Talon. "I can do this."

"You attacked Jason for twitching wrong." Bruce looked him in the eyes. "There are far more fraught situations than that out on the streets. I can't let you go out with me if that's how you respond to something that isn't even a threat."

It was a punch to the gut. He'd failed a test, then. Bruce didn't usually do that. If he did, he told Richard what was happening. But he hadn't, and Richard had failed.

Was Richard that much of a disappointment? He wasn't stupid. If the boy wasn't a guest like the others, he had to be a trainee. Someone who liked the library and made Bruce smile. He knew what it meant when a younger trainee was brought in.

Richard bowed his head and let Bruce go, thinking hard. The situation was difficult. To win the right to go out on the streets as a proper hero, clearly he had to pass Bruce's test with the boy. Richard still didn't see how the boy *wasn't* a threat. He had to find out why, and why Bruce would prefer the boy as a student, and he had to do it fast. Before Bruce decided Richard was a lost cause and let him go.

Without Bruce's protection, the Court would come for him again. They would want their Talon back.

It had taken all of Richard's courage to leave the first time, with Bruce's help. He knew what would happen if the Court got him back. They would make him a true Talon and lock him in a coffin. They would make him kill again. They would hurt him until his memories of Bruce and Alfred were as hazy as his memories of his parents, until he was willing to kill even them if the Court said so.

There would be no second escape for him.

He had to figure this out.

—

It took Jason all of five minutes to decide that he couldn't stand being up in the stupid fancy house all by himself when there was much more interesting stuff going on downstairs.

It took ten minutes and another two wrong turns, but he eventually found his way back to the study he'd thought had to be a library. From this angle he could see the desk. What he couldn't see was the way down to the cave. Made sense. Still annoying. They'd come through the wall on his left, Jason was sure of it, the one with the tall clock.

He tried to reposition himself to get the right angle and distance from the door. He'd just concluded that the clock itself had to be the door when it swung open behind him. "Do come downstairs, Master Jason," Pennyworth said.

"You there?" Jason called into the dimness beyond. He couldn't see Pennyworth, but shit, he hadn't seen anyone in this house move when they hadn't wanted to be seen.

"Downstairs," Pennyworth said.

Must have been speakers or something. Jason shrugged and headed down and down and down.

The cave looked a bit different to how it had the night before. Jason squinted at it for a moment before realising it was because the training areas and the space around the big computer were lit up. At first he thought Pennyworth was the only one down there, but then he spotted a bit of movement and a flash of neon blue in the ceiling rope contraption. Had to be deliberate. A

warning.

“Feel free to come closer, Master Jason,” Pennyworth said, emerging from behind a secondary bank of computers. “You’re quite welcome down here as well, provided you don’t touch anything dangerous nor tamper with anything sensitive.”

Jason looked around. The racks of gadgets and the cases of weapons were out. There were some benches of science-y-looking stuff in a niche that he doubted anyone wanted him sticking his hands into. Ditto the computers and after what happened the night before, the cars. “What *can* I touch?” Jason asked.

After a similar brief survey of the cave, Pennyworth said, “The reference books, those two computers over there, and save for the weights and the machines, the training area.” Something over at the computer beeped. “Excuse me, that’s urgent. I will be down here until Master Bruce returns.”

“Thanks,” Jason said. He wandered over to the training area first. He’d been sitting on his ass all day (that or sleeping). Right now he needed to *do* something.

Above him, the ropes shifted again. Creepy Richard doing his best impression of a rattlesnake, it looked like.

Well, Jason was officially over it. This might not be his house, but he wasn’t going to let some jackass who couldn’t even coordinate colours intimidate him. Not even if he pulled another butter knife on Jason. He found the lowest-hanging rope and started to climb. The ropes looked like they might be fun to climb on.

Jason had climbed plenty of drainpipes before, got a nasty cut on his left arm once when the rusty pipe had disintegrated under his grip. It had been damn lucky his ma was sober enough to take him to the free clinic for that one. Climbing the rope was harder again than any drainpipe. There was no support except for where his feet and knees pressed against it. His arms were doing most of the work.

He wasn’t a coward and he wasn’t a weakling either. He hauled himself up further, muscles straining. Nearby there was a swish of sound, and Richard was in his eyeline again, a bit above him, hanging on to his own rope one-handed, effortless. “Show-off,” Jason said, and kept climbing. There was a horizontal beam strung up not too far away. If Jason could get to that, he’d be able to rest his arms.

He got another few feet upwards with great effort, only to see Richard make three quick jumps for another angle on him. Annoyed as he was, Jason had to admit that he made it look easy. Jerk. Jason’s arms were burning, his palms starting to sting. But he only had a little bit further to go.

He hauled once more, got to a position where he thought he could make the jump to the narrow beam, and leapt.

Jason’s hands connected with the beam just fine, but aching from gripping rough rope and not prepared for the less textured plastic beam, his grip began to give out. He could feel his own weight pulling him down.

In hindsight, climbing so high probably hadn’t been the best idea. That was all he had time to think as his fingers gave out and he started to fall.

This was going to hurt.

Then he got hit *hard* by a heavy weight from the side. For the second time that night the air was knocked out of him in a rush of movement, but instead of falling, he was swinging. His joints vibrated with the impact and his stomach lurched at the sudden change of direction.

His upwards momentum stopped in another jarring halt, his feet hit the beam he'd been aiming for in the first place, and the iron grip that had seized him vanished.

Jason looked around, high and low, every direction. There was only one person who could have stopped his fall. But he couldn't see Richard, not so much as a trace of eye-searing sportswear.

"Master Jason!" Pennyworth's alarmed shout rang upwards. "What happened?"

"I was climbing," Jason said. "I fell."

"What were you even - no, no, of course. Heaven forbid this house ever sees a resident that prefers to keep their feet on the ground. No doubt the rigging looked fun to climb."

Jason had the distinct feeling he was being scolded. He tried not to scowl. Yeah, the rigging had looked fun, that was why he'd tried to climb it. Nobody had said he couldn't.

Pennyworth sighed. "Let's add that to the list of dangerous things down here that would be best used only with supervision. I take it Master Richard arrested your fall?"

At that, Jason couldn't *stop* himself from scowling. First the guy tried to stab him with a damn butter knife, then he saved him from what would have been one of the nastier falls Jason had taken in his life? "He should make up his mind," Jason said. "Does he want me dead or not?"

"Not," Pennyworth said firmly. "At the moment, I should think he mostly wants you out of the house. Not for you to sustain any undue harm. He will get used to your presence here."

Yeah, Jason heard the word 'undue' in there. He knew what it meant. "What's his deal, anyway?" Jason asked. "Did he try to steal Wa- Bruce's tires too?"

"A story better told by Master Bruce, or Richard himself," Pennyworth said. "Suffice to say that he was, and is still, in need of help. He is a good and kind young man who has been taught badly." He looked up and said in the direction of the ceiling, "Thank you for your assistance, Master Richard."

"He's not even there," Jason grumbled.

"Perhaps, or perhaps he is. Regrettably I cannot tell. If he is, however, I think he deserves some thanks."

Jason thought that might be a hint. "Thanks," he told the ceiling. That jerk probably wasn't even listening anyway.

Richard fled upwards, to the highest point of the rigging and even further, into the shadowy recesses of the cave's ceiling where Bruce didn't like him going. He needed to hide, though. He couldn't let the boy see him like this. His stomach was churning and his heart was pounding. If he stayed, he might have started to shake, like he hadn't since the first time he'd killed. Weakness like

that wasn't permitted. Showing it wasn't permitted.

The expression on the boy's face when he realised he was going to fall kept replaying in his head. Richard had seen that expression before, a long time ago. Not even the Court had made him forget -

What had he been thinking, anyway? The boy was *competition*. The fall wouldn't have killed him, probably, not from that height. And if he'd broken his legs, there was no way Bruce would find him useful as a student, even if he decided to let the boy stay. If Richard had let the boy fall, his problems would have been solved. Probably.

But he hadn't thought. He'd just leapt. The look on the boy's face...

It was what Bruce would have done, Richard told himself. Superman, Wonder Woman. They would all have done the same thing. Saving him from that fall was the right thing to do.

If only it felt like it.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks everyone for the wonderful response to this fic! I'm glad you're enjoying it as much as I'm enjoying writing it!

Warming Up

Chapter Summary

Three civil conversations.

Chapter Notes

This chapter mentions quite a bit about Jason's circumstances - so, mentions of child abuse, domestic violence, and drug abuse.

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

It was nearly dawn before Bruce arrived back at the cave, sore and exhausted but not actually injured. Alfred was at his usual place at the computers. Jason, to his surprise, was sitting on the floor reading. For the second night in a row there was no sign of Richard.

“Welcome back, sir,” Alfred said. “Any injuries?”

“Not tonight,” Bruce said.

Jason had perked up a bit, though Bruce could see shadows under his eyes and the beginnings of a bruise around his wrist. He frowned. He hadn't thought Richard grabbed him so hard. Alfred saw where his eyes had gone, and said, very quietly, “Later, Master Bruce.”

There was nothing Bruce could do but nod as small as possible before taking off his cowl and heading over to Jason.

“Pennyworth said I could stay down here,” Jason said.

“No, that's quite all right. As long as you're not up to anything dangerous.” That would happen if Jason stayed much longer. He doubted Jason would be able to resist some of the shinier weapons down here. If nothing else, he was expecting Jason to attempt to steal something. The silverware was one thing, but batarangs quite another. “It's time for sleep now, though.”

Jason glared. “I slept this afternoon.”

In a closet, yes, Bruce had seen. Before that he'd barricaded himself inside the room he'd been given. “It's a bad habit to get into.”

“*You're* not sleeping.”

“Not yet,” Bruce corrected. “Upstairs, please. We'll need to talk tomorrow morning, after we've both rested.”

Jason did not look pleased with that pronouncement, but he slunk off upstairs anyway. Soon he'd start arguing, which Bruce had learned from Richard was a good sign. Arguing meant he was less afraid. Or, at least, secure enough to test boundaries. Once he was gone, Bruce turned to Alfred.

“Okay, what happened?”

“Master Jason climbed the rigging,” Alfred said.

This sounded bad already. “Don’t tell me. Richard was up there.”

“I believe Master Richard’s presence was what inspired him to climb up in the first place.”

Bruce didn’t dare groan; Richard could still be up there, hiding in the shadows and listening to every word. “And?” And he couldn’t think of a worse place for the two boys to start fighting.

“Master Jason fell. Master Richard caught him.” While Bruce breathed a sigh of relief, Alfred added, “I have not seen him since.”

“When did this happen?” Bruce frowned.

“Not more than ninety minutes after your departure.”

“In the middle of his workout? And you haven’t seen him since?”

“Indeed.”

“I’m going to try and find him,” Bruce decided. It was not a safe idea. Richard lashed out when he felt threatened. He’d have to keep his distance. Safe or not, he could not allow Richard to hide from his problems. It would be poor parenting, not that he was Richard’s father. Nevertheless, he’d taken up certain duties when he’d taken Richard in, and he didn’t intend to fail in them. So he climbed up the rigging himself, not bothering to change quite yet. He couldn’t see Richard anywhere. Regrettably, that was not unusual. Years of brutal training had been effective in teaching him how to hide.

But Bruce was older, trickier, and wiser in the ways of the world than Richard. He knew his ward climbed to the rocks beyond the rigging when he was upset. Bruce didn’t follow. Instead, he swung out and caught himself against the wall. From there, he could see a huddled figure sitting on a narrow ledge.

“Richard,” Bruce called. It didn’t have to be loud. The acoustics of the cave did their work.

Richard looked up, revealing an expression that was equal parts fury, terror, and grief, all of which were quickly smoothed away. “I did the right thing,” he said defiantly.

“I know,” Bruce said. “Alfred told me. You caught Jason when he fell.”

“It was the right thing to do.”

“Yes.”

He was trying to convince himself. Bruce always hated to see it, like he always hated to see Richard’s pain. Richard tried so hard, and he’d kept his sense of self and a great deal of the morals his parents had taught him, but nobody was immune to years of violence and brainwashing. What he’d been forced to do, how he’d been taught to think, it couldn’t be undone. If Bruce could go back to that night at the circus and save him -

- no point to that thought. Richard did well, was doing well, and Bruce would do everything in his power for him to live a long, safe, happy life. Free of the Court.

Bruce kept hold of the wall, staying there and staying away while Richard kept looking up and

then looking back down, clearly thinking about what to say. “Would you like to spar with me?” Bruce asked after a few minutes. The exercise might do Richard good.

Sure enough, Richard nodded. Seemingly without a second thought, he leapt for Bruce’s rope, used it to springboard backwards off the wall, and fell gracefully back towards the rigging. He caught himself with ease. Bruce shook his head and followed him down.

Richard waited until Bruce’s feet were on the ground, and even until Bruce said “start” before lashing a fierce upwards kick towards Bruce’s chin. Bruce ducked aside, dodging a rain of graceful blows as best he could. Every time they sparred, Bruce realised again why the Court had wanted Richard so badly. There weren’t many with Richard’s sheer talent, and none with his knack for making violence a thing of beauty.

Still, Bruce was more familiar with the non-lethal combat Richard still had to devote precious fractions of a second to considering, and had a few tricks up his sleeve besides. He found the gap in Richard’s attacks and turned the tables, wrestling him to the ground by sheer brute strength.

“You know what you did wrong?” Bruce asked, once Richard had tapped out.

“I let you close the distance,” Richard said. “And the second right strike to your head was dangerous.”

“Very good.” Richard had come a long way in the past few years. The un-learning was harder than the learning. “Do you feel any better?”

“A bit.”

Bruce threw him a towel. “I know this must be hard for you. But Jason’s not going to be here forever. He’s not going to hurt you, and he’s not going to hurt me. Or Alfred. It’s going to be fine.”

Richard’s mouth twisted briefly. “How long?” he asked.

“I don’t know yet. I need to find something else for him first. I don’t even know if his parents are alive...or able to care for him.” Bruce suspected that they weren’t. He suspected that there was hardly an adult in Jason’s life who had looked after him, or treated him with care and concern for his wellbeing.

At that, Richard’s face went suspiciously blank. After years of knowing him, Bruce knew that meant Richard was thinking something that the Court of Owls would not have approved of him thinking. It could be sympathy for a boy without parents. It could be deep-seated resentment for the intrusion. It could be both. Bruce still believed that Richard’s better impulses would win out.

At last, face still carefully devoid of expression, Richard asked, “What do you want me to do?”

“I want him to feel safe here,” Bruce said. “Don’t watch him while he sleeps.”

“Safe,” Richard echoed. “Okay.”

Bruce smiled at him. He really was very proud of Richard.

The first thing Jason did when he found his way back to the stupid huge bedroom was check outside the window for any sign of creepers hanging round out there. Or the one creeper. He was starting to suspect that no matter how loud Richard's clothing was, he wasn't going to see him coming.

Nor was he keen on the idea of using the bed. It still looked intimidatingly clean and fluffy. He'd probably get grime all over the sheets or into the mattress if he slept in it.

Of course, he *could* use the clean, shiny shower in the bathroom. He even had a clean, fluffy towel. And clean clothes to change into, even if the shirt was an almost aggressively bright blue. Richard's hand-me-downs. He seemed to like blue. Clothes aside, the prospect of a shower was very tempting. The water would probably be nice and hot. It would probably stay hot too. It sounded *real* good.

Even though he'd gone longer without a shower (it was hard to find somewhere safe to wash, sometimes), Jason decided to go for it. When else was he going to get the chance for unlimited hot water in a private bathroom, without breaking in to someone else's home for it? Fifteen minutes later he emerged feeling all tingly from the scrubbing. His hair squeaked when he ran his hands through it, he'd cleaned it so hard. He could have stayed in a lot longer, but he was getting kind of tired. After one more check outside the window, he grabbed his pile of blankets and settled in a corner to doze.

The next thing he knew there was nothing but bright sunlight, right in his eyes. He'd gone to sleep. He'd actually *slept*. Anyone could have snuck up on him!

Furious with himself for being so stupid, he went downstairs. He wasn't going to just stay in that room. He was going to case this place properly. Wayne had said he was going to talk to Jason about what next, and that meant Jason was getting kicked out. He needed to at least get *something* he could sell.

He edged through the halls, getting more and more frustrated as he went. There was porcelain shit all over the place. Jason *knew* it was valuable, but it was also too fucking delicate and hard to shift. People like him stole silverware and tires for a reason.

Other than that, it was all paintings and fancy furniture. He definitely couldn't steal a whole sofa.

After a while he found himself in a hall he recognised. One of the ways to the kitchen, he thought. He could hear a bit of clattering in there, and smell - was that egg? Jason edged into the room.

Richard was there already, picking at a plate of eggs and vegetables. He looked up the instant Jason set a toe over the threshold, face expressionless. Jason grit his teeth and ignored him. He *wasn't* scared of Richard. *Nobody* should be scared of a guy who dressed like that.

"Good morning," Richard said. Jason nearly jumped out of his skin. Richard was still watching him, as though he thought Jason might bite him or something. What did *he* have to worry about, the crazy son of a bitch? Jason couldn't hurdle a table and hold him down even if he wanted to.

He kind of wished he could get Batman to teach him. Shit, Richard hadn't learned moves like that just anywhere.

"Morning," Jason ventured.

Cold blue eyes looked him up and down. "You slept," Richard said.

"It's easier without a creepy stalker outside my window," Jason replied.

To his surprise, Richard's face pulled into an actual expression - a small frown. It looked like it might hurt. "I thought you might be stealing," he said. "Bruce said not to worry about what happened if you did."

That was - that was both good news and bad news. Bad, in that it sounded like Wayne was on to him. Good, in that Wayne didn't plan to stop him. Or let Richard stop him. That part was definitely good. He remembered being slammed into the floor. He'd barely seen Richard move. Batman was allowed to do shit like that. Batman's weirdo kid, no. "I'm not going to steal anything," he lied.

"You stole Bruce's tires," Richard said.

"I needed them! It would have paid the rent on my mom's place! Heating! Can't steal houses or heat, stupid. Do you know how cold it gets out there sometimes? The guy down the hall froze to death last winter when he couldn't pay the bills. He got drunk, fallen asleep on his sofa, and never woke up again." Jason used to get scared that the same thing would happen to his mom. "So yeah, I tried to steal *Bruce's* tires, it was that or starve and freeze!"

The frown vanished almost as soon as Jason started speaking, returning Richard's face to its usual flat mask. Then, when Jason was done, he stood up and walked out.

Thirty seconds later, Pennyworth appeared at the door. "Was that Master Richard I just heard leaving?" he asked.

"Yeah," Jason said bitterly. "Might not want me dead, but he acts just like every other prick who's ever chased me out of a shop."

A plate full of breakfast was set down in front of him with a decisive clink. "You do him wrong, Master Jason," Alfred said. "And you will see once he stops being afraid of you."

"What's *he* got to be afraid of? Jason asked.

"A great many things, of which you are undoubtedly the least. Rest assured, I do not know why he's acting this way."

Jason decided not to reply. Mostly because there was food in front of him again. He knew Wayne was looking to send him on soon, but he had to admit, he'd miss the food here. There was so much, and Pennyworth could cook. He'd have to see if there was anything else he could take from the pantry. While Jason ate in silence, Pennyworth went back to whatever it was he did around this giant house. Jason suspected he was super busy, all the time.

He was just finishing the last few bites of omelette when a heavy, soft weight hit him in the back of the head, and the world went dim around him. Jason shouted in alarm and flailed wildly, hoping that whoever had attacked him, he could *punch them in the dick*. Instead he came up with only handfuls of soft wool.

It was a blanket, heavy and immediately warm. It was also a fuck-ugly pattern of red, green, and yellow, which Jason was willing to bet only one person could stand to look at for long. When Jason looked around, there was nobody there. The blanket might as well have fallen on him from the ceiling.

Pennyworth reappeared at the door, expression of shock rapidly melting into the first real smile Jason had ever seen on him. "Ah. As I said, Master Jason, you do Master Richard wrong."

—

Jason spent most of the morning in the library. Best room in the house, no contest. Not long before lunch, Wayne stuck his head into the room and said, “Are you ready to discuss long-term plans, Jason?”

No, I have school. He didn’t say that, though, not when Wayne was making sure he had food every few hours. Instead he nodded, made a note of what page he was up to in his book, and followed Wayne out. He wouldn’t have minded staying in the library, but Wayne led him to the study, the one with the entrance to the cave in it. He indicated to Jason that he should take a seat in one of the armchairs, while he sat behind his desk.

“First things first,” Wayne said. “Your mother’s name is Catherine Todd, correct?”

“Yeah,” Jason said. Here it came. He hadn’t expected to hide it from Batman.

“The Catherine Todd who died of a heroin overdose four months ago?”

Jason scowled. “What of it?” His mom went through enough crap when she was alive, she didn’t need Bruce freakin’ Wayne looking down his nose at her after she was gone. He missed her. She’d *tried*. She was his *mom* and not even Batman was allowed to say she’d done a shit job of looking after him.

He’d been the one to find her. He’d come back from scrounging and she’d been in the bathroom, needle still in her arm. Jason had cleaned her up as best he could, he’d called for help to get her body out, and then he’d lied and lied and lied to keep Social Services away. It had been working, too.

“I’m just surprised that she maintains a tenancy agreement,” Wayne said. “Month to month, I see. I take it you’ve been paying. Did you have any plans for when the landlord gets suspicious?”

He shrugged. He’d been paying the rent on his mom’s room since she died so he at least had somewhere kind of safe to sleep, when her ex-boyfriends weren’t coming around anyway, but he couldn’t sign a new rental arrangement for himself. The landlord was *already* suspicious, Jason had pawned off everything his mom had owned, and he was having trouble stealing enough to make up the rest. At the end of the month he was probably going to be on the streets for real.

Wayne said, “And your father is Willis Todd?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s due out on parole in two weeks,” Wayne said. “He passed the board hearing.”

Dread filled Jason, thick and heavy. “Again?” he asked. His dad back...it never meant good things.

“Again.” Wayne looked at him, and even though he wasn’t wearing his cowl-thing, Jason could see Batman there. “Would you rather avoid him?”

“He’s my dad,” Jason said.

“Yes. Would you rather avoid him?”

He swallowed hard. Nobody had asked anything like that before. “Do I have a choice?”

“I meant what I said about not returning you to an intolerable situation. I see your mother made and withdrew several domestic violence complaints about him.”

He knew. First the drinking, then the screaming started, sometimes his dad hit her, then his mom started dialing, but when the police arrived she never let them in. Jason tried not to be around until his dad had passed out. “Can - can I have some time to think about it?” Jason dared to ask. “Without Social Services?”

Wayne stared him up and down too. In the back of his mind Jason wondered whether Richard had learned that from him. Eventually, he said, “If you think it will help you.”

“He’s my dad,” Jason said helplessly. Dads were shit and there was nothing you could do about them except go into foster care, which was worse. Everyone knew that. “I can’t just leave him, not if he’s out.”

“You can, if that’s what’s best for you. I’ll leave that decision to you. You’re old enough to know your own mind on this.” He shook his head a little, and changed the subject. “Are you and Richard getting along well enough? Aside from the incident at dinner last night.”

It wasn’t being a snitch if he only had okay things to say. “He didn’t let me go splat on the cave floor,” Jason said. “He also said good morning and threw a blanket on me.”

“Did he?” Wayne sounded absurdly pleased. “That’s good to hear.”

Batman had strange standards for his kid.

But Jason didn’t have time to reflect on that, because Wayne was speaking again. “If you’re comfortable enough here, then it might be best for you to stay until you’ve made a decision about your father. You are of course welcome. We have plenty to spare.”

So the only thing he’d been worried about was whether Richard might maul him or vice versa, Jason figured. Well, he hadn’t, and Jason didn’t mind waiting out the next two weeks somewhere with lots of food and hot water - and books.

His dad would be pleased if Jason could bring some silver back. Might be he’d even help out with the rent. “All right,” Jason said. “Two weeks.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for your patience! I think I've got a better idea where this is going now and how it's going to get there, so hopefully I won't leave you waiting so long again!

And thank you all for the wonderful feedback!

Every Day

Chapter Summary

Things settle down, a bit.

Chapter Notes

Don't think there's anything in this chapter the tags don't cover.

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

They quickly settled into what could only be called a routine.

Jason slept on the floor of his room (because the bed was scary) and woke up around eight. Then he went down for breakfast, where Alfred made sure he had a big meal to start the day. Sometimes Richard was there, picking at his food. He was a fussy eater, Jason learned quickly. He wouldn't eat any sort of porridge, or anything with too much lemon in it, or red meat that wasn't cooked grey, or indeed anything he deemed 'too red.'

Like there was anything too red for Richard, Jason privately thought, not going by his clothes anyway. He should be grateful that he had food. *And* that someone else cooked it for him.

Once breakfast was done, Jason went to the library and stayed there all morning. It was amazing. He loved every minute he spent in that big, quiet room, surrounded by books. It wasn't just novels Bruce had, but plays and poetry and non-fiction as well. The last wasn't quite so interesting to Jason as the rest, but he put a history of the Wars of the Roses in his little stack of books to attempt all the same.

Then there was lunch, which was invariably just Jason and Alfred. Bruce slept until about ten and was out of the house by ten-thirty or eleven at the latest; Richard was always off doing whatever Richard did. Lessons, mostly, or so Alfred told him. Sometimes training.

On the second day of Jason's stay in Wayne Manor, he spotted a red-haired woman walking through the grounds. Not the public side near the road, with the smooth lawns and the really high wall, but the back side, the one Jason hadn't explored much because that many trees in one place wasn't right. At first he thought she might be one of Bruce's girlfriends, but then he realised she had orange skin and solid green eyes. A friend from the Justice League?

He didn't have much more chance to think on it, because there was an unfamiliar, wordless cry of delight. Jason whipped around to see who on earth in this formal, empty house could possibly sound so happy, and saw Richard fling himself gracefully from somewhere above him. He was getting some serious air. Jason shouted himself, in alarm, because *hello*, Richard had just jumped out a third-story window! Or third-story balcony, whatever, it was high up.

To his surprise, the woman shot into the air herself - *flying* - and caught Richard with ease, smiling broadly herself, masses of red hair swinging in the breeze. And Richard was *laughing*.

It was strange to see on that usually-impassive face, and stranger to hear. Their conversation drifted up towards him from where the woman was still hovering, Richard in her arms.

“Every time,” the woman scolded him. She didn’t sound all that angry about it.

“It’s fun,” Richard said. “Why are you here, Kori?”

“I have no work today. Donna has none either. I thought we could go swimming. You did say we had permission.” They were descending now, instead of floating, and the last Jason heard was a pleased humming from Richard. He went back to his book, but after an hour curiosity overwhelmed him. Swimming? It was nearly the end of winter, but it was still cold as balls outside. Where the fuck would they go swimming? Did Wayne have a pool in here?

Another lengthy chunk of exploration on the ground floor revealed that yes. Yes, Wayne *did* have a pool in here. Jason found it from the shouting. There wasn’t just one unfamiliar female voice, but two.

Funny, from what those convenience store magazines wrote about Bruce, Jason would have expected any swimming in here to be a lot sleazier. Instead, he peeked in on Richard and his lady friends (both of whom were *incredibly* hot, Jason couldn’t help but notice) all fully dressed except for their shoes and in the pool anyway. Richard and the woman Jason hadn’t seen before, the one with dark hair (Donna?), were hitting each other with foam sticks like they were weapons while the alien flying lady egged them on.

It looked like fun. Jason hadn’t ever really had friends before. He liked reading too much for most of the other kids he knew to really fit in with them. That alone made them call him a smartass and a snob. They were probably right about him being a smartass.

Might’ve been nice though.

He slipped away before Richard and his friends could see him.

After lunch passed the same way as before lunch did. Jason knew for sure Richard trained in the afternoons, because he did so outside, running around and doing flips and climbing trees. The movement was distracting while Jason kept trying to read.

He *had* to keep reading. When was he going to get another chance like this? And some jackass kept ruining it by doing crazy gymnastics shit out of the corner of his eye. It seemed like every time he moved windows, Richard was right back in front of it, doing five consecutive handsprings or twisting himself into a pretzel.

Jason had to admit, Richard was really good at the crazy gymnastics stuff. Had Batman taught him? There couldn’t be many people in Gotham who could do things like that. If he’d taught Richard, maybe he’d be fine with teaching Jason a few things? Not that there was a lot he could learn in a week and a half.

Outside on the lawn, Richard kicked himself into a handstand, if ‘kicked’ was the right word for leaning over and deciding that nah, his feet didn’t really *need* to be on the ground. His bright yellow shirt obeyed gravity and fell across Richard’s face, and as he held position Jason got a glimpse of a bunch of ugly scars along his ribs, too straight to be anything but intentional. Fear sliced through him for an instant - had Wayne done that? - before he really looked. The scars were old. They looked more like the ones Martina’s john had given her when he found out she was keeping money back. Wayne probably hadn’t done that to Richard.

Who had, then?

A few times Jason found himself drifting off in the afternoon, having naps like some little kid. It was weird, but the library felt almost *safe*. He didn't mind so much falling asleep in there.

Bruce got back around six most days. Jason worked it out. When you took travel into account, Wayne only spent five hours a day or so at his actual job. "Lucky bastard," he said to Alfred. It didn't seem fair. Alfred got up before all of them and went to sleep around the same time, and he spent almost all that time working.

"It is his great good fortune," Alfred agreed.

"Doesn't it bother you?"

"Not in the slightest. I am a fortunate individual myself, to have found work that suits me so well. After so many years it hardly seems like work."

"Can I help with something?" Jason asked anyway. Alfred set him to peeling vegetables. After that, Jason started coming down to the kitchen to help out somehow in the evenings before dinner. He liked reading, but he couldn't just sit around doing nothing all day.

Dinner, he had with Bruce and Richard. He'd thought it would be awkward, but Richard didn't threaten him with any more butter knives, and Bruce kept the conversation going. With Richard, Bruce talked about math and science stuff Jason couldn't make head or tail of. Wasn't often he felt stupid, but their conversations did it. Then, just when Jason was getting *really* frustrated, Bruce would turn to him and ask what he'd read that day. And he *listened*. He even asked more questions. What Jason had liked about the book. What he hadn't.

No grownup had ever asked him stuff like that before. Jason *liked* it. That and the food. The food was amazing.

After dinner was when all the Bat-stuff happened. Jason refused to stay in the house by himself when everyone else was down in the cave. He *should* stay up there, he knew, and take the opportunity to add to his small stash of food and valuables, but the idea of being all alone up there freaked him out. People like him shouldn't be trusted in houses like that.

So he followed the rest of them downstairs.

If Bruce Wayne was allowed to be lazy as fuck, Batman sure wasn't. After dinner came an hour and a half of studying cases. Alfred and Richard both helped with that. "You don't have to stay down here," Bruce said to Jason, turning away from his big-ass computer. Jason thought he'd been quiet, but *Batman*. House of ninjas.

On the screen behind him was a set of notes on a man who'd been beating prostitutes, not all that far from his mom's apartment. They weren't police notes. The police didn't care. "I want to help too," Jason said.

Bruce looked at him for a long moment. Then he turned back to the big screen, typed a few commands, and said, "I've sent some transcripts of phone conversations and police interviews to the computer on your right. If you can read and summarise them for me, that will be helpful. I need to know the facts of the case and the status of the police investigation."

Jason got right to it. He kept going even when Bruce went to warm up for a long night of Batmanning, though he turned away for a minute or so to watch him fight with Richard (who was as good at fighting as he was at gymnastics). He *had* to see if Bruce would teach him any of that

stuff.

Probably not, since Jason had already tried to steal his tires. Batman beat up people like him for that, he was pretty sure.

But Bruce hadn't beaten him up, and so it was worth a try.

It was only after full dark that Batman really went out. He took the car, which still wasn't as loud as Jason thought it should be, and peeled out ridiculously fast. Each night it was followed by Richard hurling himself up into the mass of ropes, then back down to hover over Alfred as he checked up on the patrol, then practiced with some short sticks Alfred said were called *escrima*, then hovering over Alfred again, then poring over street maps and blueprints, then hovering, and so on and so forth. The entire rigamarole was punctuated by Richard throwing longing glances to the cave exit.

"Someone wants to be Batman Junior," Jason said on night four. Richard was practicing with the little bat-shaped throwing stars and he was capital-A Annoyed with his aim. He hadn't made a sound. He didn't have to. It hadn't taken long at all to work out that with Richard, quiet equalled bad. All that scary quiet was ruining Jason's concentration.

Richard surprised him. "No," he said. "Batman is good. I can't be Batman."

"Oookaaaay," Jason said. "What are you upset about anyway?" He was hitting his targets pretty well, from what Jason could see.

"Look," Richard said, gesturing to the human-shaped dummies. Jason looked, not turning his back all the way to Richard when he still had pointy throwing things in his hands. There were knife marks in the gel-stuff, not in the eye or the throat or the heart, but all in the little chalk marks over the shoulders. Looked to Jason that Richard was really good at throwing knives. "They went in too deep. They could *kill* someone. I keep throwing too hard."

How he knew that when he hadn't left his mark, Jason didn't know. Instead he rolled his eyes. "Then don't throw knives at people. That'd help."

Richard's face went utterly blank again as he stared Jason down. Then he spun on his heel, marched over to an equipment table, and came back with some little weights on a string. Jason went back to his summarising to the *whish-whish-whish-thunk* of Richard throwing them around instead.

Bruce got back in so late it was early, usually just when Jason didn't think he could stay awake for another minute. He sent Jason back upstairs at that point, but he was pretty sure Bruce didn't go to bed right away 'cause of how Alfred grumbled.

On the Thursday night (Friday morning), Jason waited until Bruce was warming down, and asked, "Can you teach me how to fight?"

Bruce looked at him, sizing him up with cool eyes. Jason did his best not to squirm. It wasn't a full-on glare, he told himself, but to be honest he might have been better off if Bruce *had* been glaring. He knew how to handle that.

When Bruce said nothing, Jason said, "You taught Richard, didn't you?"

"Less than you'd think," Bruce said. "Mostly of necessity." He just kept looking at Jason. Evaluating.

He had a whole bunch of reasons planned why Batman should, a whole damn *speech* (even though he'd hate to admit how helpless he felt sometimes), but just when he was about to launch into it, Bruce said, "I will teach you some things to help you defend yourself, yes. Tomorrow afternoon. Now get some sleep."

Puzzled but not unhappy, nor willing to risk the agreement, Jason obeyed.

The bolas had been a good idea. Difficult. They were very different to the knives Richard had trained with as long as he could remember clearly. They was slower and harder to aim.

But he didn't have to make himself go numb inside when he threw them at human-shaped targets.

He'd keep the knives as a tool, Richard decided, and use the bolas as his main throwing weapons from now on. For that, he'd need more practice. Lots of it. Even if he couldn't be Batman, he was going to at least *try* to be a hero, and he was never going to kill again.

Richard headed down to the caves and the practice area with a light feeling all through his chest. Things were working out well. Better than he'd thought when the boy - Jason, he corrected himself - had arrived. Richard had been keeping an eye on him, as Bruce had instructed, and he was easy to keep safe. All he'd needed to do was go about his usual routine, whether lessons or light training, in places where he could keep an eye on Jason (but not while he slept, because Bruce had said). Jason hadn't even realised Richard was watching him.

But that was okay. Richard wasn't a threat. He thought he might even understand why Bruce wanted to keep Jason here a little better. Jason wasn't cold here. Knowing that he'd helped - he'd *seen* the blanket he'd given Jason on the floor, so he knew Jason was using it - made him feel warm too. Inside, though.

And besides, all Jason seemed to do was read, anyway. Maybe Bruce wanted him to help with cases. Richard was doing his best to learn about being a detective, but studying was hard when he had to work himself up to opening books. That would be all right, if Jason helped with the reading while Richard protected Bruce and Alfred.

There was noise drifting up from the practice mats. Voices. Richard froze before he could be seen. Why was Bruce down here so early? Why was *Jason*? That was Jason's voice, he was sure.

"That hurt," Jason's voice said.

"It always does," Bruce replied. "Stand up. Try again. This time don't lock your knees. You need to be able to move with the force of the blow, especially when you're fighting someone stronger than you are."

It was hard to sneak into the cave from the house, but Richard knew how to do it. Slowly, carefully, he edged along below Bruce's sightline and behind his workbenches, before climbing a wall and going across the top of the shelves, to a place where he knew he could get a good, concealed view of the practice mats.

Bruce was there. Training with Jason. He was showing the boy how to block a punch and take a fall. Even as Richard watched, Jason hit the ground correctly, absorbing the force and springing

right back up to his feet.

All the nice fuzzy warmth Richard had been feeling for the past few days vanished in an instant.

Stupid! Stupid, stupid, stupid! Stupid like some of the people Bruce invited into the house said he was, when they thought Richard couldn't hear. He'd got it wrong *again*. Bruce really *did* want the boy to replace Richard, just like he'd been afraid of.

Richard watched for a little while. He'd learned most of what Jason was learning when he was a lot younger than the boy. He'd *mastered* these lessons when he was a lot younger than the boy. He didn't understand. Why was Bruce doing this? Had Richard really not learned fast enough? Well enough?

Jason hit the ground correctly for the third time in a row. He'd got the idea, Richard could tell, even if his movements weren't very smooth.

It made Bruce smile. "Well done," he said.

When Richard had started learning from Bruce, it had taken weeks before he'd said anything like that. He'd known Richard could hurt him. He'd been wary. Suspicious. Richard had made so many mistakes those first few weeks he was surprised Bruce had put up with him.

Even with all the discipline he'd learned in the Court, it was hard to stay where he was and watch Bruce and Jason when inside it just hurt. He wasn't going to go back to the Court. He *couldn't*. He wasn't going to let this happen. He was not going to let Bruce throw him out when his replacement couldn't protect him and Alfred like Richard could.

But...he couldn't let Jason go back to where he'd been, either. Not if he was scared of being cold. That would be wrong.

It wasn't fair, Richard thought bitterly. Why couldn't they both stay here? Why couldn't Bruce just let Jason read and read and read?

Then it hit him, as hard as his great-grandfather ever had. Why *couldn't* they?

Richard slipped back down to ground level and went back the same way he came, thinking hard. Bruce wasn't like Talon's old masters. Bruce was kind. Even if he could only have one trainee -

- what he needed to do, then, was figure out a way to stop Bruce training Jason. That was all. And after days watching Jason, Richard thought he might have a few ideas how.

Chapter End Notes

Well, again, that took longer than I wanted it to. Thanks for your patience and your wonderful comments on this story. I really am enjoying writing this one, so I'm thrilled people seem to enjoy reading it!

Breaking Point

Chapter Summary

The inevitable confrontation.

Chapter Notes

No special warnings for this chapter.

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

“That was a good start,” Bruce said, as Jason lay on the ground aching in every last muscle. He wasn’t short of breath or anything, but *god* had he fallen down a lot. And got hit a lot. A few days of working with Batman had turned out to be super gruelling. “You can practice that on your own from now on.”

He’d already been doing that, the last few days. If his dad decided to knock him down, Jason wasn’t going to be falling on a padded practice mat. He wanted to know what it felt like to fall on a real floor.

They moved on to deflecting and absorbing blows. Jason hated every second of learning it, since it all assumed that Jason was going to get the crap beat out of him. After their first session, Bruce had said, “we don’t have to do this.”

Jason, lying on the mats and smarting from a blow he hadn’t quite managed to catch on the meat of his forearms, had said, “I do.”

Wasn’t as if anyone trying to beat him up was going to pull their punches. Most of them would be bigger and stronger than he was, too. His dad was a big guy.

Bruce started on aiming those harmless blows at Jason’s left side. They stung a bit if Jason deflected them with the meat of his forearm, and stung a bit more if he didn’t. Then he did the same with the right side. Then light kicks. Then he mixed it up, and finally, asked Jason to show him what he should try to protect if he was on the ground and getting a real serious laying-into (his head, mostly).

“I hope you never need that,” Bruce said.

“Me too.” Pipe dream though. Someone was going to kick the shit out of him sooner or later.

Bruce sighed. “I’ll teach you how to throw a punch. It’s no good only teaching you how to endure.”

Because sometimes the only way to stop the bullies was to hit back. Batman knew that just as well as Jason did. Jason had been hoping for this, but he hadn’t dared press.

“Make a fist,” Bruce said. “I’ll teach you what I can while you’re here.”

After they were done, Bruce said, "I apologise if this isn't as useful as it could be. I've never taught anyone the basics before."

Tired as he was, Jason perked up. "You didn't teach Richard? Where'd he learn it?"

"The Court of Owls."

Irritation spiked through Jason's gratitude and exhaustion both. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

"I mean it," Bruce said. "Richard was trained by the Court of Owls."

Frowning, Jason ran through the rhyme. Court of Owls, shadowed perch, granite and lime...and then he got to the final lines. "Speak not a whispered word of them, or they'll send the Talon for your head, what, *seriously?*" Richard wore fluffy orange slippers and refused to eat spaghetti bolognese!

"Seriously," Bruce said. "I told you, he's had a difficult life."

Jason whistled. "Guess that explains why you weren't upset that I tried to steal your tires."

It made Bruce smile crookedly. "When I first met Richard, he made a very good attempt to kill me. It took a bit of convincing to get him to leave the Court. He's worked hard to learn how to fight non-lethally ever since."

Well, that explained...a lot. The thing with the throwing knives, at least. How many times did you have to throw a knife to know, the instant it left your hand, that it would kill its target? "So he really does want to be Batman Junior," Jason said.

"Not Batman," Bruce said. "He's always insisted he want to be *like* Batman. Not Batman. I've never even...let him out on the streets..." He frowned. "Excuse me, Jason." And then he strode right back up the stairs, leaving Jason alone in the Bat-cave.

That hadn't happened before.

Jason looked around, ignoring how sore he was. He probably wasn't going to have long. There were a *ton* of electronics in here. Even the old things, the things that wouldn't be missed, were better than anything Jason had ever sold off before. He had to find something small that he could hide on his person, before Bruce came back.

Stealing from Bruce didn't feel good, not with the way Bruce had been feeding him and housing him and letting him read for most of the day. But he couldn't stay here forever and he had to live somehow.

—

His first plan was not working out so well.

It should have. Richard had been watching. Alfred liked Jason. Jason liked Alfred. Jason helped Alfred with his work even though he didn't have to. Alfred let him. *Alfred* didn't have any trainee. It made perfect sense. Alfred could teach Jason everything he knew and Richard could keep

learning from Bruce and everyone would be happy. He'd been trying for a week to gently herd Jason in Alfred's direction. They *had* spent more time together because when Alfred asked him if there was anything he wanted to eat Richard had said he wanted dishes that were more complicated to make, but it hadn't resulted in anything.

Richard was starting to feel a bit desperate. Every day this week Bruce had worked with Jason for an hour at least. He'd watched from above, taking care not to be seen. Bruce only trained Jason when Richard was supposed to be doing other things. He hadn't cut down on Richard's training yet, or told him anything, but it was only a matter of time.

Did Bruce really think Richard wouldn't notice? Even if he'd missed the training sessions themselves, which he hadn't and *wouldn't*, he'd've definitely noticed Jason hauling himself around the manor with every muscle obviously hurting.

He'd been surprised at himself when he'd seen, and immediately wanted to go make him stretch properly and get liniment and make sure Jason applied it properly, but he'd hardened his heart against the impulse.

If Jason was going to train, it was going to hurt. If he was sore, he might even not do so well in training and fail some of Bruce's tests.

Richard didn't like making himself not feel things. He'd done it too much with the Court, mostly so he could kill his targets. He didn't like thinking of Jason like he thought of the people he'd killed.

There was nothing for it. He was going to have to ask Alfred directly.

As he made his way towards the kitchen for his last-ditch effort to resolve this without resorting to the Court's methods, he felt his heartbeat pick up. Asking. Asking for things was hard. Talon wasn't supposed to ask for things; Talon was provided with all that it needed. His masters would have devised something truly awful for him if Richard had ever asked of them anything like what he was planning to ask Alfred now.

Deep breaths, that was the key. Bruce and Alfred weren't the Court. They wouldn't hurt him for asking them anything. Probably.

Alfred was doing some of the cleaning in the study when Richard caught up with him. He made no real effort to be quiet, but the older man never had broken himself of jumping, just a little, when he first realised Richard was in the room. "Is there something you needed, Master Richard?"

He was committed. "Will you train Jason?" he asked.

There. He'd done it. He braced himself for the reply.

Alfred frowned and said, "I'm afraid I don't quite know what you mean."

So it wasn't over. He could do this. "Train him," he repeated. "To help with the work here. The cooking and the maintenance and helping with cases."

"Oh, Master Richard. I'm afraid that would be wildly inappropriate for me to ask." At Richard's tilt of the head, he went on, "Master Bruce simply cannot pluck a child off the streets and set him to doing manual and domestic labour in his house. Maybe a hundred years ago that would be acceptable, but not today."

Richard's heart dropped. "But he likes it," he said desperately. It hadn't been hard to see how much

Jason liked helping Alfred with making dinner.

“Master Jason is a guest here. He’s not to be put to work like a mule.” Some of Richard’s confusion must have shown on his face, because Alfred sat down and patted the seat next to him, an invitation for Richard himself to sit as well. “What’s brought this on, my boy?”

He couldn’t sit, not with all the tension in his muscles. If he sat down, it would be that much harder to run, and he might need to. The words wouldn’t come, though, and he paced back and forth, hoping to shake some loose. “How can he stay if he doesn’t have a place here?” he asked at last.

“If you’re concerned that Master Bruce will evict Jason, you needn’t worry,” Alfred said. “He’s made it clear to the young man that he’s welcome to stay if he wants to, and Master Bruce does want him to stay. Jason’s father is not due out on parole for a day or two yet, and seems to have abused both Jason and his late mother.”

Richard kept pacing. He *did* worry. If Jason couldn’t be sent back to his father, and couldn’t train with Alfred...

“That’s good,” he said. It was easy to keep his voice level. His masters had taught him how to do that, and taught him well. It was clear, then. There was only one option left. Only one reasonable option anyway. “Thank you, Alfred.” Without waiting for any other word, he left. No point drawing this out.

He tried to hurry upstairs, to the room Bruce had given him, but his feet felt like lead every step of the way. He couldn’t stop looking around. He’d *liked* it here. It was warm and he could go outside to see the sky whenever he felt like it. He had a room of his own, not that he’d ever really known what to do with that much space. Now...

Maybe Kori would take him in. He didn’t like that idea. When the Court came for him, he didn’t want her to get caught up in it.

As he walked through the halls, trying and failing to let go, he saw movement. A person. Too short to be Bruce or even Alfred - so Jason, then. What was he doing up here? This time of day he should be reading. Or - or training with Bruce. And he knew Jason hated to be in this part of the house by himself. Stealthily, because his masters had trained him well, Richard followed after.

Jason didn’t go into his room. Instead, he stopped by one of the other bedrooms, one of the ones Richard had never seen opened up before. Watching, Richard frowned. What was Jason doing in there? He ducked into the bedroom next door, went out the window, and climbed around so he could see through the window of the room Jason was in. He got to the window just in time to see Jason pull a dust sheet back over the bedside table. Once Jason was gone, Richard let himself in. Curious, he lifted the dust sheet and investigated.

Inside, metal glinted. The good silverware, or some of it anyway. There was a scanner from the cave in there too. There was a little box of dry crackers. Jason had been stealing from Bruce. From Alfred.

There was a box of cereal in there. Richard’s cereal. His favourite, the one he kept as a special treat.

Jason had been stealing from him, too. Richard thought he hadn’t. That Jason understood that he’d be given what he needed.

Stupid again. No wonder Bruce didn’t want him anymore. He could feel anger burning in his

chest, though. Even if Bruce didn't want him and didn't care if Jason stole from him, Richard cared. It wasn't about the *things*. Richard wasn't about to let Bruce replace him with someone who betrayed his kindness like that.

Change of plans.

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“Have you seen Richard?” Bruce asked Alfred. He'd been searching for Richard since his epiphany training Jason, but without luck. He had a bad feeling about this. At this time of day Richard was usually outside. Only freezing weather stopped him.

“Yes, Master Bruce,” Alfred said. “Not twenty minutes ago.”

“What did he want?”

Alfred huffed, in irritation or amusement Bruce couldn't tell. “Would you believe he asked me if I would train young Master Jason as a butler?”

The feeling of foreboding grew stronger. Richard cared about Alfred, indisputably, and valued what he did around the house - but he'd never shown any real interest in Alfred's work, either. This was about Jason, and only about Jason. And if Richard had been asking Alfred if *he* could train Jason... “He thinks I'm going to replace him,” Bruce said softly.

God, he'd been such an idiot. Handled everything wrong. The Court never kept two Talons at the same time. Of course he thought that Bruce teaching another boy meant that Richard himself was about to be rejected. Rejection didn't mean anything kind in Richard's world.

“And he came to me to try and find a solution that wouldn't end with either of them being forced to leave the manor,” Alfred said. “Oh dear. That is a worry. I only reassured him that you would not be sending Master Jason from here if he didn't want to go.”

Bruce quirked a smile in bleak amusement. “I take it you refused to take on an apprentice butler.”

“Naturally. The boy shows far more interest in learning from you, though truly, the way he attacks your library, he should be in school.”

That was true enough. Bruce knew what it was like to devour a book himself, but it had been a long time since he'd seen someone else do the same. The best thing for Jason would probably be private tutoring, to catch him up to his peers with the benefit of consistent education, then a good school with supportive staff and a demanding academic programme. It couldn't happen without Jason's cooperation, and Bruce very much feared Jason would decide to go back to his father.

It would be such a waste.

First, Richard. Richard was the more immediate worry here. If he had asked Alfred something so important, then he must be desperate. Most likely, he felt alone, too. Bruce had really made a mess of this. He couldn't have Richard doing anything drastic, nor going back to the shell of a human being the Court had done their best to make of him. Every step had been a trial for Richard - going outside, wearing colours other than black, catching up on his education, making friends. He'd done it all with methodical stubbornness.

“I’ll go find him,” Bruce said. “You see if you can track down Jason and make sure he stays out of Richard’s way for the moment.”

Bruce was *not* going to be responsible for Richard losing his progress because Bruce himself had made mistakes. He refused.

The problem with finding Richard, though, was that he was very good at not being found. Bruce hurried through the halls as quietly as he himself could manage, the better to hear any indication of Richard. Nothing.

Dread intensifying in his guts, Bruce started to comb the house.

—

There was a flash of bright teal across his eyes, and then a fist buried itself in Jason’s guts. He doubled over, wheezing, only to get his legs kicked out from under him from behind. He sprawled on the carpet face first, chin stinging, blood in his mouth. A foot hit his shoulder, trying to flip him up. Jason applied what Bruce had been teaching him and curled inwards, but his attacker knew what they were doing. Two swift kicks to the ribs and Jason was uncurled and staring up at the ceiling.

Then Richard’s blank face came into view.

No, not *really* blank, Jason realised. Even if his mouth was a flat line and his forehead and eyebrows weren’t grooved into a frown or a snarl or anything, it was all in the eyes. He could tell. Richard was furious. For some reason. “What the fuck?” Jason said. He wished he sounded more indignant, but he was kind of short on breath.

“You’ve been stealing,” Richard said. His voice was flat too, which wasn’t right either. Richard wasn’t the most emotional guy around, but he wasn’t a total zombie. There was usually *something* there when he spoke, even if it was pretty muted.

Jason pushed himself up into a sitting position. Richard let him. Jason knew ‘let’ was the right word for it. He spat out blood, realising too late that it would stain the nice carpet. “Get bent,” he said. “What do you care? Bruce has got plenty.”

“You stole from Alfred. You stole from me.”

“No I didn’t. I didn’t take any of your stuff. Or Alfred’s.”

“The crackers. The cereal.”

From sitting to standing. If Richard took another swing at him Jason was going to at least *try* to fight back. “Oh, that’s yours and Alfred’s, then? *So what?* There’s plenty of food in that cupboard.”

“It was *mine*,” Richard said, and before Jason could blink Richard dropped, whirled around, and kicked Jason’s legs right back out from under him again. This time his tailbone jarred on the floor. “Mine.”

“Get yourself some more fucking cereal then!” He tried to roll over and succeeded. “You can just go and get more if you want some! I need it! I told you, I have to fucking *eat!*”

Well, that got an expression. Kind of. The tiniest frowning of brow. “You don’t care,” Richard said. “Bruce brought you here. He was kind to you. Alfred too.” He crouched over Jason, digging a knee into his sternum like he had that first dinner.

“Yeah?” Jason sneered. He wasn’t scared of Richard. He wasn’t going to *be* scared of Richard. He had to think of the dork with the fluffy slippers, not the nursery rhyme monster. “Then I’ll give it back. Except for the cereal, because you’ve been nothing but a *dick*.”

He twisted as best he could, trying to squeeze out from under the knee pinning him down. To his surprise, Richard toppled off him. Freed, Jason took his opportunity and belted Richard around the face as hard as he could. The blow connected. Jason didn’t stick around to see if he’d done any damage. Hit and run was the only way to do this.

It was a shame that he wasn’t going to be able to take anything from his stash. And he was going to miss reading here, and even learning from Bruce. Jason ran for it, fast as he could. It was a long way back to Gotham proper. He didn’t dare look back.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again everyone, so much, for your response to this fic. It's amazing. I think there'll only be two chapters left after this one, which is a bit sad, but that's how it's looking. I hope to have them written and posted soon!

On The Trail

Chapter Summary

Bruce and Richard - Dick - search for Jason. Jason searches for Gotham.

Chapter Notes

A bit more misogyny and direct child abuse in this chapter than in previous chapters.

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

He found Richard slumped against a wall, not far from Jason's room, head in his hands. Bruce hurried to his side. "Richard? Are you all right?"

He wasn't. Clearly. Blood was running from his nose to his chin, and he wasn't speaking. He wasn't even looking at Bruce, oblivious to his surroundings in a way Bruce had only seen once or twice before.

This was going to be difficult. Bruce had never been much good at this sort of thing. He'd got a bit more used to it since he'd taken Richard in, but it was never, ever easy.

He ripped the sleeve from his training t-shirt and gently pressed it to Richard's still-bleeding nose, allowing Richard to take over, and let him lean against Bruce's shoulder while he collected himself. In the meantime, Bruce cast around for clues. There were marks on the carpet where the fibres had been disturbed. Big marks near where Bruce and Richard now sat, but a little further away there were small footprints. Jason's, they had to be. To one side there was a small gob of drying, bloody spittle. Trajectory suggested that was Jason's too.

Jason and Richard had got into a physical fight.

Well, Bruce couldn't say he was surprised. He *was* surprised that Richard had ended up with a bloodied nose from the encounter (not broken, Bruce thought, but he'd have Alfred check). A week and a half of self-defence training couldn't stand up to the years of Richard's own training and considerably greater physical capacities. It would have had to be a very lucky blow indeed.

He turned back when he felt Richard straighten up. The younger man looked up at him, not entirely hiding his apprehension. "What happened?" Bruce asked, as gently as he could. He didn't want to sound as though he was demanding a report.

"I found the things Jason stole," Richard said. He wiped at his chin with the bloodied rag that had been Bruce's sleeve a minute or two ago, succeeding at smearing blood everywhere. "I confronted him."

"Why?" It went without saying that Richard remembered perfectly well what Bruce had said about Jason stealing.

“He wasn’t just stealing from you. He stole from Alfred. He took my cereal.” Richard frowned a little, hesitated, and asked, “Why are you replacing me with Jason if he steals from you?”

He’d been right, then. He wished he’d seen it sooner. “You’re not being replaced,” Bruce said. “You never were.”

“You’re training Jason,” Richard said, the flatness of tamped-down anger in his voice. “I’m not that stupid. You’re training Jason and replacing me.”

“No. My teaching Jason doesn’t mean I ever planned to replace you. That’s not how it works outside the Court. You can both stay, and you can both learn. If Jason himself wants to stay, that is.” He had to admit it was unlikely, now, if he’d got into a fight like this with Richard. Bruce wouldn’t want Richard’s enmity either. “I promised you would have a home here, and that stands.”

Richard looked back at the floor. “But...why...”

“He asked,” Bruce said. “I agreed because of Jason’s father.”

If anything Richard seemed to droop even further. “Alfred said Jason’s father hurts him.” He looked up at Bruce. “I wanted him to stay. I just - he was *stealing*. It was my cereal and he took it. I couldn’t let him replace me.”

“Is that why you hit him?”

Richard nodded. He didn’t need to say anything else. After he’d asked Alfred if he would take on Jason and been refused, he must have resorted to something closer to how the Court did things. That would have meant a physical confrontation.

Bruce asked, “And how did he manage to hit you?”

“He called me dick,” Richard said. “I remembered - *I remember my name.*”

Bruce sucked in a breath. After years of brainwashing and only being addressed as ‘Talon,’ Richard had forgotten his name along with a great deal of his life before the Court; Bruce had identified him through the missing persons database and the case history. “That’s -“ He couldn’t think of the right word for it. Wonderful. Amazing. Neither were quite right. “Good. That’s good. I’m happy.”

Richard made a noise in the back of his throat that Bruce couldn’t interpret, then stood. He looked a bit wobbly, another rare sight. “Where did he go? I need to...” He trailed off. “You’re not replacing me?” Bruce shook his head. “I need to apologise,” Richard said.

“I think he’s run off,” Bruce said. “Look at the carpet.”

Another indistinct noise in the back of the throat, and Richard started following the trail of crushed fibres. He was good at that sort of thing. Bruce followed him along the hall; it was clear Jason had fled without a thought for stealth. “We fought ten minutes ago,” Richard said. “I think.”

That was bad. Jason could have gone a long way in ten minutes, and it was getting dark outside. He hadn’t returned to his room, though, so Bruce hoped he was merely hiding elsewhere in the manor. Surely Jason would want to collect his meagre stash of stolen goods. “You keep tracking him,” Bruce said. “I’ll get Alfred and we’ll start looking at the footage from the external cameras.”

Richard nodded and set off. Bruce turned away as well, fully intending to keep an eye out for Jason as he went. Finding anyone in a house this big was a problem.

In spite of the godawful stitch in his side and what he *knew* were bruises from where Richard had kicked him, Jason didn't stop running until he was back at something that looked like a proper road. The fucking rich person suburbs seemed to be mostly hills and a lot of lawns and trees. Jason didn't know shit about how to get around in neighbourhoods like that. From here he just had to keep walking. Then he could see what he could do about food and find somewhere to hole up for the night. He slowed to a walk instead.

Seemed to him like the running had been easier than usual. Usually a sprint like that, especially followed by the longer jog to get distance, would leave him totally wrecked. Must've been all the food he'd been eating. He was going to miss that. He was going to miss that a lot.

Bruce and Alfred too, he guessed. Which was stupid. He'd only known them for like two weeks.

The other stupid thing about suburbs was the lack of places to hide. It was all stupid houses with tiny-ass yards. He'd be sleeping in a park and hoping it didn't rain. He *hated* sleeping in parks. It was too open and no matter what you did the ground always felt damp except in the middle of summer. Resigned to not finding or stealing any dinner, Jason tucked himself into a small gap under the branches of some evergreen tree, hidden by the foliage. Other people had done the same thing before him, clearly, from the junk food wrappers caught in the layer of needle-like leaves on the ground.

Everything was spiky and sticky and had the sharp scent of pine. It smelled like cheap floor cleaner. Small price to pay for being hidden from view and out of the wind.

He thought longingly of the warm, ugly blanket he'd left back at Wayne Manor. Then he shook his head. That was Richard's blanket, and fuck Richard.

Jason didn't know when he dropped off to sleep, but he woke before dawn, sore in every muscle and fiercely hungry. He'd got soft. Nothing for it, though, since he had to get back into the city proper. He pissed against the tree (who knew if the public bathrooms here were safe?) and started walking again.

Wayne Manor was further away from the city than Jason had thought. He kept heading towards the skyscrapers he could see in the distance, but a lot of the suburban streets didn't run straight, taking him around the city rather than straight to it. More than once he hit a dead end and had to backtrack. There was no subway out here, only buses, so he couldn't just jump a turnstile. Jason quickly realised that there was no way he got back to his place before midday. Not to mention he had to get something to eat, because he was starting to slow down a bit. Wasn't going to be anywhere near as good as how he'd been eating the last two weeks, but he'd manage. He'd managed all his life, hadn't he?

He couldn't pretend he liked scrounging as much as he liked reading.

It was mid-afternoon (and a long, hungry day) before Jason finally got back to familiar territory. First order of business was going to the apartment. Just to check on it. He'd been away for two weeks, after all. Who knew if he'd had any squatters or other visitors? He'd have to go back out for late afternoon/early evening pickpocketing, but he had the time to at least check. He slunk up the stairs, trying not to look too much like there was anything unusual.

When he got to the door, it was already open. Just a crack, but open. Fuck. Door wasn't broken, which meant the bastard building superintendent had given someone the key. He'd give anyone the key for a twenty or a bottle of cheap whiskey. No way to tell how long ago. Cautiously, Jason edged into the apartment, ready to bolt again if he needed to.

Cigarette smell. Fresh. *Really* fresh.

"Cathy?" Jason's dad called from the other room. "That you?"

"No," Jason said, giving up on stealth. His dad. He guessed it was okay the super let him in, then. Even if he could hear the slight slur to his father's words and didn't like it. Not one bit. "Hi, dad."

Wills Todd frowned at him. He was a tall man. Big. Some people who knew them both said Jason would look a lot like him when he grew up, which Jason hated the idea of. Gone to seed just a little, but that didn't mean he couldn't hurt Jason. "Where's Cathy?"

Jason scowled. Couldn't help it. "Mom's dead. For months now. Don't tell me you're too drunk to remember already." He knew it was a mistake the second the words left his mouth, but it was his mom they were talking about. His dad didn't get to forget about her, not when Jason couldn't. His dad didn't *get* to come home and drink himself stupid when Jason was the one who'd cleaned up the shit and vomit after his mates got her body out.

Sure enough, anger clouded over his father's features. "Don't you mouth off to me, boy."

With the look on his face, Jason didn't dare push his luck any further. Instead, he edged around his father, intending to grab a change of clothes. He'd been wearing Richard's hand-me-downs for the past two weeks. They were better quality than anything he'd ever owned, but god they were ugly. He wanted his own stuff back. His father glared at him, but let him pass.

After some consideration Jason decided he might as well keep the ugly green shirt on under his own. It was still cold outside. "I'm getting food," he told his father as he left.

"Don't come back without some for me as well," his father said. The last Jason saw as he left was his father picking up a beer.

So he was back out on the streets. Again. Jason found himself strangely dissatisfied with the situation. Not as if he'd ever *liked* it or anything, being poor sucked. But it had been fine. Stealing things and pawning things (like he was doing right now) was just something he did. He had to. Now all he could think was that it wasn't fair.

And his dad. Jason kicked an empty bottle over, startling a nearby homeless man. How come his dad was sitting back at the apartment getting drunk while Jason looked after him? Alfred wasn't even related to Bruce but looked after him. Shit, it wasn't hard to see that Alfred loved Bruce. Same for Bruce and Richard. But Jason's dad, his actual dad, he sure didn't act like he cared.

Jason cared though. Even if his dad was shit, he couldn't let him go hungry.

It took hours cruising around the subway to get enough cash for dinner, and he only managed it because some stupid tourist got careless with their wallet. Jason might be fine with a few spoonfuls of peanut butter, but his dad would want something else. He spent most of the cash on a packet of jerky from the local convenience store, the only one in a five-block radius Jason had never lifted from.

When he got back, the whiskey smell was stronger than ever. "Cathy," Jason heard his dad slur. "Fucking finally."

“I told you, mom’s dead,” Jason snapped. He’d already told his dad once. Drunk or not he should at least fucking remember.

“Stupid bitch,” Willis said, and Jason saw red. “She should be here. She out whoring? Stupid *bitch*. Slut owes me. Should be here.”

That was it. Feeling oddly cold inside, Jason walked over to his father, made a fist, and punched him right in the nose.

It wasn’t like the hasty blow he’d landed on Richard. He’d done it just the way Bruce taught him, whole shoulder behind the blow. Willis Todd looked stunned. Jason said, “You don’t talk about mom like that.”

Then Willis hit back.

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The trail stopped at an exterior window. Richard - Dick - frowned at it before climbing out the hard way, the better to inspect the easy route down the guttering Jason had probably taken. A few fresh scratches in the paint told him he was on the right track.

Dick followed the trail across the lawn. Still no concern for stealth in those heavy footprints. He hadn’t even stopped to take the things he stole. If Dick had been the one running, he would have stopped.

Unless he thought that staying might get him killed.

Was Jason really that scared of him? The thought turned in Dick’s stomach. He didn’t want to scare people like Jason, or scare people for no reason.

The trail ended not far outside the wall separating manor grounds from the street. Jason had run on the roads, leaving no trace for Dick to follow. Defeated, he headed back inside.

“Did you find him, Master Richard?” Alfred asked, hurrying over upon spotting him.

“No,” Dick said. “He left. And my name is Dick.”

“I see, Master...Dick. That is bad news. In that case we should join Master Bruce and assist him with tracking young Jason through electronic means.”

When they got to the cave, Bruce already had feeds from dozens of cameras up on two of the biggest screens. “I saw,” he said. “Jason’s almost half an hour ahead of us. Alfred, if you’d get a car, I’ll send you information to the GPS and with any luck we’ll be able to catch up with him.”

“Very good, sir. I will take my own vehicle. Hopefully Master Jason will find that somewhat less imposing than any of yours.”

“He tried to steal the tires from the Batmobile,” Bruce said. “I don’t think ‘imposing’ scares him. But I take your point.”

Once Alfred was gone, Dick asked, “Am I allowed to help?”

“I’m relying on you,” Bruce said. “I need you to keep track of Jason as best you can while I configure the facial recognition search.”

Dick got to it. He knew how to track through the cameras too. He was good at it. He was good at recognising faces, the way people moved, even in the middle of crowds.

That, he soon realised, wasn’t the problem. There just weren’t enough cameras to get a good sense of Jason’s path. Dick found him at the corner of the Clements’ property, only to lose him between there and the Updikes’ house next door. He found him only once more, on a surveillance camera as he crossed a sporting field at Gotham Academy. The timestamp suggested that he’d cut through a private property or two to get there. That, or he ran much faster than Dick thought he could.

“I lost him,” Dick had to report at last.

He didn’t stay to hear Bruce blame him for his failure. Dick had gone and lost Bruce’s other student. After Dick had driven him out in the first place, when he didn’t even have to. Instead he fled upwards, as fast he could. He remembered his mother scolding him for fighting with other children. She’d called him *Richard* when she was really mad still, and *Dick* after she heard his side of the story, and when he’d apologised...

Jason had given that back to him. Another memory of his family. A clear one. His *name*. And instead of apologising and trying to make some sort of amends, Dick had chased Jason off like he was still Talon and they were in the Court.

“Richard.” Bruce’s voice echoed up towards Dick’s perch. “Richard. Dick. I’m not angry. Will you come down?”

Hard to believe. But Dick owed Jason and Dick owed Bruce, so - so he did. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“We’ve all lost trails before,” Bruce said. “It happens. Then we pick up the trail again. The computer’s running a search right now. Alfred’s still looking as well. I’ll be going out to look for him in person soon. We *will* find him.”

“It’s my fault,” Dick said.

Bruce sighed. “It’s not *all* your fault. You know you could have done better. I am not throwing you out, this does not change how - how I feel about you, and your mistakes can be addressed.”

Dick bowed his head. Mistakes. Mistakes only meant one thing. Even here, even though Bruce was kind, when Dick made a mistake he had to do *something*. “Whatever punishment -“

“None. I’m not the Court, Dick. I can see you know what you did wrong, and I can see you’re trying to fix it. Punishment would be redundant. Now, will you take over the computers while I suit up?”

Without a word, Dick returned to the computers. He could do this. He *had* to do this. Dick started plotting out as many potential routes from the manor to address Bruce’s notes said Jason lived as he could, but there were so *many*. What if Jason got lost? What if he got hurt? He had to be cold out there. He’d said it was cold in his building, and he hadn’t taken any warm clothes or blankets with him.

Some time later, Alfred said, “Master Ri- Master Dick. I must insist you rest.”

“I haven’t found Jason,” he protested.

“And as I have told Master Bruce many times, adequate rest will help you recharge for a more efficient search in a few hours time. You’ve been in front of those screens all night, and a good part of the morning as well. Time to sleep. Four hours, at least.” Alfred gently took Dick by the elbow and led him away. As they left the cave, Dick heard the *thunk* of the bolt sliding home. Alfred was locking him out.

“Has Bruce found him?” Dick asked.

“Regrettably not,” Alfred said. “Two-Face and the Penguin had something of a fracas around midnight, and Master Bruce was detained for some time trying to sort it out. He’s sleeping now too, and much needed. We must trust that Master Jason can look after himself for a day or two.”

Alfred left Dick in his room. He didn’t lock Dick in - neither he nor Bruce ever did - but that door too was shut with a firmness that said *stay here*.

He wasn’t going to do that.

Dick couldn’t afford to get caught here. First he changed into the less colourful clothing both Alfred and Bruce said was better to wear in public. Then he started filling his backpack. He wasn’t going to steal from Bruce or Alfred, but he could give Jason another blanket and his cereal, at least. Even if he had to drop it off at Jason’s apartment. While he was there he could ask around if anyone had seen Jason, like Bruce hadn’t had the chance to the night before.

When he was done packing, Dick slipped out the window. Bruce had never let him go out to be a detective before, and Alfred wanted him to stay here, but this was important.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks everyone again! Super keen on getting the last chapter written and shared with you all, when you've been so fantastic and patient despite erratic updates.

Taking Care

Chapter Summary

Several understandings are reached.

Chapter Notes

Mind the tags.

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

It was strange, being in Gotham by himself again. The Court usually only let him out for him to learn the streets and participate in practical training; in the years since he'd been with Bruce, he'd only gone into the city with other people. Now he was alone. It was a little overwhelming.

And exhilarating.

There were so many people around. Dick could talk to any of them. He didn't have to stay on the high ground. He couldn't talk to all of them, though, so he had to choose carefully. Who would know most about Jason?

He looked around for people who seemed at home in the area, making eye contact with others, any sign of familiarity. If they knew the neighbourhood, they might know Jason.

Dick asked a young woman with two very small children - she knew Jason by sight when Dick described him, but hadn't seen him recently. Same with the scowling drunk man who wandered out of the building every so often, and a woman who kept leaning out her ground-floor window to smoke.

"He's a good kid," the last woman said. "Looks after his ma real well."

"I know," Dick said. He smiled. It usually made people friendlier. It worked here too, since the woman's face softened slightly. "I just want to find him. That's all."

Dick eventually went back to the high ground. A lot of the routes between Wayne Manor and Jason's apartment involved the subway. He wanted to keep an eye on the busiest exits for a while. Lots of people were going in and out. A lot of people weren't paying. He saw lots of kids about Jason's size, and a lots of people with dark hair like Jason's, but nobody with the same combination of size, swagger, and readiness to run.

It was nearly dark again when Dick decided to go back to Jason's building. That would be the place he went back to, surely. Jason had been gone for almost a full day - he had to be back in the area by now. Dick refused to consider that he might not be. On his way he asked a few more people if they'd seen Jason.

"Yeah, just a few minutes ago," the man behind the counter at the convenience store said. "Came

in here to buy food.”

“Did you see which way he went?”

The man shrugged. “Back to his apartment, I’d guess.”

Dick thanked him and hurried out. He knew where Jason’s apartment was. From this side of the building, it’d be easier just to climb up to the window, since he didn’t know the floor layouts. He started up the fire escape - Jason’s building was on the fourth floor, three windows along. Not hard to get to at all. He climbed up, wondering how he’d say everything that he wanted to say. He hadn’t talked much to Jason, but when he had, it hadn’t gone like he expected.

“Don’t you dare speak to me like that, boy!”

The words exploded through the window Dick was heading towards, slurred by alcohol. A grown man’s voice.

Jason’s father hurt him.

Thoughts of not alarming Jason vanished as Dick sprinted the last few feet to the window.

“You shut your fucking face now!”

He could hear the sound of blows, and muffled shouts of pain. Dick grabbed the edge of the fire escape above him and swung in, breaking the window and entering the apartment in a single movement.

“And don’t you ever lay a hand - the fuck?”

Dick stood in the doorway of a tiny bedroom, looking on a tiny living area. A big dark-haired man who looked a lot like Jason was standing in front of him. Not important. Yet. Dick looked past him to see Jason’s curled-up form. He’d used what Bruce had taught him. One arm was hanging wrong, clearly broken, and there was a hitch to his breathing. Rib trauma. Not something Dick had inflicted on him, probably from Jason’s father stomping on him. There was blood on Jason’s arms, but he didn’t seem to be bleeding - transfer, perhaps?

“Who the fuck are you?” the big man demanded. His knuckles were split and bloody. He’d hit Jason so hard he’d cut himself.

“You hurt Jason,” Dick said.

The man, it had to be Jason’s father, opened his mouth. Dick didn’t have any interest in what he had to say. He grabbed the man’s arm and *twisted*. He felt it crack with a spike of satisfaction and heard his shout. That was fair. Next he struck at the ribs. Jason’s father swung at him with his good arm to try and fend him off, a clumsy blow Dick only had to step back to avoid. He got two sharp blows to the ribs in, one on each side. The bones didn’t break, because unlike this man, Dick knew how to avoid it.

How many times had this man hurt Jason? Too many, Dick decided. That stopped today. He caught the second heavy swing at his face and broke the man’s other arm as well. Now he wouldn’t be able to hit Jason. That was good.

But it wasn’t enough.

Dick hit the man across the face. The solid backhand *crunched*. He felt a tooth give under his fist.

Jason's father stood hunched over, blood pouring down his face, eyes burning with rage and pain. With two broken arms, he couldn't hurt Jason right now, but Dick had no illusions that he knew that he *shouldn't* hurt Jason. So he hit him again. Forehand this time. Jason's father fell. Unable to break his fall due to his broken arms, he shouted with pain. Dick stepped forward and ground a foot into his back.

In the corner, Jason wheezed, "Don't kill him." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jason roll over with a wince and struggle to his feet. "Get off him."

"He hurt you," Dick said.

"Don't care." Jason dragged himself to his feet. "I don't want you to kill him." The effort was too much, and Jason fell over too. He made a horrible stifled moan when he landed.

Dick had come out here for Jason. He ended it with a quick punch to the forehead to knock Jason's father out, then stepped over the heap and went to Jason himself. "I don't kill anymore," he said, kneeling down to check on Jason. His rib injuries worried Dick most; he could splint a broken arm but if there was anything bleeding inside... "Stay still," he ordered, as Jason tried to evade Dick's hands checking his ribcage. "You need a doctor."

He needed a phone. Leaving Jason for a second, he flipped the father over and searched his pockets. No phone. Dick hadn't brought his own, since Bruce could track it. He had no intention of being dragged back to the manor before he found Jason.

"I can go myself," Jason insisted.

"No, you're hurt," Dick said. And cold. He could see Jason shaking. He took the blanket out of his backpack and, with only a bit of awkwardness, tucked it around Jason's shoulders. "I'll be back."

He dragged Jason's father to the tiny bedroom and jammed a chair firmly under the doorknob, over Jason's protests. Then he went downstairs and borrowed the building manager's phone to call for an ambulance. They warned him that the response time would be a little slow because of the building he was in, but they promised to come anyway. That was a relief, since while Dick was confident he could carry Jason to a doctor if he needed to, he knew it would hurt him a lot.

When he got back, Jason had staggered to his feet again. Dick *tsked* and wrapped the blanket back around him. "The ambulance is on its way," he said.

"Why are you *doing* this, you crazy fuck?" Jason snapped, mouth tight with pain and eyes shadowed. "Not like you didn't beat me up yesterday either."

Dick hesitated. "I came to say sorry," he said. "I didn't understand."

"Didn't understand what? That not all of us live in a big fancy mansion with all the food they want, whenever they want?"

"That Bruce wasn't going to make me leave so he could teach you," Dick said. "I'm sorry."

Jason stared.

"It's what the Court would do," Dick explained, unaccountably nervous under Jason's disbelieving gaze. "If you weren't good enough, they'd bring someone else in. That was your last chance to prove...I should have known, Bruce isn't like the Court. But he explained and I was wrong, so I came to apologise."

Jason stared a bit more, then drooped. “Whatever,” he muttered. Dick wished the ambulance would hurry up. Jason was very pale. His arm had to hurt. “Thanks for not killing my dad, I guess.”

“I don’t kill anymore,” Dick repeated. “I brought you some cereal.”

He took that out of the bag too. Jason said, “You’re crazy,” again, but he didn’t reject it.

Satisfied, Dick settled back to wait.

The night passed in a blur of pain, doctors, and at last drugs. His dad only got one hit in on his face before Jason curled up and blocked like he’d been taught, but it was enough to rattle him. His right arm was in a bad way, he knew. Muddled as he was, he realised at some point that they were taking him in for surgery. Something about pins.

His arm wasn’t as messed up as his dad’s arms were, not after what Richard had done, he thought with a vicious satisfaction.

Jason woke up the next morning and promptly vomited.

“Anaesthesia,” a deep, familiar voice said. Gentle hands helped him sit up and lean forward, guiding him to at least sick up in a bucket. “Not an uncommon reaction. There we go. You’ll be fine.”

When Bruce passed him a plastic cup of water and Jason had washed out his mouth with half and drunk the rest, he croaked out, “what are you doing here?”

“Checking on you,” Bruce said. “We were all worried when you ran off.”

“No, how did you get into the room?” Jason glared, even though he felt shitty and his heart wasn’t in it. He was pretty sure the cops or social services or whoever weren’t supposed to let random people wander into kids’ rooms. In theory, anyway.

Bruce, though, Bruce just arched an eyebrow at him, and Jason remembered, *oh yeah, Batman*. “We were worried,” Bruce repeated. “Dick was...distracted. I think he might still be patrolling your window ledge, actually.”

There was...just so much wrong with that statement. Jason picked one. “Dick?”

“Richard. Apparently it’s what everyone at his circus used to call him before the Court abducted him.”

“Right.” His arm hurt and his head still felt packed with cotton from the drugs; he had to be dreaming this up. Like anyone would ever come visit him like this. Bruce wasn’t his dad. What reason did he have to be here? Still, he found himself asking, “What happened to my dad?”

“In custody. And a pair of casts. The police have laid charges against him for child abuse, and his intoxication breached his parole.”

Jason thought about it. *You don’t talk about mom like that*. He’d started that fight, technically. “Good,” he said. He meant it, even though saying it made his stomach lurch. Then, “Wait, does

that mean Richard's in trouble?"

"No. The police accept his story that he stepped in to defend you. They did ask him if he could stop at the first broken arm next time, but he's in the clear."

Showed what the police knew. If Jason thought Richard had been scary with a butter knife, the icy lack of expression on his face as he'd casually evaded Willis' blows had been terrifying. So were his own methodical, brutal attacks. It was all too easy to imagine Richard with a knife, getting ready to kill his dad, just like Bruce said he'd been trained to do. Willis was *lucky* Richard had stopped at breaking his arms. It was a relief that he wasn't in trouble, though. "So what happens to me now? Social Services? A foster home?"

The words were bitter. He'd spent so long trying to avoid foster care. He didn't want to get shoved into it. Everyone knew how bad foster care was. Couldn't trust strangers, not as far as you could throw them. Even if your parents were shitty, they were at least your *parents*.

"You can't avoid foster care," Bruce agreed. "That said, *I* am a registered foster parent. If you want to live with me, that is...an option. Only if you want to, though."

Jason glared through the haze of wearing-off medication. "Why? What's in it for you?"

"Nothing except the assurance you'll be safe and well cared for. I'm not offering because it benefits me."

"That doesn't make sense," Jason said.

"If it helps, you can think of it as something I'm doing for Dick, until I can convince you otherwise. He's decided that you're one of his, it seems."

Bruce had said that Richard was lurking around outside. "That makes even less sense!"

"Even if I told you that until yesterday he didn't remember his name?"

Richard - Dick. "I just called him a dick and hit him in the nose," Jason said.

"Yes, he's very grateful."

Jason spluttered. These people couldn't be serious, or even real. While he spluttered, a nurse poked her head in. "Oh, Mr Todd, you're awake!"

Jason had never been called Mr Todd in his life, not even by Alfred.

"And - Mr Wayne? What are you doing here?"

Where Bruce had raised an eyebrow at him, he turned a blinding, vapid smile on the nurse. "I was looking for Dick. He's got away from me again, but he's been so worried I thought here was a good place to check. Then, well..." He gestured at the plastic tub Jason had vomited into. "I thought he could use the company."

"Right. That's very kind of you, but you're not on the list of visitors for this young man, so I'm afraid I have to ask you to leave." The words came out a bit nervous, and the nurse didn't even know she was talking to incognito Batman.

Bruce didn't bat an eyelid, nor ease up on the smile. "That's all right. I'll keep looking for Dick, then, but I might sign myself in as a proper visitor later, if that's all right with Jason."

Still deeply confused and actually kind of creeped out by the act, Jason nodded.

Once he was gone, the nurse started checking up on him. “You’ve got a very strange story, Mr Todd,” she said.

“You have no idea,” Jason told her.

—

Nobody came to visit him for the rest of the day, not even the social worker assigned to his case. Jason got the impression the doctor wasn’t hurrying him on.

“Rest,” she’d ordered him, since she’d caught him crawling out of bed to check the windows for damn ex-circus ex-assassins. “You do not get to mess up that arm again, young man.” She’d been backed up by a nurse with the most terrifying *don’t fuck with me* expression Jason had ever seen on a medical professional, so he decided not to give them shit.

Besides, he’d already found not one but two boxes of cereal stashed in the little cabinet by his bed. Richard had been by already, and Jason sure didn’t think he’d signed in.

He was bored already. Not much to read around here except magazines, and Jason had never really watched much tv. He’d much rather be up and about now that he only felt a bit groggy from the painkillers they were giving him. Not only did he have a broken arm, he had a fractured rib and bruises all over - not just on his arms, but on his legs as well, from curling up and trying to block. They were pretty dark bruises. Once the painkiller wore off they’d probably hurt a lot.

They did at least feed him. That part was fine.

Bored and nervous, Jason killed time reading abandoned newspapers, until at last the lights went off around them. Jason forced himself to keep reading. He wasn’t tired, not after all the late nights. And if something was going to happen, it was going to happen now that it was dark outside.

He didn’t have long to wait. A nurse stepped past on his rounds, and within a minute, Richard was standing next to him. Of course he hadn’t even heard the window opening. That would be silly. To Jason’s surprise, he was wearing clothes that didn’t hurt the eyes - plain dark jeans and a deep green jacket. He supposed it was better for sneaking around in. And for blending into a crowd. “Jason,” Richard said. “How are you?”

“I’ve got a broken arm,” Jason said, playing it as cool as he possibly could. Damn ninjas, sneaking up on people. “Bruce said you’ve been lurking around outside.”

“I wanted to make sure you were all right,” Richard said unrepentantly.

“And you couldn’t do it by coming in through the door.” There was something else he wanted to know. “How’re you explaining all this? What you were doing in my mom’s apartment, that sort of thing.”

“I told them I got lost and you agreed to walk me out of the area once you’d dropped off your shopping.”

Okay, Jason could go with that, when the social workers started to ask *him* questions. Things that

weren't 'and how many times has your dad hit you, Jason?' He shifted awkwardly, cast suddenly feeling three times bulkier. That reminded him. "Look, thanks for stopping my dad. He was getting carried away." He could've done a lot worse if Richard hadn't been there. Probably would have. It wasn't a nice thing to think.

"It was my fault you ran in the first place." He surveyed Jason's little room, then looked down at him with surprisingly earnest eyes. When Dick wasn't doing the no-expression thing, he was oddly guileless. All-or-nothing emotion. "Are you going to come back to the Manor?"

Jason hesitated. Okay, he'd been a bit scared of Dick before, even if he'd said he wasn't. He really wasn't now. But he also wasn't stupid. Dick was dangerous and could hurt him over a misunderstanding. "You going to attack me with a butter knife again?"

Dick shook his head. "I'm sorry for that too."

He believed it. Stupid of him, but he believed it. The bit about Richard being sorry, and about him not going postal again. He shouldn't. How many times had he believed his mom when she said that this time, she was going to get clean? People lied about shit like that. All the goddamned time.

He *wanted* to believe it. He *wanted* to go back. Pathetic and stupid. He didn't *need* - he *shouldn't* - he just wanted. Having the chance couldn't be right. "Why?" he asked. "Why the fuck do you, any of you, want *me*."

"You're brave," Dick said, immediately, matter-of-fact. "And you helped. I remember what my mother used to call me now. I *owe* you. Bruce and Alfred want to help you too, but that's what they do. They helped me escape the Court even though I killed people. For months I expected...but they never asked me to kill anyone for them. They let me be a person again." His expression turned pensive. "I don't think it has anything to do with *deserving*. I think they're just kind."

Dick would know, Jason realised. Maybe...

Either way it had to be better than normal foster care. And...his dad was never going to be his dad again. Not really. He knew that. "All right," he said. "I'll come back to the manor."

The smile he got was broad and blinding, even in hospital half-light, every bit as delighted as the one Dick had turned on his lady friends. "I brought you something else," he said, slinging his backpack off his shoulders. "From Alfred this time. He said you weren't done reading these."

He unpacked a trio of books. The next three in the to-read pile he'd made at the Manor. Jason felt a lump in his throat again. "Thanks," he said, more awkwardly than he might have liked.

"Bruce will come by again tomorrow. Alfred too." Dick was just about to say something else, when his head snapped to the door.

Footsteps, Jason realised, a few seconds later - but that time was all it took for Richard to get out the window, totally unseen. Freaking *ninjas*! That was the next thing Jason asked Bruce to teach him, for sure. "Next time use the door, dickhead," Jason said quietly, knowing that even if he couldn't see Richard he was still there and still listening.

An equally quiet laugh floated through the tiny gap Richard had left open. "Tomorrow, little Robin."

Thanks everyone SO MUCH for your response to this fic. Writing this has been a blast, and knowing that other people liked it too really helped. Such a blast, in fact, that, well...

COMING SOON

He could do it. He'd defied Bruce before. Over important things even, like finding Jason. That had worked out fine. Bruce had even agreed with him that it had worked out for the best, and the only thing he'd been a little angry about was Dick leaving his phone behind. So Dick could tell him that he and his friends wanted to form their own superhero team. He could.

End Notes

Unlike my other stories, I'm writing this one as I go. While it's multi-chapter, it's not going to be a very long story, and it'll be updated irregularly. Thanks for reading, bookmarking, commenting, and/or leaving kudos!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!