Familiar Ghosts

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Series: Part 4 of Cor Et Cerebrum

Familiar Ghosts

by audreycritter

Summary

Two years after the end of Developmental Milestones, Gotham is starting to look like a brighter city. But old villains and old problems come back to haunt them and the Wayne family starts to wonder if anything can really change for good.

This story returns to the rotating perspective style of Foreign Object.

Notes

Thanks to Dawn for beta work!
The Catalyst

The smell of antiseptic and filtered, pumped air fills the medical unit and overpowers the undercurrent of damp stone drifting from the tunnels. There’s a slight tang of metal and sweat, from the computers and platform grating and the sanitized but beaten practice mats.

It’s been three years since Kiran Devabhaktuni first stepped off the lift and into the Cave but the place is so familiar to him it feels like it’s been longer. He knows just how to stand in the medical unit to keep the T-Rex out of his line of vision while waiting for an injured Batman to return. The drawers are labeled in his own handwriting and an inventory list he maintains is tucked inside a plain black binder leaning against the pale green wall that backs the cabinets.

Three years of sutures and minor surgeries and setting bones and Batman still does things like report tersely over a text message that he’s incoming with an injury and doesn’t bother to bloody specify where or how severe. Dev waits, spinning just slightly on a stool and avoiding the dinosaur and trying to solve a brain teaser puzzle he’s watched half the Waynes solve in front of him in minutes.

When the Batmobile slides to a careful, automatic stop on the car turntable, it is clear that the vehicle was moving on autopilot. Dev tosses the wooden puzzle aside. Chatter on the comm spills from the computer speakers, various reactions and questions and planning, but the cave microphones are muted and so Dev ignores the noise while he jogs over to the car.

Autopilot is a surprise and not a pleasant one.

The door lifts and slides back with a mechanical hiss and Batman is in the car alone, sitting stiffly in the driver’s seat. His jaw is pale and tight beneath the cowl, and he reaches one hand up and fumbles at the edge of the mask without much success.

“Is it off?” Dev asks, bending over near the low car. There’s a single, tense nod in reply and nothing else. He reaches out and pushes the cowl back, and Bruce’s fumbling hand switches tasks and peels off the secondary domino mask instead.

Beads of sweat stand out on Bruce’s forehead, his hair slick and matted with it, and Dev tosses the detached cowl into the passenger seat.

“Where?” Dev asks without specifying further. Based on the pallor and set of Bruce’s face, there’s little use in yelling or swearing at him at the moment.

“Knee,” Bruce grunts in response, the word forced out between clenched teeth.

Dev ducks his head to look in the interior but the car is dark and the black suit fades into visual obscurity. There’s a faint scent of blood.

Bruce is trying, already, to sit up and haul himself out of the car and Dev stops trying to assess the knee in the poor lighting. He offers an arm to Bruce, who ignores it until he tries to stand.

One faltering step wrenches a sharp cry out of Bruce and when Dev catches him, loops Bruce’s arm over his shoulders, Bruce doesn’t push him away.

For a moment, neither of them move forward: Bruce is catching his breath and Dev waits, letting him.
“The kids aren’t about,” Dev says gently.

Bruce nods stiffly and leans more heavily on him, shuddering slightly.

“Want the chair?” Dev offers and Bruce shakes his head.

“I can make it,” Bruce says, his whole body tense beside Dev.

For the briefest of moments Dev considers refusing to move forward and insisting on a wheelchair, but decides against it and takes the first step.

The first meters go slowly, Bruce barely putting any weight on his right knee, and then driven by momentum and perhaps a desire to just get it over with, the last couple steps are rushed and they stop right in front of the medical unit gurney. The wheels are locked to keep it from sliding across the floor, and Bruce braces himself with his arms and then lifts himself to sit on the edge.

“Dev,” he groans, the syllable breaking, and Dev is still right there next to him and helps steady Bruce’s leg and move it into place so the other man can lie back heavily on the gurney with an exhausted exhalation.

“What happened?” Dev asks, turning to gather some basic diagnostic and response tools on the counter. He glances briefly at the trail of blood left from the car to the medical unit and risks waiting to clean it.

“Bullet,” Bruce says. “Went through the armor.”

“Still in?” Dev asks, pulling a light over and flicking it on. He focuses it on the injured knee and can now see where the skin and suit are mangled together.

“Yes,” Bruce grunts.

“I’ll give you a local and cut the suit off,” Dev says, the specialized scissors already at hand on a tray. He grabs a bottle of anesthetic and snaps the safety cap off of a syringe. Bruce doesn’t move or speak again, but growls low under his breath when the needle goes in near the edge of the wound. It’s fortunately bleeding slowly and he can afford to give it a minute to set in.

Once the minute has passed, he works quickly, cutting away stiff armor plating at the narrow joints where they meet, and then the thin layer of sweat-wicking material beneath that. While he cuts, the only sounds are the snipping of the scissors and Bruce’s carefully measured shallow breathing.

“How bad is it?” Bruce asks without lifting his head, when Dev pulls the last of the material away from his leg.

“I’ll scan it, mate, but from just a visual, not as bad as it probably felt,” Dev says, studying the sliver of exposed bone and shredded epidermis. There are grains of yellowish coagulating powder on the wound, which explains the slowed bleeding. He already has gloves on and he uses a small tool to tap the damaged area.

“How can you feel that?” he asks, looking at Bruce’s face to judge his reaction.

There’s no shift in Bruce’s facial expression and he gives a slight shake of his head.

Dev rinses the exposed area with distilled water and continues a visual check, listening to Bruce’s breathing to note if it changes.
There’s a glint of dull grey and copper when he prods the torn flesh and pinkish white beneath.

“Bullet’s right there,” he says. “I’m not absolutely sure but the fracture looks transverse, simple. Armor must’ve slowed it.”

Bruce exhales slowly and begins to sit up some, wincing as he does so. Dev knows the local isn’t stopping any residual pain traveling up or down the leg and he reaches out with a bloodied glove before he even thinks, stopping Bruce with a hand to his chest. It leaves a streak of dark crimson across the bat symbol.

“Wayne,” Dev says. “I’ve not said it was nothing. Lie back.”

“I can–” Bruce says.

“You’ll bloody not,” Dev retorts sharply. “Don’t move. I said I think it’s simple but if I’m mistaken, you don’t want to tear the cartilage behind to bits.”

Bruce meets his eyes, stubborn determination clashing against fierce concern. His scowl fades and he lowers himself back onto the gurney.

“Is that local fading?” Dev asks, glancing at the clock.

“No,” Bruce says.

“How much?” Dev asks.

“Only a little,” Bruce says.

“I’ll scan it and then give you another dose. If it’s what I think, this shouldn’t take long. You’ll have to keep it immobile for a bit.”

“How long is a bit?” Bruce asks, suspicious and weary at once.

“No walking on it, not even with crutches, for at least twenty-four hours,” Dev says. “Then a brace and minimal weight for four weeks at the least.”

Bruce makes a noise of irritation that Dev ignores as he preps the mobile scanner, a handy machine on wheels and lighter than it ought to be for what it does.

Ten minutes later, with a stronger local in Bruce’s leg, Dev drops a slightly flattened bullet into a metal dish. It hits with a clang and rolls sideways.

“Save that,” Bruce says automatically.

“I’m not a sodding idiot,” Dev answers with a slight smile.

There’s the ghost of a smile that crosses Bruce’s lips in return and then vanishes.

The fracture is close enough that it doesn’t need artificial bracing screwed or tacked into the bone, which is a relief. There a small dented chip where the bullet hit and settled. Dev cleans and sutures the knee closed, and applies an antiseptic around the stitches.

A low hiss escapes Bruce and Dev looks up quickly to see the other man’s face drawn with pain and his brow furrowed over tightly closed eyes.

“Two minutes,” Bruce says through his teeth. “That was all. It wasn’t worth more anesthetic.”


There’s a supply of braces in the closet and he stands to hunt for an adjustable but stiff knee one, that will keep the joint from moving.

“Painkillers are not optional,” Dev says, hunting the shelves for the one he wants.

“I’m fine,” Bruce says even though he sounds far from it.

“And you’ll be better with painkillers,” Dev says easily, sliding the boxed brace off the shelf.

“Half,” Bruce counters.

“You are a bloody glutton for punishment,” Dev says, setting the angle of the brace while he talks. “Half after the first dosage. And after a day, I’ll leave it entirely up to you and your self-punishing nature.”

“Fine,” Bruce agrees.

Dev can’t tell if he sounds more bitter or grateful, but lets it drop as a thing settled while he straps the brace around the knee. Bruce swallows pills without arguing further.

“Do I have permission to sit up and take the rest of this damn suit off?” Bruce asks, his tone flat and rather unlike an actual inquiry and more like a warning. Dev thinks there’s more pain in his bearing than ire and he offers an arm to help pull Bruce into a sitting position.

With some help from Dev, Bruce is changed into a tee and loose shorts and already half-asleep on the gurney by the time the thrum of a motorcycle engine fills one of the tunnels, approaching rapidly.

He blinks, fighting the painkillers, and Dev puts a hand on his shoulder to keep him from sitting again.

“Red Robin,” Dev says to Bruce, just as Tim hops off the bike and tears his mask off.

“How bad?” he asks. “Alfred said he didn’t come down because he didn’t want to interrupt anything.”

“Shite,” Dev mutters, reaching for the comm button that connects to the Manor. “Alfie, he’s in one piece. Come down if you like.”

Tim crosses the space from parking bay to medical unit with quick steps, looking worried. He’s not changed much in the past few years Dev’s known him, having finally hit the age where changes are minimal and subtle. But worry accentuates the ways his face has grown harder, sharper, and lost the remnants of childish softening.

“We couldn’t find the shooter,” Tim says, reaching the gurney and looking down at Bruce while he speaks. “We were all looking. He just vanished.”

“Scan the bullet,” Bruce answers, gesturing vaguely.

“What?” Tim asks, ignoring this order and not moving toward the counter where the bullet sits. “Like, how bad is it?”
He looks up to Dev when Bruce’s eyes drift closed again. The anxious expression hasn’t smoothed out in the least, though there’s some frustration in it, too.

“Not too bad,” Dev says. “Just a few weeks off.”

When Tim looks down at Bruce again with a pensive frown, Dev claps a hand on his shoulder.

“I’ve not lied, Timothy. It’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Tim says, shrugging. “Otherwise you’d look more pissed.”

“That’s how I knew he wasn’t lying,” Bruce says with his eyes still closed.

“Bloody hell,” Dev grumbles. “You could both just trust what I sodding say.”

“You’re swearing, too,” Tim comments.

Dev mutters at the hazy half-smile on Bruce’s face and doesn’t interject when Bruce says something to Tim again about a diagnostic scan.

On the far side of the cave, the elevator door opens and Alfred steps off and heads straight for the medical unit with a thin-lipped expression. The atmosphere in the Cave shifts incrementally back to a weighty gravity and Dev feels a spike of guilt.

“I’m sorry, Alfie,” Dev says. “I ought to have let you know sooner.”

“It’s quite alright,” Alfred says, studying the brace with a frown. “I’m well accustomed by now to the habits of hyper-focused men.”

“I’m gonna scan this,” Tim says, taking up the tray with the bullet.

“Shall we go upstairs?” Alfred asks.

“We ought to,” Dev says.

“I’m fine here,” Bruce mumbles sleepily. “Until I can walk.”

“You’re not staying down here for a full day, mate,” Dev says with a slight laugh. “I’ll get a chair, Alfie. He’ll need an excuse for work.”

Alfred talks quietly to Bruce, words low enough that Dev finds it easy to avoid eavesdropping as he sets the bars of the collapsible wheelchair.

“I don’t need that,” Bruce stops talking to Alfred to say to Dev.

“Mate, I’m not carrying you,” Dev retorts. “And you aren’t hopping all the way upstairs. You’ll live.”

“Bruce,” Tim calls from the computer, a strange hesitation in his voice.

All three heads in the medical unit look up and over toward him in sync. There’s a set of diagnostic scans of the bullet on the massive monitor, of varying detail.

There are small splinters of light metal compressed and bent in the crushed tip, tiny bits that could have torn through tissue and bone and exploded out the other side leaving massive bleeding and damage in their wake. But they are there, instead, minuscule spikes of hell pressed together and
undeployed.

"Are those flechettes?" Alfred asks. There’s horror in his tone and the way his eyes widen. “In a handgun round?"

“Yes,” Bruce says after a moment, dropping his head back.

“They didn’t…the bullet casing never split,” Tim says, taking the small metal out of the scanner. He’s wearing gloves pilfered from the medical unit. “It looks like it’s the wrong metal. Lead, maybe an alloy mixed with copper. Too soft."

“Damn it,” Bruce mutters, sounding now thoroughly exhausted.

Dev doesn’t need an explanation.

Dev grew up in a military household listening to bitter rants about the effectiveness of ammo and supplies and the damage of weapons treaty violations. He has worked in hospitals where the worst case scenarios were a possibility, where he had to study journals and images to be prepared.

“That could have taken your knee out,” he says, feeling suddenly sick despite his usually strong stomach.

“We need to find the gun,” Bruce says, propping himself up on his elbows. “And whoever used it.”

“Yes,” Tim says, his gaze stony when he turns in the chair. Any trace of shock is gone. “We do. Not you.”

There’s a long silence when neither Dev nor Alfred interrupt the glaring match between Bruce and Tim.

“Bed,” Alfred says, breaking their concentration when it becomes clear neither will relent. “Bed and it can wait, at the very least, until you’ve slept. For you as well, Master Timothy. It’s nearly four in the morning as it is. Finish up whatever work you have.”

“Dick’s heading back to his apartment,” Tim says sullenly, spinning the chair away. “Give me thirty minutes.”

When Dev looks at Bruce’s face, the hard edge of frustration in him softens and becomes something more like empathy.

“Alfie,” he says, with a yawn. “Would you terribly mind going ahead and making some tea?”

If Alfred is wounded by what he must recognize as a gentle refusal of help, he doesn’t show it. He might be grateful to be given some other direction.

“Thank you,” Bruce says quietly, when Alfred has gone up, and Tim is deeply distracted by typing.

“Stay in your sodding bed today, if you want to thank me,” Dev says, helping him into the wheelchair.

“I will,” Bruce says tiredly. “Whatever you gave me is knocking me out.”

Dev doesn’t say anything else until they’re on the elevator, pausing only to catch Tim’s attention and make a game controller motion with his hands. The young man nods and goes back to the computer screen. Even if they only play for ten minutes, it will at least maybe convince Tim to trek upstairs soon after all.
“Three weeks,” Dev says when the elevator door closes, his hands still on the wheelchair handles. “If another of those bastards show up anywhere, in a Wayne or in the ER. I’ve said four and I won’t stand by while you ruin that knee, but if you give it a real rest, I won’t stop you after three weeks. Don’t let on to Alfie that I’ve said it.”

“Deal.” Bruce sits a little straighter, his voice hard. “You’ll watch out for them at the hospital?”

“I will, but if they work any better on anyone else,” Dev says as they exit the elevator, “nobody will be able to miss them.”
I'm going to attempt a MWF updating schedule this time because I know I can't commit to daily. If it becomes too much, I'll switch to twice a week! The next couple chapters are long but expect some variance in length after that! Thank you for all the support and excitement!

The grand chandelier hangs over the polished concrete floor of the Gotham Museum of Ancient Art’s main hall. The foyer has been swathed in cloth banners and sparkling lights for the annual fundraiser banquet.

The room is decorated to the hilt tonight, the wooden tables draped with thick white linens to cover the scars of masking tape and pencil lines after years of functions. There are buffet tables with catered foods and a functioning bar along with two tables of water, coffee, and sparkling pink punch.

Bruce Wayne’s slick leather-soled shoes are quiet on the marble-stained concrete and he’s grateful that despite his earlier mild complaints lodged in favor of his newer shoes with the Darby lacing, Alfred insisted on these bespoke Oxfords from James Street. Every time the conversations in the room are interrupted by the echoing squeak of rubber sole from one of the other men’s shoes, he reminds himself to thank Alfred somehow later.

He surveys the room in-between social chatter with different micro-groups of Gotham’s wealthy and Gotham’s educated. There are those who provide the funds while modeling themselves as critics or connoisseurs, and then there are the curators and producers and restoration specialists who need the funds. And tonight, they’re all present and mingling and trying to impress or please each other in the demure dance of their ecosystem.

This is not a Wayne Manor event and the family isn’t in complete attendance, but a mix of them were roped into it or volunteered. It is only now, after deftly handling and then extracting himself from a conversation with Mrs. DeWitt about her cultivated appreciation and defense of post-Nero Roman murals, that he realizes none of them are still in the room.

Knowing Gotham, there’s a spike of mild worry in his gut not quite like intuition but more like force of habit. After looking over the room twice, he turns one more time to check the drink and bar tables. His knee, only three weeks after being fractured, protests angrily.

Then his worry falls away and leaves him with just a throbbing knee. Cass is by one of the tables in a shimmering purple gown, accepting another wine glass of strawberry punch. If Cass is at ease, then the others are fine. Bruce might have a good head for threats, like she does, but she’s always been more in-tune with her siblings’ emotional states. She meets his gaze across the room and gives him a sudden smile and subtly points to the bar.

A scotch sounds incredible, and his knee wants it more than the rest of him, but he shakes his head. She gives the slightest of shrugs and a tiny frown and turns toward the steps where there’s a tucked-away collection of tables and chairs. Maybe the others are there.
Staying out of the cowl and giving his knee time to heal has been easier than he’d first anticipated. Some of it certainly has to do with the temperamental nature of joint recovery and how much it just flat out hurt, but it is helped by the fact that the trail has gone completely cold.

Three weeks and no sign of a gunman, no weapon, not a single similar bullet anywhere in Gotham as far as they could tell: not within their circle or at the hospital or, after notifying Leslie Thompkins, even at the Clinic. It is this total absence that made Bruce decide not to go out of his way to inform Jim Gordon, not until they’re sure.

A decade ago, external detective work would not have been satisfying to him. Even now, there’s a slight itch or suspicion of unturned stones and he is determined to go over everything, again, when he resumes his role. But it is not as pressing as it once was, and Tim at nineteen is well-trained and highly capable. They are all trained and capable, but it is Tim that Bruce trusts to think and search like he would.

Plus, he has not been cut off from sifting and evaluating information from the Cave— just the streets. Dev relented and agreed to three weeks if the matter was urgent, but aside from the fact that Bruce could just ignore him, piss him off, and live with the doctor’s fury for a few weeks, in the absence of further developments another week to give his aching knee time to mend is sounding pretty good.

He didn’t last this long by being a total idiot, merely a driven one.

Bruce knows he ought to pick someone and strike up another conversation before someone chooses for him, but he’s strongly reconsidering that scotch depending on what the bar is stocked with and if the event planner cut corners in quality. Or, if he’s still here, it would be a good time to swallow bile and deal with David Vespucci.

He hasn’t decided on bar or Vespucci when there are footsteps at his side and he turns to see Jason next to him; Tim passes them, with a grin, and inserts himself seamlessly into a group of younger executives dragged along on behalf of their companies or employers. They look incredibly bored and Bruce wonders how many of them Tim knew at one of his schools– at least two of them are men he recognizes as sons of Gotham’s more moneyed families.

“Where have you been?” Bruce asks Jason, feigning interest more mild than he feels.

“Just checking out the Irish Illumination Exhibit,” Jason says, jamming his hands in the pockets of his tuxedo slacks. “You?”

“Jay,” Bruce says, turning to look the younger man full in the face, “please tell me the exhibit that’s closed to the public for another week isn’t the only reason you came tonight.”

He knows even as he says it that it’s exactly why Jason came, and probably why Cass agreed. Now, their earlier absence makes perfect, irritating sense.

Jason smirks.

“Technically, it’s not breaking in if we’re already here on invite. The plush rope isn’t exactly state of the art security.”

The scotch is sounding more enticing by the minute, even if it is middling quality.

“What if a security guard had caught you?” Bruce asks with a sigh. He’s not even bothering to repress them at this point. “I could have just paid someone to take you through early.”
“Fricking codfish,” Jason exclaims under his breath. “Catch me? Or Tim? It’s an insult to Cass to even say her name. Who do you think we learned from? And two, that’s fucking boring.”

“You aren’t going to sweet talk your way out of this,” Bruce says, now resisting a smile.

“Out of what?” Jason asks, looking around in an exaggerated fashion. He tugs a little at his bow tie but doesn’t loosen it. “Am I in trouble? Did someone see me, lost and looking for the bathroom?”

“That’s an awful excuse,” Bruce says, reaching out and straightening the crooked bow tie. Jason immediately tugs it into a skewed angle again and Bruce gives up.

“I’m getting a drink and then I’m leaving.” Jason says, clapping Bruce’s shoulder harder than he probably needs to. “If Tim asks where I am, tell him I’m not a loser.”

“Are you taking Cass?” Bruce asks, deciding again to forego the scotch. His knee has ebbed in pain and he wants to keep a completely clear head.

“If she wants,” Jason agrees cheerfully. “I’d take you, too, but you have some weird compulsion to make people think you enjoy these things.”

“How were they?” Bruce asks, right before Jason steps away. He lets the jab about his own social life go without comment. He’s surprised that even with a distraction Jason lasted as long as he did. His early teenage intolerance for these sorts of parties has not improved with absence or time; if anything, he is more outspoken of his disdain for them now, after realizing he no longer has the childish excuse to hide in a corner and eat an endless supply of finger foods.

“What? The people?” Jason asks with a bewildered expression. “Oh, the illuminations. They were gorgeous as hell. Tim got pictures.”

“Tim…took pictures,” Bruce says slowly, now definitely restraining himself in his desire to pinch the bridge of his nose and squeeze his eyes shut, “of off-limits centuries-old delicate manuscripts.”

“I like how you trust him with evidence but not with art,” Jason says in a low voice, a sarcastic lilt to his tone.

Bruce has to glance at his face to see if he’s genuinely upset or just giving him a hard time. He guesses the latter and hopes he’s not too far off.

“I’ll see you Thursday,” Bruce settles on saying.

“Or before.” Jason shrugs, spinning to walk backwards as he heads for the drink table. “I might be around.” He twists around on one shoe and it squeaks loudly; Bruce looks down at them when Jason lifts his foot and scowls. The younger man flashes a bold smile at the few people who look over.

“Are those my new shoes?” Bruce asks, eyes narrowing.

“Al told me to wear ‘em,” Jason says. “He confiscated my boots while I was in the shower. They’re disgustingly comfortable. I might keep ‘em.”

“They’re my new shoes,” Bruce repeats, feeling a little stupid. Now he isn’t sure of Alfred’s motives and can’t sort out the timeline in his head, unsure when exactly Jason showered at the manor.

“You’ve got more,” Jason says, waving when he turns his back to him. He goes straight for the bar
and Bruce watches him order; Jason’s face is in profile and he can read his lips when the younger man says, “Whiskey, neat.”

Bruce decides he might as well find David Vespucci and he scans the room again. When he turns from watching Jason, he turns almost right into Selina Kyle, who is at his elbow looking incredibly disinterested in the crowd she’s studying.

“Who are we looking for?” she asks. She’s wearing a dark navy dress with maroon lipstick and heels so high and sharp that her head is only two or three inches shy of being completely even with his.

“How long have you been here?” he asks in reply, and she tips her head toward his while pretending to look for someone in particular.

“Is it actually important or are you just trying to seem busy?” She slips her arm through his. She finally looks up at him.

“David Vespucci. A little of both,” he answers. “What are you doing here?”

“Can’t a girl just miss crashing parties? Does it have to be more?”

“It usually is,” Bruce counters, relaxing a little and not pulling away. “But people will talk.”

“Let ‘em talk,” Selina says off-handedly. “I’ve been out of the papers for too long. He’s over there flirting with that waitress.”

“I don’t think they’re called waitresses if they’re just catering,” Bruce says, following the direction of her gaze. “Does she look underage to you?”

“When are they ever not underage?” Selina demands, a little bitterly. “What kind of important business do you have to talk with David Vespucci about?”

“The kind where Wayne Enterprises is negating his banking contract after the last underage girl,” Bruce says, letting his bitterness match hers. “But I can’t do it here. He’s been ignoring my calls and I need to talk him into a meeting.”

Selina looks a little appeased.

“He should be in jail,” she says a second later.

“He will be,” Bruce says. “Give me another week. I’ve been…preoccupied.”

“Oh, right,” she says, with a combination of an amused twist to her mouth and a slight crease of worry in her shaped eyebrows. “The knee. You’re crutch and cast free tonight.”

“It’s better,” he says, deciding not to mention the brace under the slacks. “Almost.”

It was pointless to try. She gently bumps the side of brace like she knew exactly where it would be. He is practiced at controlling his reactions but it’s so sudden and she knows him too well– the slight grimace gives him away.

“Almost, huh,” she says, pursing her lips. “What excuse did you give your day crowd this time?”

“Golf,” he says dryly, watching Vespucci now to make sure he doesn’t lose him.

“Golf?” Selina laughs. “When was the last time you golfed?”
“Three weeks ago at The Pines,” he says with a straight face. “I sprained my knee on my tee-off swing on the third hole. I’m considering suing them for wet grass. This isn’t your usual color.”

“I thought I’d change it up,” she says, her eyes twinkling. “Besides, the upstairs walls are blue. Navy’s better for the shadows here.”

“Selina,” Bruce says, frowning.

“Egyptian statuettes going to auction. It’s a crime for any of those to fall into the hands of someone who doesn’t appreciate them.”

“Selina,” Bruce says again, even more sternly.

She pats his cheek.

“Calm down, Bruce, I’m just teasing. I’m not here to case anything.”

He relaxes slightly again, her arm still through his. He’s a little happy that her presence has kept small talk from others at bay, even temporarily.

“They’re already at my apartment,” Selina says.

Bruce stiffens all over and his knee, recently jostled, aches.

“I can’t tell if you’re serious,” he says flatly.

“You’ll have to swing by my place sometime and find out. Vespucci is leaving.”

“Selina,” he says, when she slips her arm out from his and takes a step away. She stops and looks back with a maddening grin. “Be careful. We haven’t seen any since, but…”

He trails off, knowing she’ll understand. It’s been over a month since he’s seen her, unusually long for them recently, but he’d sent relevant warnings the day after Dev pulled the bullet off his bone. He thinks sometimes she avoids the Manor more when he’s injured but he’s not completely certain. They aren’t exactly the type to sit down and talk about motivations or relationship issues.

“When am I not careful?” she asks, with a raised eyebrow.

“More careful,” he clarifies.

“Breakfast?” she asks. “Your place? How many of your menagerie should I expect if I’m there at ten?”

His phone, muted for all but emergency channels, buzzes and beeps in his pocket and he doesn’t wait for her to go before he pulls it out.

It’s from Barbara, over their secure line, and still in code. If anyone happened to oversee it, he’s always planned to brush it off as a weird wrong number.

People will believe what they want to hear.

And he’s Bruce Wayne, who sprained his knee golfing on the coast because they’d watered the trimmed turf.

He translates automatically, effortlessly.
Selina’s at his side again, looking at the screen, undeterred and without apology. He almost expects a defusing joke, but her expression is serious.

“Arkham,” he says quietly. “Crane, and your friend Ivy.”

“I don’t know if we’re still friends,” Selina says. He can’t decipher how she feels about it from her tone. “It’s been a while.”

His phone buzzes again, this time with a text from Alfred.

Near the front of the room, where there were brief speeches earlier, a harried man is picking up a microphone with a security guard at his side.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I regret to inform you that our evening has drawn to a close. There has been an incident and it is museum policy to close on such occasions. Please have a wonderful night and be safe in your own homes.”

He leaves without more explanation and murmurs sweep the crowd.

Tim pulls back from the group he’s with and questions Bruce without words, by the way he holds his head and the line of his mouth.

“You aren’t going out, are you?” Selina asks, as he nods to Tim. He looks for Cass but she’s already gone.

“It’s been three weeks,” he says in reply to Selina, scanning the crowd one last time.

“Want me to come?” she offers. “I might be able to talk some sense into Pam, anyway. She was almost up for parole, too.”

Selina now sounds genuinely, if only slightly, upset about this—more angry than distraught.

Bruce finds who he was looking for in the milling, buzzing crowd collecting their spring jackets and hunting for valet tickets.

“Make sure that girl doesn’t go home with Vespucci,” Bruce says. He hopes Selina reads this as genuine help and not merely deflection— it’s something he doesn’t want to deal with at the moment and will feel awful about later if he lets it go.

“Don’t come whining if you find out later I stabbed him with my stiletto,” Selina says. She kisses Bruce’s cheek and leaves, already slipping her heels off and into her hand.

He can worry about it later.

He texts Alfred.

Prep suit.

Tim joins him as he’s walking out of the building, down the shallow steps and past the throng arguing and complaining and jostling for the two valets’ attentions. There’s an edge of panic in the air and he knows that most of them are looking at news on their phones, already making calls. He’s not sure how detailed the public reports are, but they don’t need much, because it’s Gotham.

It’s been almost two years since the Joker and Zsasz were killed and after the first few weeks of aftermath, things calmed down more than they had in years. It’s been a while since an Arkham breakout and nightwork has been a lot of the older crime cases Bruce had when he first started.
Two years of declining violent crime, though it is far from even another city’s good average. It’s been getting better.

But it’s Gotham and even with two years of gathering peace, any Gothamite knows how bad it can get and how fast.

Bruce leaves his car in the valet lot and he and Tim slip off into the shadows of street lamps, lost in the chaos. There’s a safe house with a spare car three blocks away and within twenty minutes, they’re out of Gotham and approaching the Cave.

The entire, silent ride, Tim does not ask what Bruce’s plans are and Bruce does not waste time or breath explaining. Barbara is continuing to send them updates and by the time they reach the cave, Damian will be suited and ready.

Tonight, everyone goes out.
The glow of a 4K triple monitor spread lights the desk Barbara Gordon sits at, her wheelchair locked in place. The surface of the desk holds three mugs, two of them old, all of them with sayings or logos. They have been gifts, like most of her collection.

Her current mug is one Jason got her, with a print of a stamped library card on it. It is half-full of black coffee, still steaming, resting on a makeshift coaster made from a folded take-out menu. Next to the keyboard are an open paper file, two cellphones, a Nightwing action figure from a fast food place and a matching Batgirl one. The Batgirl’s hair has been colored red with a sharpie, by Cass, a few months ago when Babs was distracted.

One of the cell phones vibrates, sliding sideways on the smooth paper and toward the coffee. She taps the side of her headset to mute her end and cuts the sound from the monitors before picking up the phone; one screen is split and showing Gotham Channel 6 and the text transcription of the live police scanner feed.

It’s not a call after all, just three texts in rapid succession.

\textit{R u ok? Where r u}

\textit{Don’t answer 2}

\textit{Stay n B safe Love u}

They’re all from her dad.

It’s been years since she helped him switch to an unlimited text plan but she still hasn’t fully convinced him he won’t be charged by the letter. Or, maybe he believes it but old habits are hard to break.

She pauses in the six different logistics tasks she’s juggling to sip her coffee and tap out a quick reply.

\textit{I’m fine, Dad. You know me. Hiding away in my little hole. You be safe. I love you.}

There is some part of him that must know by now of her involvement in vigilantism, even if he’s still in mild denial of her role as Batgirl before the Joker happened. He’s too smart to think she’s the sort of person that could settle for anything mundane, especially since she never bothers to make up detailed enough lies to talk about work specifics.

And she’s never been the sort of person that could be involved and removed enough to never care; even before the damn chair, she wasn’t a nine-to-five don’t-take-it-home kind of girl.

But they don’t discuss it, her job. It might be to spare them the fights or give him denial of culpability in those seasons when police and Bat relationships are strained. As far as she knows, other than that one meeting to confirm his knowledge at Wayne Manor in the week after Bruce’s surgery, he has never spoken of Batman to Bruce or Bruce to Batman.

She gets that ability to compartmentalize from him.

She’s not quite as good at it, but the roots are there.
Babs switches the sound back on and gives reports on pockets of suspicious activity. It’s been a while since they’ve had a night so busy, and it’s both gut-wrenching and a welcome challenge to juggle so many locations.

Batman is out with Robin, keeping the tall fifteen year old nearby. They’re in Robbinsville, checking a string of squatter warehouses. Nightwing is patrolling Old Gotham, alternating among giving updates, joking, and shamelessly flirting with her over the comm. She pretends she’s annoyed but it warms her heart and worries her all at once– he’s edgy, if he’s this talkative.

Black Bat is scoping the Port Adams docks alone, quiet, her suit tracker a little blip on the map. Once in awhile, she’ll say one word or two to confirm her status. Batgirl is ostensibly keeping an eye on the botanical gardens from a rooftop– it is her begrudging compromise between emergency response and studying for senior finals.

Red Robin is patrolling the central business district, blocks of glassy modern buildings with floors of twenty-four hour financial operations mixed with empty offices. He’s due to check the major parks next and meet up with Black Bat to sweep Amusement Mile.

And Red Hood is keeping an eye on the upper west side outskirts, with the blocks of buildings scheduled for demolition to clear the way for more housing and a new high school. He’s silent tonight except for responses to questions, which slightly worries Babs; it’s the first time he’s been out in months, and the last time was the first in just as many.

“Remind me again,” Nightwing says, after a thirty second silence, “why I moved back to Gotham?”

“Because you love us,” Babs says, sipping her coffee. She might as well drink it now while it’s hot, before it gets too crazy. “And because the ‘haven doesn’t have a Carmelita’s.”

“Hmm,” Nightwing answers. “I do love you, but you’re right. It’s mostly the pizza.”

“Don’t forget the salads.”

“Nobody gets salad from Carmelita’s. If I wanted salad, I’d go to Figleaf. Or maybe Yamato for the ginger dressing,” Nightwing shoots back.

Babs grins. Even when he’s worried in a way that worries her, he can usually cheer her up. Her grip on the coffee mug isn’t as tight but her focus is still sharp. Maybe she can avoid a tension headache after all.

“Did I bring this with me?” Nightwing asks before she can argue about the salad. “You promised me Gotham was calm these days. I’ve been here a week and it already feels like old times.”

“It’s not you,” Babs assures him. “And I get salad from Carmelita’s.”

“That’s because I’ve been in ‘haven and not close enough to save you from yourself, but that changes, starting now.”

“Keep the comm clear,” Batman says sternly.

But she’s not a child, stricken by a reproach. She’s watching the map and the feeds and they need this, lightening the mood before shit hits the fan and they’re all too on edge. The younger ones might not be saying much but she knows it’s helping them, too.

“Help me settle this first,” she says to Batman, ignoring his small noise of frustration. “Salads at
Carmelita’s: good or bad?”

“They’re acceptable.”

“Acceptable’ means not cutting it, O,” Nightwing interprets.

“No, it means he’s not going to side with either of us. He’s playing the middle.”

“Comms clear for vital information.” Batman says, a faint smile in his tone, and Babs doesn’t push anymore. Nightwing, too, grows quiet and several minutes pass.

The comm clicks twice in rapid succession, faint clicks letting her know two people have joined the channel.

“The girl is safe,” Selina Kyle’s voice says smugly. “And Vespucci needs stitches. Not many.”

There’s an exasperated grunt from a deep voice and Babs can’t tell if it was Batman or Robin.

“I might have slipped into him on the stairs,” she says. “There was a crowd. My heels were sharper than I thought.”

“Thank you,” Batman, and it is clearly him, says in a begrudging voice.

The line clicks and Babs guesses Selina’s dropped off; she didn’t even know she had a comm and she’s a little frustrated not knowing if Bruce gave it to her or if she lifted it off one of them. It’s a conversation to save for another time.

“I am in the Cave,” Alfred says calmly and stiffly in the silence that follows. “And I will be here for the remainder of the night.”

There’s another faint click and Babs checks the active channels; Batman’s GPS is still online but his line is muted. Five follow it in rapid succession, until only Nightwing has live audio along with her and Alfred.

“Big trouble in little China?” Babs asks, a little sympathetically. It’s hard not to feel bad for the older man when she knows he worries, just like her dad.

“I anticipate a complicated recovery,” Alfred says, and she wonders how much he and Bruce argued over the broken knee before Bruce put the cowl back on tonight. She doesn’t blame Bruce but sometimes it’s better to not openly pick sides.

“Is the Doctor available tonight?” she asks instead, guessing at Alfred’s reason for camping out in the Cave instead of working out his frustration upstairs.

“He is busy,” Alfred says simply. Babs doesn’t swear in response but she wants to– of all the nights for the hospital to have him. Hopefully, they won’t need him after all and not much will fall to Alfred in his place.

Despite their rocky start, Babs has been able to reluctantly admit that it’s been nice having someone available to handle injuries on a night by night basis.

Leslie has been slowly, hesitantly, welcomed back into the fringes of the fold. After thinking it was impossible for it to ever change, Bruce had surprised Babs by initiating contact again. Even with gradual steps, things were not what they once were and Babs can accept that enough has changed around it that they might never be.
But honestly, things rarely ever stay the same.

And Dr. Thompkins, for all her willingness or emotional investment, runs a clinic that is in high-demand and does so almost single-handedly. The Gotham citizens who would otherwise turn to self-treatment to avoid $900 ambulance rides and $3000 hospital bills turn to her, and she is there. The vigilante network, even before, rarely utilized her services except for the most extreme circumstances.

Babs’ isn’t sure she had fully realized before how much was falling to Alfred or the kids themselves, with the increased number of involved parties. Once upon a time, Leslie had managed emergency care for one or two masked figures while the rudimentary things had been handled by Alfred.

But now, there are over half a dozen of them and the clinic hasn’t gotten any less busy in recent years. Not all the things Leslie handles are the result of crime; even peaceful cities have the desperate sick.

So, the fact that Dev mostly manages his hospital schedule to accommodate the Bat nightlife and will go anywhere to offer treatment is a thing Babs didn’t even know they needed until they had it. It’s most obvious on nights like these, when they are likely to need support and it will have to go to Alfred again like in previous years.

The police scanner transcript, provided real time by a speech-to-text code she wrote herself to cut down on audio distraction, is flooding the screen with constant updates. She watches it, knowing there are certain codes the computer will alert her to, but wanting to see what’s going on anyway.

It’s full of dead end squad car updates, nothing about Arkham escapees. But they are busy with the Gotham panic that always goes hand-in-hand with Arkham news. Rioters near the Section 8 housing block are being subdued, most of them with Upper East End or university addresses—assholes who hopped off the tube and took advantage of assumed distraction.

Looters hit the Boesch Street boutiques and tech stores sometime around midnight, with dozens of calls about broken glass and fire and gunshots pouring in over the dispatcher lines. There’s a rapid uptick in backup requests for bar fights, domestic violence situations, and suicide threats citywide less than an hour later.

As the clock ticks by with no official updates on the news, no rumors of sighting or capture, Babs coordinates patrols through the Tricorner, Coventry, and the Hill. She talks Red Hood out of sweeping the Narrows alone, sends Batgirl and Black Bat to check the power plant, and urges an increasingly snippy Robin to find food.

She watches the city swell with dread, a frenzy of violence and self-harm that clogs police response and slows patrol times as the Bats stop to intervene in the worst of it. Rather than hours with no obvious threat dulling the hysteria, it seems to egg it on as every district waits for the storm to break.

On the comms, Alfred is quiet but online. Every mask is growing more tense by the moment and even Nightwing’s joking has tapered off after he forces Robin to sit and eat with him on a rooftop.

Babs is going to be furious if Scarecrow and Poison Ivy escaped somewhere just to sleep and this whole night has been a waste.

“I’ve got a visual on something,” Red Robin says suddenly, around three in the morning. “I’m northeast of Grant Park, looking over Miller. I can move in but it’ll take me some time.”
“I’m south of Sprang,” Batman replies. “Black Bat’s with me. We’ll check.”

Two minutes before they arrive, the dispatcher lines explode with frantic calls.

The whole bayside of Murphy Avenue lights up on her screen and the computer alarm chirps wildly, as the scanner codes trickling through the police radios warn of toxin.

“It’s definitely something,” Babs confirms. “Gas mask time.”

She finds a video feed from a security camera facing a Murphy Avenue apartment building; there are remnants of a small festival of some kind. Banners flutter from street lamps and partially deflated balloons hang limply from strings in the artificial light.

One brick facade is covered with creeping, vibrant green vines with white thorns so large Babs can make them out on screen. A low smoke pools around the cars and parking meters along the street.

For one long moment, this section of Murphy Avenue is empty and then it bursts into activity. People pour out of double doors, a few risk the jumps from first and second story windows, and in the background there’s a flash of strange orange light.

Batman and Black Bat’s locations on the map have them right on top of the chaos; within minutes a rapid response team with the GCPD is there pumping air through giant filter trucks, handing out flimsy masks, spraying herbicide on the vines. They shrivel and hiss and curl back as if more alive than normal plants while the shrieking of sirens announces the arrival of a fleet of ambulances. Barricades are erected from sawhorses and traffic cones.

“There’s no sign of Ivy,” Batman says pensively after ten minutes.

Babs has been watching over the security camera as the vines brown and blacken, the tips of the thorns curved. She worries now about the same thing. It smells fishy. If Ivy was anywhere nearby still, if there wasn’t something else going on, the destruction of one of her mutated plants would lure her into the open.

“I don’t—” Babs says and she doesn’t get to finish.

In a counterclockwise pattern, from Roberts Lane in Old Gotham to Zhonghe Street in Chinatown to Cameron Street west of the Glade to the Percival Hall Dorms at Gotham U to 12th Street in Burnley to the Columbus Heights in the Bowery, the map and scanner ignite in disaster.

For seventy-three seconds the entire dispatcher network goes down, rerouted to a very confused and overwhelmed West Gotham County station more used to handling animal control and vehicular incident calls.

Air traffic control halts all flight patterns to make room for the flurry of heli-ambulance trips from ground or the overwhelmed Gotham hospitals to auxiliary facilities outside of the city limits.

“Oracle,” Batman snaps. He and Black Bat are moving in different directions. “Where is the hub?”

“There isn’t one,” she says, scanning the map frantically. “It’s everywhere. Overlay in your cowl.”

“How the fuck did we miss this?” Red Hood demands, speaking for the first time in hours. “We were everywhere!”

“This wasn’t spontaneous,” Red Robin says. “I’ve got a building fire on North 11th. Looks like someone dumped gasoline and tried to torch the plants. I’m checking for civvies.”
“Do not go in,” Batman says sternly.

In response, Red Robin’s comm line disconnects.

“Damn it,” Babs mutters. “Nightwing, I need a backup for Red Robin in Burnley.”

“Negative,” Batman says. “There are six places not including Murphy, which is under control. That’s one to each, excluding Robin.”

“I can take a location on my own,” Robin says fiercely. “He can check on Red.”

It’s nice to hear some brotherly defense in there instead of just injured pride, but Babs doesn’t have time to be grateful for it now. And she agrees with Batman on this one.

“No. You stay with Nightwing and take Percival Dorms. There’s a marked population density there."

“B,” Nightwing says.

“Red Robin is fine. If he thinks he can handle it, he’s fine,” Batman says. “I have Roberts and Black has Zhonghe. Where is everyone else?”

“Hood, you have Cameron and Batgirl, take Columbus Heights,” Oracle takes over directing. “Stay on comm for updates. Your priority is securing Scarecrow or Ivy if possible. Only stop for civilian aid in life or death situations. Keep your filter masks on.”

Babs pulls up security video channels for as many locations as she can. They vary in quality. They’ll have to do. The comm lines fall into silence except for location checks as areas are scoped; everyone stops more than once to intervene in a situation the police haven’t shown up for yet.

Red Robin’s comm clicks back on and he reports he is okay, while he coughs, and says the building is emptied.

They work until dawn to contain toxin and clean areas, when the light of morning brings slight relief and nothing else starts up.

There is no sign of Ivy or Scarecrow beyond the destruction they leave in their wake.
The Trauma

Chapter Notes

Gore warning ahead, of the ER variety.

An ordinary night shift on-call for the ER and post-op patients turned into disaster. It has been a long time since Dev has dealt with trauma that condensed and endless. And even now, as he lies down on the too-short couch in his office, they are still getting new patients.

On-call overnight became a day shift when there was a list of head and spine trauma waiting to be evaluated and dealt with, until a five hour surgery that pushed him to the twenty-eight hour mark of working left him dead on his feet. He’d scrubbed out of surgery and Tony Fabriello had taken one look at him and said, “Go sleep” as a man with a gunshot wound to the side of his face was wheeled in from an ambulance.

Dev checks his mobile one more time, relieved that he’s missed nothing from the Waynes– it was a constant, small worry in the back of his mind between every surgery and evaluation. There are a few messages, assuring him that things are well or “managed” as Alfie puts it. This could mean any number of things but Dev doesn’t have the energy right now to determine what.

It is eleven at night and he’s been in his office for all of ten minutes and he is almost asleep when his mobile, only just plugged in and put down, buzzes.

He groans and reaches for it without looking, his hand fumbling on the table. He answers without sitting up, hoping it’ll be something he can hang up on or resolve within seconds.

“Hullo,” he says.

“Oh, good, you’re up,” Barbara Gordon says. “I hope you got some sleep after last night. If you’re free, we’d appreciate some help.”

Dev sits up and rubs his eyes, searching for wherever he left his keys.

“How serious?” he asks, spotting them on the desk. He tugs his trainers on one-handed and props the slim mobile against his shoulder to tie them. They’re sticky and he pulls his fingers back, to see a smear of muddied crimson on his hand. He sighs and ties them anyway and stands to look for skin disinfectant in a drawer.

“We’ve got a few compromised, all toxin,” Babs says. “Non-fatal, non-puncture. But too much for A on his own.”

“Crane and Isley?” Dev asks, scrubbing at the old blood on his skin. He tosses the wipe in the bin beneath the desk and picks up his keys.

“Apprehended,” Babs says, sounding relieved. “What’s your ETA?”

“Thirty-five minutes if traffic’s not bad,” Dev says, already in the hall and locking his office behind him. “I’m leaving from hospital.”
“Avoid 11th,” Babs says. “13th through 17th look clear up to the bridge.”

“Right, thanks,” Dev says. “I’m on my way.”

Out at his SUV, he snags a granola bar from the pack in his boot, and eats it out of pure practical willpower and not an actual sense of hunger. He ought to be hungry but isn’t, and he knows it’ll catch up to him later.

He’s not even out of the hospital car park when it occurs to him Babs didn’t specify who it was that was injured. It makes him push the speed limit more than he’s usually comfortable with, the map Jason made him memorize of speed traps around the city his only small consolation.

And then he forces himself to drop back down when he suddenly comes upon a squad car parked on the sidewalk, responding to some disturbance in a building, and realizes that all the normal patrols have probably been disrupted by the chaos.

Even though he was almost asleep, he feels wide awake now and suspects some of it is adrenaline and some of it self-deception. It is approaching midnight when he takes the bridge out of the city proper and into the expansive suburban lots where Wayne Manor resides.

The drive is one he knows by muscle memory now and out here, where the speed limits are less enforced, he takes the curves fast enough to make his younger self shudder. When he skids to a stop, it is at the lower paved lot outside the garage and the side door rather than at the front. He lets himself in without knocking and hurries toward the Cave.

When Dev steps off the lift, the cave is eerily quiet despite the fact that there are several figures near the medbay.

“Hullo,” he calls, and Alfie and Jason both turn. The butler looks mildly distraught and Jason looks furious; the younger man is still in his Red Hood suit aside from his helmet and mask, which are nowhere in sight.

Wayne is at the computer desk, typing, and does not look up or stop when Dev walks past him toward the medical unit. Timothy and Damian are sitting upright on separate gurneys, Damian with his arms crossed tightly on his chest.

“Kiran,” Alfie says by way of greeting. “Timothy’s been given an antidote that appears to be working as much as one might expect.”

“Plant or fear?” Dev asks, picking up an instrument to check the boy’s eyes. Jason mutters something to Damian and leaves the brightly lit unit to join Wayne near the computer.

“Fear,” Alfie says.

Timothy coughs, hard, before Dev leans over to examine him. He’s still not spoken to Dev, which is unusual. Dev glances at Alfie who now has his lips in a thin, displeased line.

“Smoke inhalation, from last night.” Alfie is decidedly upset now, in a frustrated manner. “There was not complete agreement upon his return to the field tonight.”

“We caught Scarecrow,” Damian says angrily. His voice breaks in the middle of the second word but nobody teases him. His general defensive embarrassment is so prickly and sharp it takes most of the fun out of giving him a hard time, even on a good day. Tonight, not even Jason yells anything across the cave.
“I would have fucking caught Scarecrow,” Jason snaps instead. “You were told to keep your ass at home, you idiot.”

Damian’s spine goes even more straight, if it’s possible. Alfie steps in front of him and Jason mutters and kicks something that doesn’t give.

“He is concerned,” Alfie says in a sternly consoling tone. Damian doesn’t relax but he doesn’t jump down or storm off or yell anything in reply.

“Timothy, mate,” Dev says, now giving his attention over. He doubts he’d be so easily distracted if he wasn’t tired and resolves to make himself focus more. Timothy’s gaze is wary when he looks.

“Dev,” he whispers, his eyes filling with sudden tears when the light shines on his pupils. They shrink but only slightly. He coughs. “Dev, I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“What’s the problem?” Dev asks. If he can keep him talking it might tide him through the worst of the fear toxin that the antidote doesn’t touch.

Timothy looks down at his knees while Dev checks his pulse; it’s slightly elevated but not much.

“He’s gonna fire me,” Timothy whispers, his hands trembling.

“He won’t,” Damian says sharply and dismissively. Dev gives him a fierce scowl.

“What’s keeping you here, Dames?” he asks.

“My arm was caught in a door and even though I’m fine, I was informed I had to stay and be checked over,” Damian says, staring straight ahead and not looking over at Dev.

Dev puts a hand on Timothy’s shoulder.

Timothy shakes his head and tightens his jaw, then coughs. His breathing shortens and turns raspy and Dev leans over to catch his eye.

“Mate,” Dev says gently. “It’s the sodding toxin talking. Breathe. Come on, then.”

Timothy nods but another cough cuts off a deeper breath and he’s sucking in quick bursts of air again, on the verge of full blown panic.

“My fault,” he gets out.

There’s commotion over near the computer and raising voices. Jason and Wayne are starting to argue, the words punctuated by Jason’s gesturing arms and Wayne slamming a hand on the desk.

Timothy jumps and then curls in on himself when there’s another shout, his knuckles white on the edge of the gurney.

“Alfie,” Dev says, “would you mind intervening?”

“I’ll take Jason upstairs,” Alfie agrees, “unless you require assistance.”

“I’ll ring up if I do,” Dev promises.

“Very well,” Alfie says.

“Tim,” Dev says, putting one hand on each of the young man’s shoulders. “Counts of three, mate.
Breathe in.”

Within another minute, after some quiet intervention, Jason goes with Alfie to the lift and Wayne is silent at the desk. He doesn’t resume typing.

Under Dev’s hands, Timothy’s shoulders are hunched but his breathing has evened out.

“What’s this then about being fired?” Dev asks, letting go of the shoulders to prep some things on the counter should he need them. Timothy visibly flinches at the question and shakes his head again, fiercely.

“Can I lie down?” he asks in a small voice and Dev grabs a blanket from the closet.

“Of course you bloody can,” Dev says, shaking the blanket out and handing it to him. Timothy curls up into a tight ball on the gurney and exhales a shuddering breath. Dev listens for a moment, his back to Timothy so obvious attention doesn’t drive the paranoia up like it has sometimes in the past.

When he’s satisfied that they’ve avoided a full-blown panic attack, he moves on to Damian.

Damian’s arms are still crossed tightly and he is glaring straight ahead, though he shifts his glower to Dev when Dev steps into his line of sight.

Dev has a brief flash of memory, brought on no doubt by his own exhaustion, of Damian much smaller sitting on this same gurney and scowling at him. Dev sat on a stool then and Damian was short enough that his head wasn’t much above Dev’s, even with the height of the gurney. But even with all the ways Damian has grown in the past three years, the irate bunching of his eyebrows and set jaw are much the same.

And Dev remembers then, recognizing them as what they were.

Fear.

“Your arm, then, Dames?” Dev asks anyway, and Damian rolls up the sleeve of the tee shirt he was wearing under the suit.

Considering that it’s Damian, Dev is prepared for anything from purplish bruising and abrasions to deep lacerations he’d bound himself in the field. In the past few years, Dev’s exasperatedly lectured him more than once on what constitutes an emergency or urgent matter because nearly everything falls short of either in Damian’s estimation.

But the arm is just faintly reddened, a thin line where the edge of a door must have caught it through the suit, and nothing else. Dev’s turns the arm over to look at it, feeling gently for any fractures, and checking Damian’s pulse at the same time.

It’s frantically racing.

“Dames,” Dev says quietly, while his head is bent near Damian’s and he’s still pretending to examine the arm which seems absolutely fine.

“Dr. Devabhaktuni,” the boy replies stiffly.

“How long were you exposed to fear toxin?”

Over on the other gurney, even with Dev’s voice kept low to attempt to avoid anyone overhearing,
Timothy whimpers and coughs again.

“Approximately as long as Drake was exposed,” Damian says, his challenging glare fading a bit. “I did not want to impede anyone else’s treatment for something I could handle.”

“Bloody hell, Damian!” Dev exclaims, standing and grabbing an antidote out of the cabinet. He has the measured out dosage in Damian’s arm before the boy can string together a complete protest. “It’s not a test of strength.”

For the first time since Dev entered the cave, Damian drops his head. His chin nearly touches his chest and the nod is almost imperceptible. Dev is standing in front of him, watching him, when Damian tips forward and the top of his head just barely rests on Dev’s arm. For a moment, they stand there—Timothy facing the other direction, Bruce still at the computer. Dev rubs Damian’s back with his other arm, and after less than ten seconds the boy jerks back and lies down without another word.

“Blanket?” Dev offers.

“Yes,” Damian says tightly, and Dev throws another blanket over him and goes to check again on Timothy.

“Hullo, there,” he says, pulling the stool over and sitting down. He can’t keep back the stubborn yawning and Timothy blinks at him. He offers Timothy a cough lozenge and Timothy takes it and sucks on it, then speaks around it with it tucked against his teeth.

“He told Damian to stay home,” Timothy says, in such a soft whisper Dev almost doesn’t catch it. “But he’s fifteen. We needed help. I told him he was going out with me anyway. We argued but he didn’t stop us. And then I got him hurt. It’s my fault. It’s all my fault.”

It takes Dev a second to parse out this, to understand which parts are Wayne and which are Damian.

“He’s going to fire me,” Timothy says, sniffling. “He’s going to hate me. He’ll throw me out and I’ll be alone.”

“Wayne!” Dev asks, spinning a little on the stool. “Do you’ve plans to fire Timothy?”

“No,” Wayne says without looking back or softening his tone.

“See, then?” Dev asks, catching Timothy’s wide-eyed gaze again. “You’re not being sacked. Dames isn’t even mad at you, are you, Dames?”

“We were in agreement about our plan,” Damian says by way of disregarding this concern.

Tim closes his eyes and sighs.

“Can you sleep, mate? Either of you want music? I’m keeping you both here to keep an eye on you for a few hours at the least.”

“Quiet is okay,” Timothy says. “Damian?”

“I prefer silence,” Damian answers, shifting a little on the gurney.

Dev dims the lights of the medical unit but doesn’t shut them all the way off. He yawns again going down the steps and across the mats to the computer platform, where he leans against the desk
and studies Wayne. The other man doesn’t react to the scrutiny but continues whatever he’s doing
on the computer.

“Fear or plant?” Dev asks after a moment. That does get Wayne’s attention and he glances up
suddenly, as if startled. For a man who doesn’t startle easily, it’s a little unsettling to see.

“Plant,” Wayne says, resuming his work. There’s a long pause. “And I landed too hard on my
knee.”

“Is it swollen?” Dev asks without looking for himself. There’s no point unless Wayne cooperates.
“Painful? Throbbing or constant?”

“If you’d stop asking damn questions, maybe I could answer,” Wayne snaps.

“I’m shattered, mate,” Dev says plainly, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I’m not making more
trips across the cave to snag supplies you already know you need but forgot to mention.”

Wayne studies him in return for a moment and then types again. Dev doesn’t even bother reading
what’s showing up on the screen.

“I gave myself an antidote. My knee is slightly swollen and the pain is constant but not severe.”

“And your pain tolerance is bloody useless,” Dev answers, going to hunt for an ice pack and some
milder pain meds. “You know it’s meant to tell you something’s off, yeah? You aren’t supposed to
learn to ignore it.”

Dev waits for the usual retort, the other side of the half- bitter back and forth they can keep up
during minor things like this, but it doesn’t come. He frowns and returns to the desk with the
chemical ice pack activated and meds and a bottle of water. He sets them down and when Wayne
reaches for the ice pack, his fingers are shaking just slightly.

“How rough’s the toxin?” Dev asks, pulling another chair over and dropping into it. “I’ll need to
properly look at your knee and make sure you didn’t fracture it again.”

“It isn’t pleasant,” Wayne answers the question. “I warned Selina not to come by today.”

“Want company, then?” Dev asks.

There is an empty silence that follows this, and it stretches out over what feels like minutes though
it is likely not that long.

“Yes,” Wayne says simply. He takes the medicine and drinks half the water bottle.

It isn’t until he tips his head back to drink that Dev notices, in the light of the computer monitor, an
angry red burn in the shape of a lipstick print on Wayne’s cheek. One side is perfectly preserved,
the curve and point as defined as they were on the napkins Leena used to blot her mouth when they
were teens. He’d find them left behind on the washroom counter and pitch them in the bin.

The other side of the mark is smeared sideways, as if Wayne had turned quickly away and spoiled
the intended target. It’s seeping pink around the scarlet edges, tiny blisters in the darkest parts.

Wayne, by attention or paranoia, catches him staring and his eyes widen just slightly.

“You want some cream for that, mate?” Dev asks, at the same time Wayne lifts a hand and
tentatively runs his fingers over the mark.
“It left a burn,” he says flatly.

“It wasn’t there when you returned?” Dev asks, leaning closer to look. Wayne drops his hand but sits rigidly and without looking at Dev’s face.

It reminds him of Damian.

“No,” Wayne says. “I didn’t see it then.”

“I’ll get some diphenhydramine,” Dev says. He stands and hesitates. He knows from the files they keep in the cave on toxins and Arkham inmates, former or current, that Pamela Isley is capable of both immense physical persuasion and mind control. He finds her properly terrifying, even just in theory, but has been assured by Wayne in the past that the other man has built up a formidable resistance.

Now, with the mark on Wayne’s face that seems to tell of a last-second rebellion and the way the other man is pointedly ignoring him while he types, he wonders.

“Wayne,” he says, dropping his voice and assuring himself with a quick check that Timothy and Damian are both close enough to sleep and far enough away. “I’ve not been told what happened,” he says, “but if you find yourself needing to talk it over…”

He trails off, feeling his own tiredness slow him in this foreign territory. Pressing Wayne, working through sensitive subjects, is something he’s gained experience doing, but this area is like that part of Wayne’s life where Selina exists: it is untrodden ground, rarely discussed between the two of them.

“No,” Wayne says. “It was nothing. I’m fine.”

Dev isn’t sure he believes it but also decides from Wayne’s posture and their mutual exhaustion, coupled with injuries and proximity of time, that it’s best left for a few hours or days.

“Diphenhydramine,” he says. “And I’ll look at your knee.”

When he steps up into the med unit, he’s not there for more than a few seconds hunting about for the cream in a drawer of labeled boxes of them when a rattling noise catches his attention.

Timothy is shaking on the gurney, hard enough to rattle the locked wheels. And as soon as Dev nears him, Damian starts up, too.

“Wayne,” Dev calls, taking the tube in one hand. Wayne turns in the chair. “I’ve work over here. You’ll have to manage.”

He throws the cream and even though it goes a bit further left than he intended, Wayne reaches out and catches it without much obvious effort.

“Can’t stop,” Timothy says, his teeth chattering when Dev leans over him.

“Your brain knows you’re fine, mate, but your body doesn’t yet,” Dev says, checking his pulse and then Damian’s. The younger boy is cursing in Arabic in a low growl.

“I’m giving you both a second round of antitoxin,” Dev says. “Then oxygen if you need it and we’ll wait it out. You’ll be fine.”

For a few hours, he monitors vitals and talks to the both of them. Wayne stops typing at some point
and sits so motionless at the computer that Dev, when he has a moment to register it, thinks the other man has fallen asleep sitting up. But then Wayne moves and opens a file and scrolls without speaking.

When Timothy and Damian are out of the woods he lets them stumble upstairs so Alfie can feed them and send them to bed for the rest of the morning. Then he scans Wayne’s knee again and makes certain it’s merely sore and not rebroken.

They ride up in the lift together, Wayne still silent and Dev matching it. There are deep shadows under Wayne’s eyes and when he does say something about calling off work, Dev is glad he won’t have to try to talk him out of going in.

It’s barely dawn and Alfie is still awake, with breakfast of a sort and tea in the kitchen. Jason is not with him and Wayne goes the rest of the way upstairs without eating.

Dev, however, feels hollow. He sits and eats with mumbled thanks and only distantly registers Alfie’s slightly cold manner.

There are so many conversations he ought to have and all he can think of is a bed. He finishes off a cup of tea, resolved to deal with everything later, when his mobile vibrates in his pocket.

It’s the hospital, with a message that he’s needed for an emergency shift again.

Dev stares at it blankly and then pockets the mobile and stands.

“Thanks again, Alfie,” he says. “I hope you can get some sleep. I’m off. I’ll be ‘round again when I can, to check on things again.”

“Good morning,” Alfie says as a farewell and he clears Dev’s place out from under him and leaves the room ahead of Dev.

The dismissal, so curt and unusual, stings especially on top of the prospect of the day ahead of him. He feels like he’s been awake for weeks already. But he doesn’t have time to address it now and he lets himself out the side door.

He drives back to the hospital in a daze during the sunrise, changes in his office, and heads straight for the ER.

Tony Fabriello is standing at one of the desks in the central station, bent over an on-screen scan. He glances up at Dev, his shoulders slightly hunched like they always are. He looks weary when he turns back to the scan and remarks bluntly, “You don’t look like you slept at all.”

Dev doesn’t bother answering but he joins Tony and asks, “What’s this one?”

“Fifty-six year old female, slipped off a fire escape ladder. Her BP is fluctuating but the edema is increasing rapidly.”

“Want me to take it?” Dev asks, willing himself past the edge of fog into something like clear-headedness again. This isn’t the first emergency he’s dealt with in Gotham and grueling residency hours left him with skills for navigating days like this.

“No,” Tony says. “They’ve got a possible spinal trauma in 4 they need a consult on. Take that.”

And so Dev dives back into the aftermath of the city chaos, the straggling cases brought in as the panic dies slowly down and the Level 1 trauma centers around the city are freed up. There are
scans to review and surgeries to perform until the tail end of another ten hours when they've finally worked through most of the backlog and new cases that require neurosurgeons.

At some point during the day, sandwiches were delivered to the nurses’ station and Dev ate on his feet while evaluating images of a fractured C3 vertebra. That was a little after a normal lunchtime and now he’s drinking a cup of stale black coffee he doesn’t even like, about to leave, when a call comes in from the ambulance service that they’re enroute with a GSW trauma to the head.

Dev waits, finishing the bitter and lukewarm coffee, now at the point where he’s lost all sense of time and feels like he could stay awake forever and it wouldn’t bother him. Hospital staff has just finished sanitizing a trauma OR when the double doors slide open and they rush a man in on a stretcher.

There’s blood all over one side of the man’s face and body and when they slow in the hall to transfer him over to the ER staff, he sits halfway up mumbling.

He shouldn’t be able to move, from the looks of the right side of his head.

He sits all the way up while the nurses are trying to convince him to lie down, but he slips off the stretcher onto his feet and one of the nurses steps back.

Dev is standing six feet away watching as if in a dream, while the man swats at the nurse’s hands and shrugs off the EMT’s reach while he ambles forward with a distant gaze and blown pupils, black nearly swallowing the pale blue irises.

“I’m okay, I’m okay,” he’s muttering, when he ought to be unconscious. Blood drips off his cheek and onto his bare shoulder. “I shouldn’t be here. It’s just fear toxin, just the toxin, I dunno when I was near it but I must’ve been.”

He stops right in front of Dev and sways and Dev puts an arm out but doesn’t touch him; the ER staff behind are frozen. Two nurses behind the desk are half-standing, all of the hall like statues except for the man.

The man slowly lifts his hand and puts it to the more-bloodied side of his skull and then pushes his hair back like he’s trying to calm himself. It leaves bits of tissue and flecks of bone in the blond strands.

“I’ve always been afraid of bein’ murdered, I have nightmares about it,” he says, his eyes meeting Dev’s. He looks suddenly strangely lucid but still wild in his pale eyes, like someone drugged and fighting it. “It’s just toxin. I don’t wanna waste your time, I’ll just sweat it out. It’s always your worst fears, you know. Nicky said it was. Always with the being murdered. Nicky’s is fish. Ever heard of a stevedore being scared of fish? Stupidest fear I ever heard. I think he’s just givin’ me a hard time.”

“Want a lie down?” Dev offers, his mouth dry. If he wasn’t so bloody exhausted maybe he wouldn’t be so sluggish.

“Nah,” the man says, “I gotta…” He pauses, as if thinking hard. “I gotta…”

He looks down at the blood on his hand and then lurches forward abruptly, almost stumbling into Dev with his fingers outstretched and in Dev’s face. Dev doesn’t step back, but he tips his head before the hand makes contact with his own skin.

“Can you see that?” The man asks. “I didn’t know toxin could make it look so real. It’s warm, too.”
And then he collapses, falling straight down like a marionette with severed strings.

The staff move as if released from a spell, swarming around the man and Dev already knows before the nurse calls out the lack of pulse that it’s just a body now. There’s more blood on his trainers, bright on the white laces.

He crouches down while they roll the man and prepare to lift him, begin useless CPR. There’s a bullet hole on one side of the man’s head, hair burnt near the point of entry, and on the other side there are missing chunks of hair and exposed bone and a dozen exit wounds all seeping blood and brain like a morbid constellation. The brain inside can’t be more than shredded pulp from the looks of it.


He waits, again, until the police come and he shows them the wounds and leaves while they’re making arrangements.

And it’s a sign of how absolutely, thoroughly shattered he now actually is that his mobile doesn’t even occur to him as an option. He leaves without changing his trainers, he drives all the way back to the Manor and almost drifts to sleep twice behind the wheel on the Gotham outskirts.

Wayne is eating dinner when Dev finds them in the dining room, Timothy and Damian still there and now Cass with them. Alfie says something that Dev doesn’t process and he stands in the doorway and when he has Wayne’s attention, he swallows.

“We had one in the ER, not an hour ago. The flechettes worked this time.”

There’s a clatter of forks and Wayne and Timothy and Damian are all asking questions at the same time, until the other voices cut out and give Wayne the lead.

“I don’t know,” Dev says, and it’s hard to sort the order of his words. “There’s a file. The GCPD are transferring the body to the county morgue.”

“Kiran,” Alfie says, silencing the others with a look. “When did you last sleep?”

“I don’t know,” Dev says again. “What day is it?”

“Go sleep,” Alfie says gently, turning him by his arm. “Questions can wait a few hours. Go sleep.”

Dev doesn’t remember the walk to the bedroom in the east wing or the collapse into the bed.

He doesn’t even dream.
The Gotham 4th Precinct office isn’t quiet when Detective Dick Grayson clocks in but the noise is reassuring; the last time he stopped in, it was dead silent because almost every free officer was out in the city responding to something.

Now, chatter and teasing arguments fill the room as day shift gathers jackets and leaves, and night shift trickles in with cups of coffee and bagged midnight lunches. A patrol officer comes in with a box of cupcakes and leaves them in the breakroom, just around the corner from Dick’s desk.

He’s just pulling out his chair, which is not his chair because the wheels are squeaking, when his personal phone buzzes. He should put it in a desk drawer for a few hours, but first he checks it while scanning the room for his stolen chair.

It’s Bruce, so he answers.

“Hey, just got to work,” he says, hoping that its hint enough. He’s still not sure how Bruce feels about his recent move to GCPD from Bludhaven and maybe the idea of it will be enough of a deterrent to not get into any big discussion right now.

“I know,” Bruce says. “There’s a body being transferred to the county morgue and you need to be assigned to the case.”

“Maybe this is a side effect of you always being the boss,” Dick says, “but it doesn’t exactly work like that.” He spots his chair three desks over and swaps it for the noisy one. Nobody looks up during the shift change mess.

“Talk to Gordon,” Bruce says.

“I can’t just do that.” Dick says, dropping into the chair and lowering his voice. “I have to keep a ton of professional distance or this transfer was useless. If he gives me any preferential treatment, if it even looks like it, especially with me and Babs right now, my career’s shot. I know you aren’t—” Dick pauses and corrects himself. “—we aren’t used to playing by the rules, but this is an exception.”

He braces himself for the refusal of this logic, knowing Bruce’s tendency to prioritize results over other things.

“You’re right,” Bruce says after a moment, as if thinking.

“No, this isn’t—wait, I’m what?”

“You’re right. If we want the system clean, we have to use the system’s rules. I’ll get the file from Gordon.”

“Oh,” Dick says, relaxing a little. “I mean, I can see what I can do. If it comes up, I’ll grab it if I can.”

“Good,” Bruce says. “Do that.”

Dick wants very desperately for a few brief seconds to challenge the fact that Bruce, even now, is attempting to order him around. But he decides to just drop it unless it becomes more of a problem, especially after the minor victory of Bruce not trying to force his first plan.
The longer he’s known Bruce as an adult, the more he’s realized that Bruce doesn’t talk to kids this way but to people in general, especially when he’s acting as the Batman. It’s maybe not ideal but if Dick can slot it into a general category of social awkwardness instead of just Bruce treating him like he’s a child, it’s easier to live with it until it’s worth protesting.

There’s silence on the other end and Dick starts to think Bruce hung up without a farewell while he was debating with himself, but there’s a noise like shuffling papers in the background over the line.

Some of Dick’s temperance might also be the result of fielding calls or texts from Jason and Damian about the previous night, and feeling just a bit of sympathy for Bruce at being on the receiving end of all of that defensive rage and conflict. One son angry that he’d been benched for safety, one son mad that they were left short-staffed, another furious that Bruce was letting the youngest go out anyway and choosing to trust one instead of fight all three.

Dick is glad he wasn’t at the center of that mess, after how hard it was to just handle Damian alone when they were patrolling. Tim hadn’t even stuck around and Dick, in retrospect, doesn’t blame him much.

“You okay?” Dick asks, his voice still quiet. It’s not like it’s the first time Bruce has taken Ivy down alone, but dealing with any of the Arkham inmates during a breakout is unsettling. Dick knows from experience that they each tend to be at their mental worst, the most morally detached or conflicted. Dick himself has heard everything ranging from vengeful rants to coy attempts at manipulation to genuine grief and regret.

“I’m fi–” Bruce cuts himself off. “No,” he says instead.

“Wanna talk about it?” Dick offers. Screw the night shift, if Bruce of all people is opening up.

“No,” Bruce says, this time more decidedly. “I want this to stop at one. Let me know if you find out anything.”

“Okay,” Dick says, biting back a sigh. At least it’s minor progress, not waiting until implosion or collapse to admit that something is off. Maybe he can push for more later, in person or after a few days.

“How are you?” Bruce asks. And in a conversation full of surprises, this might have been one of them years ago but isn’t now. It’s something he’s almost gotten used to Bruce taking the time to ask, after the past few years.

“I’m alright,” Dick says, leaning back in his chair as it swivels gently from side to side. “I can’t really talk much longer but I’m trying to just give this some time.”

“It’s not always this bad,” Bruce says, and he sounds like he’s actually sorry. “It hasn’t been. But the city still needs men like you. That hasn’t changed. I’m glad you came back. I should have said something sooner, but I didn’t want you to think I was pressuring you.”


“It’s been a problem in the past,” Bruce says, unamused. “One I’m trying not to repeat. But I’m glad you’re here.”

“Thanks. Really.” Dick says, a weight of dread and uncertainty dissolving in his gut. It shouldn’t matter so much, Bruce’s good opinion, after all this time-- but he almost finds himself needing it more instead of less, while willing to risk losing it with less hesitation. It’s a surreal mix.

“You too,” Dick says, automatically. It’s been his job since he was twelve to remind Bruce just how human he is, like almost everyone else. “Talk to you later?”

“Have a good night, Dick,” Bruce says. “I love you.”

“Dad,” Dick says, grinning. He lets a bit of false whining into his voice. “Not in front of the guys.”

“I was—”

“Love you, too,” Dick says, enjoying Bruce’s flustered and grumbling tone.

He hangs up before Bruce can beat him to it.

The shift change shuffle has cleared up and the desks are manned by a skeleton crew in the aftermath of so many overtime hours the past few days. Dick’s new partner is off for the night as everyone’s schedules are shuffled around to try to recover. He’ll be working with a rotation on any calls that come in until morning; the case board is filled with dozens of new file numbers and they’ll likely add more before morning, when those will be sorted again and reassigned.

“Hey, rich kid,” a voice calls, right as Dick is contemplating sorting change to shove into the vending machine. He could use something cold and caffeinated, even after sleeping most of the day.

Knuckles rap on Dick’s desk and he looks up at Reggie Martin. The older detective has a blue folder in one hand and points to the door while walking.

“We got something. You’re coming with me.”

Dick has only worked with the older detective a handful of times, but he’s gotten the distinct impression that he annoys the stocky black man. He ends up staring at the back of Martin’s shaved head while they go down the stairs and into the precinct lobby, trying to figure out what he can do or say to change the man’s mind.

They’re passing the front desk when Dick’s attention is torn from interoffice politics and relationships and toward the distraught sounding couple pleading with the on-duty cop manning the station.

“We don’t need twenty-four hours to know something’s wrong,” the man is saying, slamming his hand down on the counter.

“Sir, I’m going to need to ask you to calm down,” the cop says, half-rising from his chair.

Martin ahead of him slows, too, waiting to see. The man isn’t huge but his arms are muscular and exposed by the threadbare tank top he’s wearing. His hair is pulled back in a tight ponytail and he doesn’t look like trouble, to Dick, but he looks like the sort that could cause some if he wanted.

“Please,” the woman interjects, her shorter hair blonde except where her roots have grown in a bit. Dick takes in details like he eats chips, reaching for them without thinking about it until he’s full of them.

The man pulls back from the counter and throws his arms in the air and then turns and crosses them over his chest, slouching with his back to the cop while the woman tries instead.
“This isn’t like Stosh,” she says. “He doesn’t drink alone, he’s never been in trouble. He doesn’t just disappear like this and not show up for work.”

“Ma’am, people disappear for all kinds of reasons,” the desk officer says, settling back in his seat. “I’m not going to speculate on a possible explanation, but policy is twenty-four hours to file for a missing adult. If you think his disappearance is related to the recent citywide incidents, there’s a missing persons center set up in the John Pritchard Building on Brooks in Old Town. I can give you directions and a bus schedule. He might already be there looking for you if you got separated.”

“This isn’t related,” the woman replies, her patience sounding strained. She looks near tears. “He went missing after all of that.”

“Twenty four hours and you can—”

“There’s something wrong! I just know it,” the woman insists, interrupting. Instead of bursting into tears, she now looks furious.

“Fucking useless,” the man with her mutters. “Let’s go. The union would be more help, Terry, I told you—”

“Can I help with something?” Dick offers, stepping forward when she turns to argue with him.

“Richie, we got a theft to follow,” Martin says from the doorway. Dick ignores him.

“I’m Detective Dick Grayson,” Dick offers his hand and the woman shakes it immediately; the man does after a brief and visible hesitation. “You said someone was missing?”

“My husband,” she supplies. “His name is Stanislaw Kolberg. He left in the middle of the night, he said it was for a shift.”

“Richie,” Martin says again.

“He didn’t have third shift,” the man snaps. He seems agitated. “He had first with me, but he never showed.”

“Richie. We gotta roll,” Martin says. “We gotta protocol for a reason, kid. I’m sorry, Mrs. Kolberg, was it? But Officer Barnes is right.”

Dick pulls a notebook out of his pocket and flips it open and scribbles a number and name on it. “Middle of the night means you’ll get to twenty-four pretty soon. Call me the minute you do.”

“Detective Grayson?” she repeats, taking the paper he tears off the pad and looking over it.

“Yep,” Dick agrees. “You call me and we’ll get everything moving as fast as we can. What’s your name?”

“Teresa. Terry, Terry Kolberg,” she says, fumbling her words and sounding relieved. “This is Nick Tomaras, Stosh’s friend. You’ll help us?”

“Promise I’ll do what I can,” Dick says, walking backward to keep eye contact while he catches up with Martin.

Outside on the sidewalk, in the spring dusk, Martin is waiting by an unmarked car with a frown.

“Sorry,” Dick shrugs. “They need to know we’ll help.”
“You don’t need to impress me,” Martin says sharply, climbing into the dark green car. “You already got the badge.”

“I’m not trying to impress you,” Dick says. “Did you hear him in there? He thinks his union can do a better job than the GCPD. And I want to make sure he’s not right.”

Martin flicks on the radio and gives Dick a long, steady look.

“Huh,” he says. “Huh.”

“Do you think I’ve been trying to impress you?” Dick asks, frowning and thinking back on all their brief interactions. “I just want to do my job. If I wanted pats on the back, I would have picked something easier, like professional model.”

Martin barks out a laugh as he turns the car on and Dick grins.

“What? You don’t think I’m pretty enough?”

The car pulls away from the curb and Martin shakes his head, still chuckling. Dick relaxes a little, feeling he’s made some headway. But he doesn’t allow himself the luxury of relaxing too much or carrying the joke any further.

He’s got a job to do and tonight might be harder than most.
The breakfast

The morning fog rolling off the river and the bay are still heavy, even this far inland in Bristol. It pools on the lower ends of the gentle hill slopes, leaving treetops as ghostly floating bushes over the white groundcover.

Jim Gordon knows while he stands on the top front step of Wayne Manor and lets the chilled knocker fall from his hand that the occupants both already know he is there and who it is knocking. He was buzzed in at the gate after identifying himself to a small silver speaker and hidden camera.

It is why, despite the vastness of the house and the early hour, the door opens mere seconds after he knocks. Alfred Pennyworth greets him with a customary mix of professional distance and decades-old familiarity, but it seems strained. Maybe the old man is tired; Jim, as an old man himself, doesn’t blame him.

“Mr. Wayne is in the dining room,” Alfred says, taking Jim’s hat and thin spring duster coat. “I’ll take you in.”

Jim himself would offer this same courtesy if someone dropped by at his little place in the early morning. Maybe a cup of coffee, a chat at the kitchen table or in the living room. But Jim would be in a robe or pajamas still, his hair mussed and his glasses in need of a morning polish. He knows the newspaper would be spread out on the worn, scarred wooden table, and that breakfast would be toast and maybe an egg. Maybe some of that All Bran he keeps buying out of a sense of responsibility for his age, and then pitching months later when it’s gone stale after a single bowl forced down with orange juice.

He guesses even before they round the corner of the hall that the picture in the Wayne dining room will be a different image altogether-- he imagines suits and school uniforms, a starched ivory tablecloth and glistening silver and some food he can’t pronounce because his French is so damned bad.

When he does enter the long, high-ceilinged room, he is surprised by the mix of his fulfilled expectations and the contradictions to them. Even as he grows older his mind stays sharp, thank God, and he takes most of it in at once.

Bruce is dressed much like he expected, minus the suit jacket, and the table is covered in linen, but the breakfast spread is more continental than foreign and seems to be dominated by muffins and sausages and a tray of yogurts.

The youngest Wayne, Damian, is one he’s not been around much. His hair is combed but he’s still in pajamas, except they’re all dark green and look like they’re supposed to be simple but cost more than Jim’s car payment when he had one. There’s a dog at his side patiently watching him stir tea or something in a fancy cup.

Tim Drake-Wayne is a bit of a surprise-- he’s pretty sure the kid lives somewhere in the city, in one of those upscale apartment buildings. But he’s there, too, in more mundane pajamas and a t-shirt with a cartoon on it; he’s slumped over the table, both elbows propping him up, with his phone at one hand and a coffee mug in the other and an apparently neglected yogurt in front of him.

And next to him, across from Damian, is a bearded, brown-skinned man with his own cup of tea and plate of food, in a plain shirt and with slightly disheveled hair. It takes Jim a second to place
him as the doctor, Dev, he’s seen around the Waynes now and then. The one seared-in memory of him that Jim has is one where the man’s covered in blood in a dusty warehouse, but they’ve crossed paths at the hospital and the occasional party or cookout.

In the second or two it takes for Jim to process all of this, the casual nature and larger crowd, he also realizes that his entrance has caused everything in the room to stop. Nobody is moving or eating, even though a timer is ringing faintly in the background. Jim is flooded with confusion and a bit of practiced embarrassment-- he doesn’t do what he does to make people happy, but he can have the decency to at least recognize when he's intruding.

“Sorry to drop by unannounced,” he says to the stony faces. And now that he thinks about it, the unusual coldness and rigid manner, he notices that Alfred looks pretty much the same as the rest of them.

“Is Dick…”

It’s Tim, far less sleepy than Jim had assumed, who breaks the silence but trails off. Jim wouldn’t have even noticed if he hadn’t been looking at him, but because he is looking at Bruce when Tim speaks, he sees the other man stiffen in a way that’s almost like flinching.

Jim could shake himself for being so dense.

“No,” he says quickly. “Dick’s fine, as far as I know. I came by about something else. In fact, I saw him a few hours ago during his shift.”

The entire atmosphere of the room changes, like the relief after a bomb is defused. And because it’s Gotham, Jim’s been around enough to know what that’s like. Every single person around the table visibly relaxes and resumes motion.

“We can go to my study,” Bruce says, scooting his chair back. He stops at a sharp glare from Alfred and Tim yawns.

“Want me to get…” Tim leaves a question unfinished for a second time, when he looks up to see Bruce’s expression.

Jim doesn’t know what the upset is about but he’s happy to not ask for explanations. He’s got enough trouble without throwing himself in the middle of domestic squabbles.

“Would you care for some breakfast?” Bruce offers instead.

Jim doesn’t usually accept food while on a case, but the circumstances are a bit unusual and he’s not exactly had regular meals for a few days. By the way half the table is tucking into their plates, he guesses they feel about the same.

“Yes,” Jim says, taking a free chair. Alfred sets a plate and mug in front of him a moment later. Jim follows the cues of those around the table and helps himself to breakfast. “Should we save shop talk for after?” he asks, trying to calculate how quickly he should or can eat to stay on schedule and still be polite.

“No,” Bruce says, his voice hard. “The room is secure.”

And Jim realizes that in his tiredness, he’s made yet another miscalculation and neglected to explain that he wasn’t here about that kind of business. The only way to clear it up is to plunge right in, so he does.
“Harvey Dent claims he’s got inside information on how Crane and Isley broke out,” Jim says, scraping butter across a roll. “And who helped ’em. But he’s telling anyone who’ll listen that he’ll only talk to you.”

There’s a moment where both Damian and Tim look up at Bruce to see his reaction, the latter openly and the former surreptitiously through a sidelong glance.

“By you,” Jim says, figuring they might be stumbling on their own assumptions, “I mean Bruce Wayne.”

“What are his conditions?” Bruce asks, a crease in his brow. He has to know, with their history, that Jim wouldn’t even be considering it for any drastic terms.

“He says his cell isn’t private enough.” Jim pauses to stir sugar into his coffee from a porcelain dish Damian slides toward him. “Says he wants something quiet. The doctors say he’s been keeping to himself, making progress. Your guess is as good as mine, if it’s an act or not. But with model behavior ever since Joker, well, you know, for two years now—”

“Almost,” Damian interrupts, sounding neither upset nor apologetic.

“Almost,” Jim amends, with a shrug. “Almost two years of model behavior and with most of the old crew parceled out, they’ve got a nearly empty cell block they say they can put him in. It’ll mean limited staff, but if he’s cooperating about this, the DA’s willing to let him have it after the hell of the past week. We’re going to be sorting through this mess for months as it is and the city wants to pin it on someone it’ll stick.”

“They’re not charging Isley or Crane?” Bruce asks, with just a note of surprise.

“Oh, they will,” Jim assures him. “But you know how they’ll both plead, and after a couple life sentences with parole for evidence of rehabilitation, it’s moot. People’ll wanna see someone suffer for this one, and if somebody inside helped them, we can make some charges that don’t feel so damn pointless.”

“Do you think there’s another guilty party?” Tim asks, turning to Jim.

“Pretty sure,” Jim says, chewing a muffin. “There usually is. And Dent might actually know.”

“If he actually goes through with sharing,” Tim says, a little bitterly. “If the coin lets him.”

“He’s a liar and we shouldn’t trust him,” Damian snaps.

“Other people can change, not just you,” Tim bites back.

“You haven’t given me much reason to believe otherwise-- you’re just as idiotic as the day we met,” Damian retorts icily.

Jim watches with a touch of amusement as Bruce closes his eyes and exhales.

“If either of you bloody eejits push my headache toward a migraine, I’ll forcibly sedate you both for the rest of the day.”

Jim glances up; the doctor has been so quiet Jim almost forgot he was there.

“You couldn’t,” Damian says, glare narrowing.

“I’d help him,” Bruce says stiffly. “That’s enough. If the two of you are going to sit here and
bicker, you can take your breakfast to the kitchen. Whether or not I talk to Dent isn’t up to either of you.”

“Dent says you’re the only man who never stopped believing in him.” Jim tries to redirect the conversation slightly, to maintain some peace. It’s hard for Jim to keep a little bit of sourness out of his voice even when acting as a diversion, but for all his good faith he knows he’s a hard and bitter man where Dent is concerned.

“I’m not the only one,” Bruce insists, in a display of charity more in tune with his public face than the man Jim’s used to meeting on dark rooftops. And even then, he supposes, that face is still there underneath everything.

“Yeah,” Jim replies. “You are. I’m not going to lie to make myself feel better.”

“He tried to kill you,” Damian says, ignoring everyone else to turn his whole focus on Bruce.

“Just once?” Dr. Dev asks.

“At least ten times,” Tim says dryly. “But not as Bruce, not unless you only count half of them.”

“That seems a fitting ratio, then, considering,” the doctor says around a mouthful of food.

“Dev!” Tim exclaims, covering his mouth with a napkin. His laughter almost immediately turns into coughing.

“I’ll see him,” Bruce says, without paying attention to Damian’s sputtering and then sullen, angry silence. “But the DA should make it clear that this only works if he gives us more than vague hints or ambiguous crumbs.”

“I’ll tell him myself,” Jim says. “How’s your schedule? Could you make time for it today?”

“I’m taking Titus and Malcolm for a walk,” Damian says, standing abruptly. The dog at his side leaps up eagerly and another crawls from beneath the table. They follow him out of the room and Tim finishes off a mug of coffee and wipes his mouth while pushing his chair back.

“I’ll talk to him, he’s still…it’s that stupid toxin. We might go find Steph so text me if we’re gone.”

Once both of the younger men have left the room, Bruce pours more coffee and asks, “How bad is it?”

Jim thinks about the thousands of reports the GCPD will have to sift through, the murder and injury charges and deciding what’s manslaughter and what’s first or second degree. Then the toxin cases and the hundreds of people who will sue the city for emotional distress if the city doesn’t charge someone else with it first; weeding out the theft, battery, attempted murder, and suicide reports and having to decide which ones were directly related and which ones maybe would have eventually happened anyway.

“Pretty bad,” he says. He turns to the doctor. “You work at the hospital still?”

“Gotham Memorial,” the doctor answers.

“Then you know, if you were in the ER.”

“I rang in the Kolberg case,” Dr. Dev says quietly. “I only handle neuro and spinal, but yeah, I’ve
been there. I’ve five still in comas, at least nine partial or full paralysis, and lost half a dozen on the table. Had the same number DOA. Mostly impact trauma or gunshot. A few dozen concussions that walked out after treatment. And that’s just what I had, just at Memorial.”

“And seven other hospitals,” Jim sighs. “Damn it. We have to get to the bottom of this.”

“It was a cover. It was too elaborate and pointless not to be,” Bruce says, his hands stilled by his plate. He’s not looking at Jim or Dr. Dev. “They must have moved cargo on the docks while we were distracted.”

“It was a damn good distraction, if that was the goal, but I can’t figure out for Chrissakes why,” Jim says. “How’s it benefit Isley or Crane? You know, Isley was two months away from being let out on house arrest.”

Bruce’s expression hardens and he meets Jim’s gaze. “We need to talk. But not here.”

“Tonight?” Jim asks. He turns to Dr. Dev. “And wait just a minute, you called in the Kolberg case? My men didn’t even know what that was until the coroner called me in a panic to get forensics in at midnight, because somebody marked his toe tag as priority.”

“Not here,” Bruce repeats before Dr. Dev answers. He stands and leaves the dining room, limping as he goes. Jim surmises he’s supposed to follow, and it rankles him a bit but he’s distracted by the limp.

Jim’s already on his feet when Alfred returns to the room, something in his hand that he passes over to Dr. Dev.

“We’re heading downstairs,” Dr. Dev says to him, throwing something that might be pills back with a swig of water. He pauses and turns toward the doorway. “Am I coming, then?” he shouts, so suddenly that Jim jumps a bit.

“Yes!” Bruce yells back, the word faint from down the hall.

“We’re heading downstairs,” Dr. Dev says again to Alfred. “Thanks for breakfast. Tea, today?”

“I would very much appreciate it,” Alfred says, already clearing the table. Dr. Dev seems relieved by this and exits the room ahead of Jim.

“Thank you,” Jim echoes. “For food. Uh, sorry about the, um, confusion with…”

“It’s quite alright,” Alfred says, with a warm smile. “It has been a week.”

“That’s about the politest thing to call it,” Jim says with a lopsided grin. “I’m ready for it to be damn well over, but I’m starting to think it’s far from it.”

“The sentiments are shared,” Alfred says mildly. “They’re in the front parlor, if you didn’t remember. It’s been a few years.”

“Thanks,” Jim says again, lingering for a moment to watch the other man stack plates. They’ve known each other for forever, it feels like, and must be close to the same age but Jim’s always regarded Alfred Pennyworth as much older. He supposes it was a fallacy from youth, when five or six years seemed like a major generational gap. He guesses he never quite shook off that feeling, even as the half decade or so meant less and less.

With a shake of his head, Jim goes to find the front parlor. He heads for the foyer first, with a
vague recollection of the house layout in his mind, and near the massive oak front doors he’s directed by the overheard murmur of conversation.

As soon as he steps into the parlor, the conversation stops and Bruce says from near the clock, “Shut the door.”

“Please,” Dr. Dev adds, with a raised eyebrow at Bruce. Bruce either ignores it or doesn’t notice and Dr. Dev looks over at Jim and rolls his eyes, while Jim shuts the door. “You prat,” the doctor mutters to Bruce, kicking gently at the man’s shoe, when the clock swings out from the wall to reveal the slender elevator behind it.

Bruce gives Dr. Dev a stern look that doesn’t seem to phase the doctor. Jim joins them on the elevator, his years of practice in the field the only thing holding back his delighted grin. Or, it is the only thing, until he looks around and notices the worried frown Dr. Dev has while sneaking a glance at Bruce. The elevator moves downward smoothly, in an isolated way that makes it impossible to tell how quickly they’re going.

They step off onto a platform overlooking the cavernous room and Jim is staggered, all over again, because it’s bigger than he remembers from the one time he was given a tour a few years ago. The place is quiet except for the hum of fans and what he guesses are dehumidifiers.

Bruce heads straight for the computer, still favoring his leg, and Jim follows. A moment later, Dr. Dev meets them there with a small box and blue nitrile gloves and hands them both over to Bruce. There are other chairs along the desk, and Jim takes one of them while the doctor sits a few feet from the keyboard on the desk surface.

“This is how he knew,” Bruce says, dumping the content of the box into a gloved hand. He types with the other and the massive screen flickers to life and a blue diagnostic scan appears. “Dev pulled this from my knee almost four weeks ago, but the design was poorly produced and the suit’s armor crushed it. We’ve been watching for them since.”

“Kolberg was the first,” Dr. Dev says, as Jim pulls on the glove held out to him and takes the bullet to examine it. He spares a glance at the screen for comparison.

“You’re sure this is the same thing?” Jim asks, turning it over.

“With the damage pattern Dev saw, I think it’s just a matter of forensics confirming it. We won’t find the bullet fragments until we know where Kolberg was shot.” Bruce takes the crushed bullet back and drops it in the box again. “But you said you knew more.”

“Just that your boy was the one who found Kolberg’s wife. He had her in the precinct filing a missing persons even before the name cleared with the coroner’s, from his driver’s license. They were about to run dentals to check when they called me.”

Jim leans back and crosses his arms as he studies the screen.

“The ambulance service must have records of where they picked him up,” Jim says after a moment. “He was brought in by ambulance, wasn’t he? The condition he was in…”

“A woman called it in,” Bruce answers and Jim isn’t even surprised that the other man is a step ahead of him. “He was sitting on a bench in Grant Park. She thought she was reporting a body; the recording of the dispatcher call is pretty clear.”

“So, we’re looking at Grant.”
“Batgirl and Red Robin swept the park this morning before dawn. They didn’t find anything except possibly a trail of blood that ended in traffic,” Bruce says, typing and pulling up other images.

“So somebody moved him,” Jim concludes. “I’m guessing you already cleared the woman? Know her name and address and life story?”

“Her high school years are patchy,” Bruce says. It takes Jim a minute to process this as a joke, delivered without humor or reaction.

“He might’ve walked,” Dr. Dev says. “No sodding idea how far.”

“The closest is Port Adams, if it was by ship.” Bruce has a map up now, though Jim knows it like the back of his hand.

And Jim was with Dick Grayson and Teresa Kolberg when they brought her to ID the body at almost three in the morning, after the coroner and forensics team took photos and did their initial evidence crawl. He doesn’t have to count across the screen to know how many impossible blocks lie between the Port Adams warehouses and Grant Park. A man with half his skull isn’t going five feet, much less those eight blocks and under an overpass.

“I’m guessing you haven’t hacked into the forensics database or whatever the hell it is you do with that computer, to see the pictures yet. That man didn’t walk anywhere after he was shot.” Jim says this with authority because it’s damned well true.

“Uh,” Dr. Dev says, while Bruce is typing again. “He very well might’ve. He was on his feet in the hospital and in absolute denial. Not the strangest thing I’ve ever seen, but it’s high on the list. He thought he’d been dosed with fear toxin.”

“He was talking?” Jim exclaims, at the same time Bruce freezes and spins a little in his chair.

“Yeah,” the doctor says. “They couldn’t keep him down. He chatted at us for a couple minutes. It didn’t make much sense. It’s a sodding weird quirk of shock. I’d not be surprised if he’d walked half a kilometer or more and didn’t know what the bloody hell he was doing. There’s likely a hospital security feed.”

“So,” Jim says slowly, watching the look that goes from Bruce to the doctor and back. “We scour Port Adams.”

“The cargo won’t be there,” Bruce says, turning slowly back to the computer. “But the spent casing might be. Maybe blood, depending on how sloppy they were. This isn’t more than a hunch, but I’m pretty sure Crane and Isley were distractions. They kept us, and anyone with a badge, busy and away from the coast.”

Across the cave, the elevator door hisses and opens and Dick Grayson hurries in, a muffin in one hand and his hair still matted from his motorcycle helmet.

“Bruce!” he calls, jogging over to them. “I didn’t want to call. But I’ve got something. Hey, Commish.”

“Hey,” Jim says, swamped with the surrealness of the hasty greeting here in the Batcave of all the places for him to be.

“Listen, how much do you know?” Dick asks, perching on the desk. “Alfred told me you were down here working.”
“I know Stanislav Kolberg was shot and that you found the widow,” Bruce says.

“Alright,” Dick says, abandoning the muffin beside him on the desk surface. “What you don’t know is this: Terry Kolberg and her husband’s best friend, Nick Tomaras, came in at eight last night to file a missing persons. She came back alone when it had been 24 hours and the name flagged in the system by then. After she ID’d the body, we questioned her but not exhaustively.”

“Nothing new here, Dick,” Bruce says, and Dick shakes his head in an irritated way. Jim has the sudden urge to reach out and smack the back of Bruce’s head and reluctantly admits to himself that the distance they usually keep is probably for the best.

“I’m not done. So, Terry Kolberg goes home with a police escort for safety. She’s pretty upset-- her husband never did anything wrong, he doesn’t have enemies, she’s got nothing if she’s telling the truth. But an hour after she leaves, Nick Tomaras comes back in. He’s ready to spill his guts. Apparently, the Kolbergs wanted their daughter at this private school. He tells me they were fighting about money all the time with fall enrollment coming up. But then, Stosh’s complaints about arguments just stop. Stosh says it’s taken care of, he’s got some money he’s coming into. He won’t tell Nick from who or how.

“Kolberg told his wife he was leaving for a third shift and she believed him-- he’d been picking up overtime shifts when he could, for the money, but it wasn’t enough. But Nick Tomaras swears up and down that there were no third shift openings that night, and that they’d closed off a whole half-mile of the Port Adams docks.”

“No third shift openings after the whole city shut down?” Bruce asks skeptically.

“The union gave priority to guys who lost shifts during the mess,” Dick says. “And Kolberg hadn’t. Tomaras said he checked the logs and asked a supervisor. Nobody had seen Kolberg for days and he’d missed showing up for his regular shift yesterday morning.”

“So, Port Adams,” Jim says. “The half-mile stretch they closed. I don’t want this to blow up into another panic, and I can’t go serving warrants for that much property without drawing some attention.”

“But that’s not stopping us,” Bruce says firmly. “Tonight.”

“It wasn’t my idea.” The shirking of responsibility is so automatic and so political that it irks Jim to hear himself say it, but he knows it’s self-defense as he raises a hand and lets it fall to others. “But I want some confirmation this isn’t just a fluke before I spread it around that we’ve got someone smuggling experimental weaponry right under our noses and put all my men in Kevlar.”

“First, Dent,” Bruce says, turning off the monitor. “I’ll have Alfred drive.”

“You’re going?” Dick sounds thrown off-guard. “Oh. Okay.”

“Was there something else?” Bruce asks, standing. Jim stands too, and for a moment his hands search for his jacket pockets before he remembers it’s hanging in the hall upstairs.

“Nah,” Dick waves a hand. “It’s fine. It can wait, it’s not about the case.”

Jim walks in-stride with Bruce toward the elevator when the younger man heads down toward the section of the cave outfitted with gym equipment. He’s chalking his hands before the elevator door opens.

“Tell Alfie I’ll come back ‘round,” Dr. Dev calls after them. “I’m off for the morning as soon as I
restock antitoxins.”

The doors close them in and Bruce doesn’t try to shout a reply. There’s a small jolt as the elevator rises and Jim finds himself staring at old, walnut-colored bloodstains on the thin carpet.

“I know there’s a chance the incidents are unrelated,” Bruce acknowledges while the elevator is still moving. This seems more like a concession to Jim’s own doubt, though.

“But you don’t think so,” Jim says. He’s not offended by Bruce’s paranoia. It’s saved his ass and countless others and Gotham itself more than once. Bruce has an uncanny and irritating tendency to be right, even when Jim’s own gut is quiet. There’s a lot of trust involved in their working relationship.

“No,” Bruce says. “I think it’s connected and I think it’s going to get worse if we don’t move fast.”

The elevator door opens and in the parlor, Alfred is waiting as if summoned by will. For all Jim knows, there was some sort of signal or communication he missed downstairs. This tech stuff is not second nature for him the way it is for Babs.

“We’re driving to Arkham,” Bruce says.

“I’ll bring the car around,” Alfred says, only opening the parlor door after the clock is firmly back in place.

Jim nods to Bruce and goes to find his own hat and coat.

“I’ll meet you there,” he tells him, before stepping out. “I’ll need to set things up and talk to Dent before you go in.”

Jim lets his footsteps fall heavy on the way down the outside concrete staircase and across the crunching pea gravel that paves the main cul de sac. His car door gives an ominous, squeaking groan when he pulls it open to climb behind the wheel.

The fog has settled into heavy dew on the grass and the morning sun is strong and bright, already burning it away where the lawn isn’t guarded by shadow. Jim turns the key in the ignition while watching a cardinal hop about on the turf beneath one of the closer trees. When the engine rumbles to life, the bird flies away, startled.

There are so many things to think about and consider as he drives, so many loose ends to tie up and details to decide. He can only delegate so much. He’s grateful, not for the first time, that Batman and his team are not held back by the same red tape that the police force needs to function safely.

If it was any other group of people, if there had been a hint of self-service, Jim would not have allowed this to go on so long.

But it rankles him that they’re now dependent on Harvey Dent and a lone bullet casing in half a mile of buildings and stacks to make sense of all the mess. And that’s if Bruce’s paranoid nature hasn’t misled him— this could be a red herring in a chaos with no sense to be found at all.

It makes the back of his neck tense, seasoned detective that he is, and the drive to Arkham isn’t a pleasant one. He never even turns the radio on, like he usually does, because his mind is so busy.

Jim isn’t sure of much but he’s sure he’s getting too old for this. He just wanted Gotham to be better by now, but here they are, still rounding up people who trash entire cities. He’d started this year with the feeling that the relative peace was good too be true.
Jim Gordon wishes he could be wrong once in a while.
The library is quiet except for the sounds of typing and pages turning. The curtains are drawn against the bright mid-morning sun, to protect the books and to make it easier for Tim Drake-Wayne to see his laptop screen. He’s slogging through ship intake reports, matching the list of cargo ships that cleared customs to the docking manifest to see if any slipped through the cracks.

It’s about a million times more likely that any small-scale illegal cargo was carted in on something less conspicuous, like a speedboat or a non-descript yacht, but this is something he can do while Babs reviews security footage from various operational Port Adams cameras. And if Tim’s learned anything in the past six or seven years, it’s that cases are made or broken on the tiny details and it’s mind-numbing, monotonous work to find them.

And Tim’s just the sort of weirdo that likes that sort of thing, and he knows this makes him kind of unusual but he doesn’t care.

It’d be slightly easier to focus if it wasn’t for the tension radiating off of Damian Wayne while he reads at the other end of the polished cherry wood library table. There are a couple armchairs–actually comfortable ones–scattered around the massive room, but Damian’s opted to ignore all of them to sit at the table with his spine rigid and read a leather-bound tome. Tim guesses it’s non-fiction but he hasn’t asked.

The past couple years have mellowed Damian. He’s still precise and physically controlled, but it isn’t unusual for Tim to find him curled up on a couch with a Nintendo game or lying on a rug with one of those paperbacks Jason’s always bringing over and often literally throwing at him. So this regression, to stiff posture and heavy reading outside of schoolwork, is concerning.

Damian had not made himself difficult to find after their brief and childish squabble at breakfast. It was almost like he’d been waiting to be sought out, and Tim had walked the entire perimeter of the Manor property with Damian and the dogs in silence. They hadn’t spoken except for Tim’s short and awkward apology, and Damian’s acceptance and equally stilted attempt at his own.

Tim expected him to go find something else to do, especially after they ran into Bruce on his way out to Arkham and got a terse update, a minimal check on their mutual well being, and nothing more.

But Damian’s hung around him ever since. He followed him to the kitchen when Tim made a second pot of coffee and made a pretense of feeding his dogs some prepackaged treat from the freezer. He found a broken tablet to fix for Cass while Tim talked to Babs on the phone.

And he’s been just sitting there reading the entire time Tim’s been working in the library and while Tim appreciates the need for company while recovering from toxin, he wishes Damian would just…talk or say something or give him at least a bit of direction. He’s too on edge himself, still, to want to risk the kid basically ripping his head off for asking and even just being near Damian is starting to drive his stress back up into heart-pounding levels.

Plus, the case, and the fact that he has to go back to work tomorrow is looming over him with the threat of continued exhaustion. He usually likes his R&D job at WE, but stumbling into a panic attack by the server towers because he’s still jumpy is sort of the the last thing he wants to do.

Tim tries to focus on the tiny print of the manifest list and block out the tension. He should come up with some sort of plan, maybe, but he can’t while he’s feeling so scattered.
The distant sound of footsteps in the hall catches his attention and Tim stands to go see who it is; he was pretty sure after watching Bruce and Alfred leave and Dev leave for the hospital again that they were alone in the Manor. But maybe Cass came home and he didn’t know. Damian looks up from his book but doesn’t join Tim. The dogs are still sleeping near one of the windows, which Tim supposes is a good sign.

The footsteps move into the kitchen and Tim’s palms are sweating even though there’s no logical reason for him to be scared. He can fight off pretty much any intruder, improvising with whatever is nearby, and the fact that it’s the kitchen is a pretty good sign that it isn’t someone up to anything sinister.

Unless stealing dry pasta and organic protein powder counts as sinister.

It’s just Dick Grayson, eating a pre-made salad with grilled chicken straight out of one of Alfred’s glass prep containers. He’s leaning against the counter and already halfway done by the time Tim stops in the doorway and sighs in relief.

“Oh, it’s just you,” he says and Dick glances over while taking a long drink of water.

“Hey.” Dick’s trimmed hair is still damp from a shower. “I didn’t know anyone was here. Al made it sound like you guys were all heading out.”

“I said something about maybe going to Steph’s,” Tim says. “But she’s trying to finish a paper and gave me her ‘Only Severe Loss of Blood, Dismemberment, or Death’ disaster speech. How long have you been here?”

“Got here before B left,” Dick says, around his mouthful of spinach and arugula. “Did some parallel bars work to unwind and I’m gonna crash upstairs for a bit.”

“You have to help me.” Tim cringes internally at how pleading he sounds and he knows he should probably do some deep breathing exercises while the rest of the toxin fades. Maybe before lunch. Maybe he should sleep.

“What’s up?” Dick spears a piece of chicken with his fork.

“Damian. He’s been following me around all day and he’s a mess but he won’t talk.”

“You tried?” Dick sounds concerned. “I talked to him yesterday but he seemed okay. Not great, but okay. He said he was with you, though.”

“Well, I mean, I was kind of waiting for him,” Tim says, lowering his voice. “But he’s like a statue. A very nervous and angry statue.”

Dick laughs and finishes off the salad. Tim can never get over how fast the older man eats, like he doesn’t have time to actually taste anything before he’s moving again.

“You gotta talk to him.” Dick rinses the glass container and opens the closer dishwasher, the one used for actual cleaning instead of just secondary sanitizing. “He’s not you. He still doesn’t know how to bring it up first.”

“I bottle stuff up,” Tim protests, almost immediately recognizing how stupid it is to be defensive about this as a fault. “I mean, I know what that’s like.”

“You come talk to him, then,” Tim says. “You’re already here. He’ll talk to you.”

“Tim.” Dick closes the dishwasher with a soft click and he sounds suddenly very, very weary. “Do you think he’s going to run off? Put himself in danger?”

“No,” Tim says honestly. He’s actually surprised the younger boy hasn’t already materialized behind them.

“I have to sleep,” Dick says, turning and putting a hand over his eyes. “I had a really shitty night. I can’t handle anything else right now until I get a couple of hours, at least. If you really, really can’t handle just talking to him, hang out with him and I’ll come find you before I leave this afternoon.”

One side of Dick’s mouth lifts in a smile. It’s probably intended to be encouraging, but Tim sees straight through it to clear exhaustion and feels an immediate pang of guilt at trying to dump this on Dick just because he’s reluctant.

“Don’t worry about it,” Tim says. “I’m sorry, I’m just…whatever Crane used was pretty strong this time. I’m still not over it and I know it’s bothering him, too. But I dragged him out there after Bruce wanted him to stay home. I can clean up my own mess.”

“There,” Dick says, patting Tim’s shoulder as he passes. “See? You found me and vented and I bet you already feel better. Go push his buttons so he can, too. You can wake me up if it backfires.”

“Such confidence, such enthusiasm,” Tim says dryly. “Thanks for the boost.”

Dick stops and gives Tim a thumbs up and a broad, fake smile.

“You can do it, Champ. I believe in you.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Tim says, grinning. His grin fades. “Um, did you wanna talk? About your night?”

“Nah,” Dick says. “Just the less glamorous side of police life. I’ll be okay.”

And Tim is left alone in the kitchen with the prospect of everything before him, but he does feel better after talking to Dick. He turns the burner on under the kettle after making sure it’s full, and he waits while the water heats.

When he heads back to the library, it’s with a mug of tea in his hand. Titus lifts his head when Tim steps in but almost immediately drops it back on his paws and closes his eyes. Malcolm kicks and makes a grunt in his sleep.

Tim sets the tea in front of Damian’s book, which is flat on the table. He’s surprised to see, when he reads the title that is upside down to him on the top margin of the page, that it is *The Count of Monte Cristo*.

“What is this?” Damian asks, mildly suspicious.

“Tea,” Tim says. He tries to find where he left off on the laptop screen. “Just lemon, right? You stopped adding sugar?”

“Yes,” Damian says. Tim glances down and across the table as Damian reaches for the mug. His hands are trembling, just slightly, and he pulls them back onto his lap without picking up the tea. His shoulders, now broader than they were two or three years ago, are set back and squared. The younger boy frowns at the book.
“It’s not drugged,” Tim offers.

“Why do you try to make others talk to me when you’re concerned?” Damian asks bluntly. His voice, whether with emotion or puberty or both—Tim can’t tell—quivers halfway through. In an attempt at self-recovery, the last word is angry and bitten off like Damian is furious.

“What?” Tim freezes and stops sneaking glances. He looks directly at Damian over the laptop screen.

Damian is staring straight ahead and won’t look at him.

“You don’t want me here,” Damian decides, slamming the book shut. He stands and tucks it beneath his arm and Tim slams the laptop closed and rises to his feet.

They regard each other, on opposite sides and ends of the table. Damian is scowling but his eyes are filling with unusual tears. Tim swings from irate to guilty in a heartbeat, like the click of a camera shutter, just as Damian drops his gaze to the floor. He’s flushing red, all the way up his brown neck and into his ears, past the little crescent scar on one side of his chin that stays starkly white.

“I’m sorry,” Tim says, swallowing hard. It’s not even worth fighting over the accusation when he knows how true it is.

“You don’t want to deal with me.” Damian clutches the book under his arm more tightly. Tim can see the tension in the muscles of his arms and hands. “You attempt to push me toward Grayson or Stephanie.”

This is exactly why, Tim wants to shout at him. Because you’re effing explosive and difficult. It’s an improvement that I’m not afraid you’ll throw a knife at my head.

But he doesn’t, his jaw working while he plots out a course.

“It’s easier for you to talk to them.” Tim considers walking around the table but doesn’t, not yet.

“Because they try,” Damian snaps and Titus lifts his head and whines.

Tim is motionless and stinging, like he’s been slapped. He forces himself to breathe evenly and slowly. It’s the fear toxin, he keeps reminding himself. It makes everything worse.

But the problem is, he also knows it’s true. And now he can’t even apologize for exposing Damian to the toxin and fighting for him to be out there as Robin without Damian absolutely taking it the wrong way.

And so he guesses the only way through is to plunge right in, unless he wants to leave things more of a mess.

“I’m sorry,” he says again. “I’m worried about you but I’m crap at this. We’re crap at this, the two of us together. Maybe that’s my fault. But I’m worried you aren’t talking to anyone and I don’t know where to start without it blowing up in my face.”

It’s proof how much Damian, at least, has matured that he doesn’t act like Tim’s confession is a personal insult or attack on his character. He sits back down quickly, still taut and hard like marble. Quietly and slowly, he sets the closed book down on the table.

Tim lowers himself halfway into his own chair, then changes his mind and goes around the table to
take the seat next to Damian. It’s still weird to him, that when they’re close he has to look up instead of down or just over. They aren’t close often enough for him to be used to it, as new as it is.

“So, uh,” Tim ventures, his hands on his knees. He wants to cross his arms but he suspects it will come off as too critical and removed. “Do you want to talk?”

“No,” Damian says, the word clipped. He does cross his arms and Tim notices again that the kid’s fingers are still trembling, right before Damian closes them into fists.

He’s glad he noticed or he might have left at that, being shut out after bearing the brunt of an outburst. Instead, Tim thinks.

“Do you want to go do something?” he offers, attempting an olive branch.

“No,” Damian says again. His voice cracks and Tim doesn’t mention it. His mouth hangs open like he’s going to say something else.

Tim waits.

“I want to stay at the Manor until Father returns.”

Tim blinks. “Why? He’s not gonna be in a good mood.”

And Damian looks over at him then, his green eyes shadowed by his long lashes, a thing he certainly inherited from Talia. He looks less like Bruce the older he gets, Tim thinks. But right now, his entire face is drawn with repressed emotion— it’s that learned blankness to mask feeling.

“He isn’t safe.”

When Tim’s confusion means he doesn’t jump to reassure Damian the way he knows Dick might, Damian’s mouth twitches into a little scowl bunched up to the left.

“He will not defend himself as well if he’s there as Bruce.”

“No.” Tim sighs. “He won’t. But he’ll be smart, Damian. He’ll fight back some if he has to. And Jim’s there, and the guards. Jim will shoot to kill if he’s got a good reason.”

This seems to console the younger boy just a little and Damian slumps back in the chair, his perfect posture ebbing out of him.

“Tt.”

“We could go to the marina,” Tim says, gears in his mind working quickly. “We could sweep the Port Adams side of the bay, and the coastline. I don’t think we’ll see anything but we could at least rule it out while it’s daylight. And if we don’t find anything, then at least we’ve gotten out instead of just hiding out here in the dark.”

“Which marina?” Damian asks and Tim knows he’s already decided to come.

“Bristol Cove,” Tim says after a moment. “We can take the older motorboat and we don’t even have to drive into Gotham.”

“Okay.” Damian nods. “I’ll pack the binoculars.”

“Grab that waterproofed Audubon, the one for coastal birds,” Tim adds. “It’ll be a good excuse if anyone gets close enough to ask what we’re doing. I’ll bring my Nikon with the telephoto lens.”
Damian nods again and leaves the library, clicking his tongue for the dogs to follow. They both rouse themselves from slumber and obey. Tim stores the laptop in his room and packs one of the smaller coolers from Alfred’s secondary pantry room with water bottles and some food.

The drive is spent in silence except for a brief conversation about whether or not ambient noise counts as music, mostly because of the Eluvium album Tim’s phone auto plays when it connects to the Bluetooth speakers in the car.

They’re fifteen minutes out from the wet slip docks with the motor humming, a salty mist on their faces and the white-capped wake rippling behind them when Tim motions to Damian in the bow to catch his attention.

“Wanna pilot?”

He doesn’t have to ask twice.

Damian takes his place in the stern, a hand on the rudder, and they turn southwest after curving around the jutting arm of wooded land that separates Bristol neighborhoods from the bridge that leads into Gotham. The city comes into view first in glimpses through the marshy underbrush and young, thin trees– this area hasn’t been forested for long. Most of the plant life was put in partly as conservation effort, partly as a shield between the pricey waterfront housing and the stark edge of Gotham that crowds the island banks.

The boat slows and Tim checks over his shoulder to see if Damian is alright, but the younger boy has one hand still on the rudder and a very worn, tattered copy of the bird field guide spread open on his knees. Tim scans the coastline instead and sees a tall, thin bird with a pale blue peaked head and knobbed knee joints standing in the shallows– it’s thrusting its beak beneath the water and comes up with a speared fish. It spreads gray wings and beats them, lifting into the spring sky. The boat resumes speed.

It’s chillier out here in the bay wind than it was at the Manor, even with the noon sun overhead. Tim shivers even though he’s wearing a jacket. Damian has a hoodie on, zipped all the way up and with the hood drawn tight around his face.

They hug the coast around Cape Carmine and head out into more open waters as they cut across the bay inlet bordered by Sprang and the Expressway. It’s all gentrified waterfront property now, bleeding over from the financial district and the Upper East Side, until the few taller buildings that block the view of Port Adams.

Damian cuts the engine and they drift on mildly choppy water. They’ve only seen a few other recreational boats south of the Kane bridge; it’s still too cold to be enticing to many and the city isn’t fully recovered.

“Bird-watching is a poor alibi here,” Damian says.

Tim shrugs a shoulder. “I don’t really think anyone’s gonna ask. And we’ve got my camera, too.”

Damian is already scanning the first section of Port Adams through the binoculars and Tim joins him with the camera lens.

“Damian,” Tim says after a few minutes of looking. There’s nothing except a crew of stevedores in hardhats moving boxes out of containers with forklifts. The crates have import stickers and look like maybe electronics. It doesn’t look suspicious but something else has been bothering Tim, nagging at him. “Do you think it was…too easy to catch Scarecrow?”
“Yes,” Damian says almost immediately. “I initially considered it a demonstration of our combined skills, but he did not resist as much as he usually does.”

“He wanted to be caught,” Tim decides. “Or, he didn’t care.”

“Whatever his goal was, he had already accomplished it,” Damian agrees.

“I’m sorry,” Tim says, lowering the camera. Damian lets the binoculars drop on the strap around his neck. “That you had to deal with toxin.”

“I appreciated you vouching for me,” Damian says, and Tim is surprised to see the boy’s lower lip tremble before he turns his head sharply and hauls the binoculars back up to hide his eyes. “I’m sorry I complicated things.”

Tim bites his own lip and then takes the few steps from bow to stern and bends at the waist to put a hand on Damian’s shoulder. Damian tenses so much that Tim wants to jerk his hand back as if burned, but instead he just moves it slowly away.

“It wasn’t your fault. You helped. It’s shitty that either of us got dosed but it wasn’t your fault. You didn’t screw up.”

Damian’s throat works as he swallows, the binoculars still up, and he gives the barest of nods.

“Thank you,” he says quietly.

“Let’s look over the port once and then just boat around,” Tim says, adjusting his camera lens and considering the battery icon on the wide screen. “Maybe actually use that bird guide.”

The younger boy leaves the rudder and opens the cooler Tim packed. He offers one of the water bottles while Tim is adjusting the ISO settings on the camera.

They look for an hour, sometimes revving the engine back to life to readjust course. They spend a couple minutes every ten or fifteen looking out toward the horizon or pointing up or down the coast, in case anyone is watching them.

“Those windows are clean,” Damian says abruptly, when they are going into the second hour. He twists the cap back on his water bottle and studies through the binoculars while Tim hurriedly points the camera. “Just on the north corner of that warehouse.”

“I see them,” Tim says. They’ve been cleaned recently, the tall rectangles glistening in the sun compared to the dingy glint of the surrounding windows. It doesn’t look like office space. “That’s a good place to start tonight. But we can’t do much more now.”

“We’re going north,” Damian announces, reclaiming his place by the motor. “There’s a sanctuary we can see from the bay.”

“Sounds good,” Tim says, noting the location of the building and how busy the surrounding docks look. “Take it away, Captain.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Damian grin.
The Campus

The bench in the hallway feels like it was designed to be uncomfortable, or maybe the designer never expected anyone to actually sit on it. It’s a flat, slatted piece with no back, intended to match the modern-contemporary style of another building maybe in the seventies and moved to this corridor of offices out of someone’s reluctance to get rid of furniture.

The hard linoleum tiles of the floor beneath it are dingy and gritty in a way that no amount of mopping or waxing will fix for more than five or six minutes but the walls have been freshly painted an inoffensive, bland beige that reminds Jason a bit too much of skin. It’s almost the exact shade as the girl he’d had a crush on in seventh grade, with her straight blonde bangs and purple-wrapped braces and Silly Bandz from her wrist almost to elbow.

He’d bought six packs of Silly Bandz at the gas station a block from the school with pocket money Alfred had given him. He traded them all, in one fell swoop, for a coveted mermaid a stingy eighth grader owned. He’d left it anonymously on Kaitlyn’s desk and been ratted out by Daniel Trescher within fifteen minutes. She’d shot the both of them dirty looks like it was some kind of trick, added the mermaid to her wrist, and ignored Jason for a solid three weeks.

Jason had been so embarrassed and distracted he’d missed two questions on the history test Bruce had reviewed with him for that morning.

Now, staring at the wall with a thick glossy folder on his lap, he’s annoyed that the paint reminded him of her and even more annoyed that he’d missed the two questions. The sting of it has only slightly lessened in the past decade; Kaitlyn he’d gotten over almost immediately when he’d furiously realized how many Lunchables he could have gotten with the cost of six packs of those stupid rubber bracelets. But the history test is still a bitter memory.

His meeting with his capstone professor isn’t for another twenty minutes but after the utter insanity of the world since Sunday night at the museum, he’s decided to play it safe and show up early just in case. He’s already been sitting on the bench from hell for fifteen minutes but staring at the Kaitlyn’s Fading Summer Tan Paint is better than pacing his apartment or second-guessing all his work at the packed Gotham U library.

Jason won’t even let himself flip through the folder, filled with summaries of his student teaching hours and his evaluations, footnoted and indexed and intertwined with education theory references. If he sees a single typo now it’s going to drive him out of his fricking mind and he will actually, exhausted as he is, lose sleep over it.

He made that mistake last semester with a Psychology of the Family Unit research paper, not that he wasn’t already a bit of a mess after that class just in general. Six weeks in, he’d gone out of his way to walk by the last apartment he’d lived with Catherine not once but four times. Stephanie had joined him once with lattes. Trying to complain to Bruce about an idiotic development theory inadvertently got him a hug and a night all but locked in the library with a copy of de Maurier’s *Rebecca*.

It shouldn’t have been consoling– a horror novel with those particular themes– but it was all the same. Or maybe it was Alfred’s beef bourguignon and joining Tim and Dev later for some weird British comedy show that Damian openly hated but stayed in the room to mock.

But that was a semester ago, his penultimate semester, and he drums his fingers on the slick green cover of one of the last things he has to submit for his undergrad career.
Fourteen minutes.

Turning it in is both a huge deal and only a small blip of the series of tasks he has to finish. The bigger task was actually writing the fucking thing and putting it all the hours student teaching and volunteering before that.

And it would be so nice, so freaking wonderful, if the last two weeks of his college experience were actually the biggest source of stress. But no, he’s fled his apartment—his three bedroom place with regulation windows and twin beds and dressers and a pack of extra toothbrushes and a cabinet of sealed snacks—to escape to the relative calm of dead week.

Because sitting outside his professor’s office for almost an hour thinking about seventh grade Kaitlyn is easier than being at home feeling wretched because he missed five calls on his school and work phone during the two days he was at the Manor or patrolling. The fact that he forgot the phone at his place makes him want to slam his face against a wall, even if he knows he won’t.

“Mr. Wayne, this is Kendall Chalmers with social services. I know your paperwork says you’re not active until the end of May, but I also see that you’ve finished all the training and I was wondering if you were free to take a fourteen year old boy on respite for a day or two. His foster mom is in the hospital.”

“Mr. Wayne, this is Kendall again, I hope you’re alright and can get back to me soon. I know it’s after midnight but I have another teen I really need a place for just until tomorrow afternoon, maybe the day after.”

"Mr. Wayne, this is Mr. Chalmers again. It’s pretty early, maybe eight, and we have two brothers who need a home just for the week. One of them is under your preferred age range, but I’d hate to split them up unless I have to.”

Five. Two more Jason can’t even remember now.

No, he can. He just doesn’t want to think about it. It’s not whatever opinion Kendall Chalmers holds of him now—it’s that he left six kids stranded. It doesn’t matter that he couldn’t have taken them all. He could have taken at least two—maybe even three if CPS was willing to overlook some rules for a few days—and instead he was running the city with guns and then sleeping at the Manor. He’d returned Kendall Chalmers’ calls as soon as he’d heard the messages and only gotten voicemail.

He knows he helped some on patrol, especially that first night, but he also suspects that maybe, maybe, they would have been just peachy without him. And the second night was a joke. If Tim was gonna throw himself and Damian into the fray no matter what Bruce said, it wasn’t like Jason could do much to stop them either. And they had, after all, bagged Scarecrow.

In retrospect, he even regrets yelling at Bruce about it, and then calling Dick to yell complaints at him, too. He’s tempted to call Bruce right now and spill his guts: I’m sorry, I was scared shitless, you were in bad shape when I found you, I’m a spineless marshmallow and can’t stand seeing anybody else hurt especially Damian but I’ll blow up one of your cars if you tell him.

Jason doesn’t pull out his cell phone. Either of them, now that he’s decided to never go anywhere without both.

Ten minutes.

Despite his better judgment, Jason flips the cover open and scans the title page. It’s formatted
correctly, titled, dated, says T. Jacob Wayne just like his legal name on all the college paperwork, the forged birth certificate, the adoption papers.

He slaps it closed before he can go any further and regret it. He has enough regrets right now, he doesn’t need anything else.

“You look like you hate the world more than usual today.” A voice breaks the silence of the hallway. Stephanie Brown drops a heavy purple backpack on the floor and sits on the bench next to him without asking.

“Thanks,” Jason says, leaning back against the wall. “I’m working on my mean teacher face. What are you doing this far from the library?”

“Begging Professor Clayton to give me a study guide for her final, when she comes in for office hours.” Steph yawns and tugs on her hair. “Be one hundred percent honest: is my braid a disaster? I tried to do it while walking.”

Jason glances at the held out braid. “It’s pretty bad.”

“Ugh.” Steph jerks the hairband out and combs her fingers through the tangled hair.

“I don’t know if I would have even called it a braid,” Jason comments, watching her face. “Maybe a confused rope.”

“Shut up.” Steph answers, fingers threading strands together again. “Unless you’re going to fix it, the comments box is closed.” There’s a pause, halfway down the braid. “You…you don’t think you could fix it, do you?”

Jason barks a laugh and shakes his head. He begins to roll the folder in his hand and then stops himself, smoothing it flat.

“No,” he says.

“Figures.” Steph sighs. She twists the hair up into a messy bun instead and wraps the hairband around it a few times. “What are you here for, anyway?”

“Turning this in.” Jason taps the folder against his knees.

“What an awful week.” Steph exhales and leans back next to him against the wall. “And it’s only Wednesday.”

“Like old times.” Jason says and he realizes a second later that he’s failed to keep the bitter anger out of his voice as much as he should have. Steph bumps his shoulder with hers.

“C’mon, chin up, Nerdbird. We’ll survive.”

“I thought that was your nickname for Tim,” Jason says suspiciously, drumming his fingers on the bench to fight the desire to roll the folder again. He hasn’t smoked a single cigarette in over a year but he’s suddenly glad they aren’t for sale anywhere on campus.

“Nerdface is my occasional, and loving, term of endearment for Tim. But you’ve exposed yourself as one of them with your disgustingly perfect GPA and weird enthusiasm in Film Studies.” Steph leans forward and unzips the front pocket of her backpack and sits back up with a pack of gum. She unwraps a piece, the smell of tangerine filling the air, and holds out the pack in offering. He takes a piece.
“Good gravy, I never should have taken a class with you,” Jason retorts, the syrupy tang of tropical flavoring flooding his mouth as he bites down on the pale orange gum. “Even if it was filler. This is so fucking sweet, how do you stand it.”

“Practice,” Steph says, snapping the gum in her mouth. “And an inability to just buy a new kind before this one is gone. I grabbed it by accident. And that was a good class.”

“Yeah,” Jason says, holding his hand out. “Lemme see what’s in this shit.”

Steph plops the half-finished package of gum on his palm and he flings it down the hall. It lands in a round, black trash can with a rustle of paper and Steph gasps and punches his arm.

“Jay! I was starting to like it!”

He pulls his wallet out and opens it; there’s $3 leftover from paying for parking somewhere earlier and he reaches around her to tuck it in her backpack.

“Have mercy on your soul and get something that won’t melt your teeth.”

“A Wayne is never late,” Steph says near his head. Jason shoots her a look. “Nor is he early.”

“Stop,” he says, fighting a grin. The professor goes into his office without a backward glance or waving for him to follow. Jason stands anyway.

“He arrives precisely when Bruce means him to.”

“We aren’t talking about this until you finish the book,” Jason warns her and Steph gives him a thumbs up and drags her backpack off the floor.

Less than a minute later, Jason is standing in his professor’s office watching the man tape a piece of printer paper with ‘SENIOR CAPSTONE FINALS SOC 463’ in scribbled sharpie onto a cardboard box. He plunks the box down on his desk and Jason drops his folder into it.

“That’s all?” he asks, feeling the weight of the work slide off his shoulders.

“That’s all,” the professor confirms, setting up a laptop on the desk. “You’re free. Go eat or sleep or whatever you gave up to survive the semester.”

And then Jason is out in the hallway again, bewildered by the sense of displacement and lack of schedule. He’s still got a final ahead but it’s a week away and even if grades won’t go up for a bit, he’s pretty sure by this point of his class standing. The only thing now weighing on him is the heartsore ache he has at not knowing what ended up happening with any of those kids.

He looks one way and then the other and Steph is twenty feet down the hall scowling at a note
pinned to a door.

“Short stuff,” he calls.

“She’s not coming in today. Office hours cancelled,” Steph moans. “And did you just call me ‘short Steph’?”

“No, but I fricking should’ve.” Jason laughs. “Food?”

“I have another paper to edit,” Steph takes a deep breath and exhales, her shoulders drooping.


Steph trudges toward him. “You said the magic words. I’m coming.”

They walk to the student center together and, despite the slight chill in the spring air, end up taking the food outside to the rubberized picnic tables set on a concrete circle next to a fountain that’s been turned off and drained until the risk of freezing is past.

Jason’s only two bites into his cheese fries when Steph looks up from her phone and chases a bite of her burger with a sip of soda.

“So,” she says, slowly, like she’s still feeling out the atmosphere, “that was the first time you’ve been out in a while.”

“Yes,” he agrees, scraping a French fry through the neon orange cheese. He’s glad Alfred isn’t there to see how much he enjoys it, despite all the older man’s efforts to culture Jason’s palate. His efforts backfired and merely expanded Jason’s repertoire.

“Are you, like, okay?”

“You don’t actually have your psychology degree yet, Dr. Brown,” Jason says. He catches her eye to make sure she knows he’s teasing and then he shrugs. “I’m okay. Not great, but I’m okay going out. It’s just other stuff.”

“Tim thinks you’re pissed at him.”

“Shrink and mediator. You’re moving fast.” Jason offers a French fry and she accepts it, but doesn’t look rebuked by his dry tone or resistance. “No, I’m not pissed at Tim. I was fucking furious but I got some sleep. Damian would’ve gone out anyway and at least he was with someone. And they got him.”

“You should maybe tell him that.” Steph’s drink is already down to ice, the slurping noise loud in the spring quiet of campus. It’s not warm enough today for students to be claiming the outdoor spots, not when there are finals to study for and the tease of a few hot days the week before to make the cold seem even sharper.

Jason looks down at his chilled, gloopy cheese and the remaining few fries. “You aren’t going to?” he asks.

“I’m not your delivery boy,” Steph shoots back, raising an eyebrow. “I’m just trying to circumvent an unnecessary family explosion.”

“How are you?” Jason returns, finishing off the fries.

“Stressed,” Steph admits. “This was basically the worst week for any kind of disaster. I have about
a zillion things to do and a hundred decisions to make after that and I’m getting antsy even just sitting here.”


Steph’s relief is visible in the way she relaxes, just slightly. She bunches up the burger wrapper in her fist and begins nervously passing the foil back and forth between her hands, staring at it.

“I got into the graduate program at Pitt,” Steph says quietly. “And Michigan.”

“That’s awesome!” Jason exclaims, genuinely happy for her. It’s about time for some good news for somebody. “Gorram, Steph, that’s great.”

She’s still staring at the foil pinched between her fingers and his cheered mood dissipates rapidly.

“…but?” he prompts.

“The admittance counselors at both told me they don’t announce GA positions until a week or two before the semester starts, but I’m an ‘unlikely candidate’ as a first year new to the school.” Steph pops the lid off her paper cup and fishes out a piece of ice to suck on. “So, between tuition and rent I’m kinda thinking about taking a year off and just working. This summer won’t make a dent, not even if I work two jobs.”

Jason bites the inside of his mouth and then just looks at her while he thinks.

“What?” she demands defensively when she looks up. She gets another piece of ice and chews it.

“Bruce would help.”

“Yeah, and he did. A foundation scholarship got me through here debt-free but I’m gonna have to grow up sometime,” Steph says. A moment later her expression falters and she puts her hands over her face. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it like that,” she mumbles through her palms. “I just…I mean, he’s not actually my dad. I’m eventually going to have to stop just pretending I’m a Wayne.”

“Bruce doesn’t pay my tuition,” Jason says, torn between defending himself and comforting her. “I mean, he did, that first year. But I had some money. I invested well.”

“Of course you did,” Steph says wearily. “I’m sorry I’m just being an awful person right now. Ignore me.”

“Steph.” Jason reaches across the table and pulls her hands off her face. “You might not be a Wayne but you’re one of us. The last thing you should worry about is money or student loans. We can figure out something.”

“Thanks.” Steph exhales, long and slow. “I need to think about it. I’m not even sure I want to move. I was just so focused on finishing this year I didn’t even really ask myself how much I wanted the next part. Don’t say anything?”

“Mums the word,” Jason promises.

“So, what was eating you alive?” Steph asks, shaking herself and setting her shoulders back. “I swear if this was one of those mopey book ending moods, I’m making you finish my papers for me.”

“Nah.” All the panic and stress of the missed calls trickles back in and he can’t even rise to joke
around. “Just foster care stuff. Some kids needed a place to stay during the Arkham break and I’d left my phone at my place.”

“Shit,” Steph says sympathetically. “Well. There’ll be other calls. I’m sure they found somebody.”

Neither of them acknowledge out loud that this isn’t necessarily true and Jason tries not to think about a bunch of exhausted kids sitting in a social services office at three in the morning while they overhear useless phone calls.

“Yeah,” he says instead, to the first part. “Just have to actually answer next time.”

“It might mean not going out, then,” Steph says cautiously, watching his face. He can feel her examining him for a reaction.

Jason has been thinking this all day but hasn’t put it into actual words, hasn’t voiced it to anyone or even himself to see how he feels. He’s gotten used to being reserve staff but now that he’s moving from theory into practice even faster than he expected with social services, he’s finally facing the fact that there’s no way he can maintain a nightlife with a teen asleep down the hall. He doesn’t have the luxury of Alfred or long-term commitment. An injury will be nearly impossible to hide, not to mention the problem of leaving a kid alone for hours with no explanation.

He nods. “It probably will. It might be, well, fuck. It might end up being kind of permanent.” Jason feels something in himself protest a little at this, a small kind of death and he knows as soon as he says it that it’s true and it won’t go back to being a different way. And he isn’t sure if he’s relieved or angry, only that it’s been a long time coming and he’s been avoiding it. Stubborn tears fill his eyes and he ducks his head, rubbing at the tears with cold, hard fingers. “Jiminy fricking cricket.”

Steph is still for a long minute and then she reaches across the table and squeezes his shoulder.

“Hey. You’re one of us. Either way.”

“Yeah,” Jason collects himself and ties his hurricane of conflicted feelings up again, like brown packages bound with twine; he’ll examine them later when he’s not sitting at a picnic table with Stephanie Brown in the middle of campus. “Weren’t you whining about a paper? Go write. I need to go to the store anyway, my fridge is empty. I’ll call Tim.”

“You sure?” she asks, standing and shouldering her bag.

Jason does actually feel better and he nods, gathering their lunch trash and standing with her. He knows he hasn’t really processed some of the decisions he’s been putting off but they feel like they’re waiting patiently instead of barreling toward him like a wrecking semi-truck.

“Thanks for lunch,” she says, giving him a quick hug. “And talking. Finals make everything worse.”

“Anytime,” he says sincerely. “Get some sleep. I’ll go out tonight if you need me to, a last hurrah or whatever the frick it ends up being.”

“I might take you up on that,” Steph says, yawning as if on cue. “I was out this morning like when even the moon gave up and went to bed. Something about a park and looking for evidence, Tim was more awake than me. There’s gonna be stuff tonight after Bruce goes to Arkham.”

Jason freezes.

“Bruce went where?”
“Arkham. Dent or something, didn’t somebody tell you? Your face says no. Yeah, it’s like a big deal or something. Call Tim.”

Jason’s got his phone in his hand before she finishes talking and she gives him a tired wave just as he holds it to his ear and strides across campus toward the block where he parked.

“Tim,” he says, as soon as the younger man answers. There’s a rushing, windy sound in the background. “I’m not pissed at you. But what the hell is going on?”
The Asylum

It is strange to see Arkham Asylum in the broad, clean light of a spring day. Wind pushes gently on the thin trees, planted years ago as a bluff against the putrid air from the sewage treatment plant that shares the small island. They’ve never thrived here and look sickly in the slightly overgrown grass and late April dandelions.

The building itself, so imposing at night, looks tired and run-down in the sunshine. Years of damp, saltwater air have taken their toll on the gray stone and it is mossy in some places, crumbling in others. The interior walls have been replaced and reinforced countless times but the exterior walls have been largely neglected, repaired here and there with a mismatched mortar dull white against the original, green-tinged work.

Bruce stands at the main door, which is not the towering set of twin doors up the stone steps near the front of the building-- those have been long-ago sealed over inside, made into a backing wall for one of the steel cage guard stations. The main door now is a metal one, with a barred plexiglass window only a few inches across, and peeling, flecking brown paint. It opens onto a flat concrete patio where he waits with Jim Gordon to be buzzed in.

In Bruce’s opinion, the smell here at Arkham’s mouth is one of the singularly worst smells in the world. And he’s traveled enough to have a broad range of unsavory things for comparison. The stench of the sewage treatment plant mixes with the antibacterial bleach of the cell blocks within, and it stings his nostrils.

His cheek, the burn mostly faded and now entirely covered by stage makeup, still irritates him. It itches like poison, enough to distract him from his throbbing knee. He knows Alfred is upset that he won’t consent to using crutches again for a day or two, and he’s getting close to reneging on his vow not to do so at home, but even as Bruce Wayne he’s defensively reluctant to show any sign of weakness walking the halls of Arkham. Alfred must understand this, or he would have insisted a bit more firmly.

Between the smell, the knee, the burn, the meeting ahead, it should not be a difficult thing to focus on the present but it is nonetheless. Bruce has not been sleeping well, and in his already limited window for sleep it is a significant blow.

When he closes his eyes, he can hold back memories. But when he slips into actual slumber, his defenses are lowered. His dreams have been fragmented things, full of the scent of roses and green wick. The scrape of prickly vines and cold tile and the heat of skin both tie him to troubled sleep and then shove him abruptly out of it, into wakefulness in the dark.

And he knows it’s because of Ivy, but it isn’t Ivy that’s waking him over and over.

He had been fully present, or near it, when Jason found him with Poison Ivy.

He had not been in control of himself before that.

Bruce’s resistance to her mind control is a tempered, practiced thing but at some point during that night-- due to distraction or exhaustion-- it faltered. He carefully catalogued the activity on the comm and the records available, leaving only four minutes of absence from himself.

She had intended to restrain him and leave him, he’s certain-- but the victory of actually subduing him must have been too tempting to leave without the seal of a triumphant and warning kiss.
It was when she kissed his cheek, the lipstick full of toxin that would burn and melt into him later, that he came to-- bound with vines and jerking his head forward so that her kiss scraped and pulled away. She wasn’t a stupid woman, but her blind spots were organic things.

Rope would have held him longer, but not much. The vines had not yet turned woody and hard, as they would have with another few minutes of growth, and they fell away under blades in the gauntlets like thin flower stems.

By the time Red Hood found them, Poison Ivy was the one restrained and Bruce was angry with her, with himself, disoriented but hiding it fairly well, and he thought that would be the end of it. His knee was the worst part at that point.

He had not prepared himself for dreams.

He keeps drifting, flashes of the wild sense that he lacks control, the edges of dread and rage and hatred and shame that he has locked away over and over and over again threatening to spill out of his sleeping moments and into waking hours.

Bruce battens it down with a tight jaw and silence, avoiding questions and close inspection.

The entrance alarm at Arkham buzzes, a light on the plastic keypad turns green, and Jim opens the door. They step in together without speaking. There’s no need-- Jim made it to Arkham forty-five minutes before Bruce and arranged things, then came back outside for him. Alfred will wait in the car, doing whatever he does when he waits for Bruce. Bruce sometimes thinks he prays. They will not talk about it.

With effort, Bruce reviews the details of the cases as a way to ground himself and focus. If Harvey Dent is offering information that doesn’t mean that Bruce is just a pair of ears. There is, he has found, a certain way to listen and talk to Harvey Dent to insure it is Dent and not Two-Face talking.

Two-Face would gut him in an instant, in front of guards if he had something to use as a weapon. They will not be allowed to be close, in the room. There will be no trusting hand on Dent’s shoulder, a reminder of times before, when things were less complicated and criminal.

There will be restraints, hands cuffed to the table and feet shackled to the bolts near the chair. The chair itself might be screwed into place; the table definitely will be. Depending on the room, they will be separated by bullet- and shatter-resistant glass. There will be a guard present, two in the hallway. Jim will stay nearby. They will all be armed.

Bruce takes off his watch for the metal scanner. They are checked through security, he signs forms and is given a pass. It’s a paper sticker that will leave residue on his suit. Lanyards and plastic visitor IDs have not been allowed at Arkham for years because of the potential strangulation usage.

The churning in his gut now is not fear-- Bruce isn’t afraid of Arkham. He hates it, hates that it is necessary. But coming here as Bruce is a strange experience that opens up many things he finds it easier to suppress as Batman.

Batman bypasses security measures, the wait in the halls, the order of the faulty system. It is the part of Bruce that has the ability to be consumed by the problem or task at hand.

But Bruce, waiting and quiet, faking uneasy smiles and small talk with the guards, is not so fortunate. There are the remnants of dreams to contend with, the stony silence of Jim Gordon and the ways that Dent of all people drags tension between them. The haunting wisps of severed relationships, of what might have been instead, flit through his mind.
A year before the incident, Bruce leaned over a billiards table in his own home, lined up a shot and sank a five ball in a corner pocket while Harvey Dent sipped a glass of gin and tonic. He can still remember the way the tumbler was fogged with condensation, the wet ring it left on the bar napkin. The promises for financial support, the talk of political ideals, the feeling that maybe, finally, Gotham could change for the better-- they exchanged plans over the green felted table. Even with the cowl hidden beneath their feet and not part of the equation, there had been a sense of power and purpose and hope.

Those dreams sloughed away with half of Harvey Dent’s face and his grasp on sanity.

Bruce still believes in Harvey Dent, but he knows it’s been a long time since that belief has been for anything more than just a chance at some mental stability and a simple life recovering. Their friendship, with the murder attempts tipping into the double digits now, will never be what it could have been.

They have been inside Arkham for almost thirty minutes before a guard ushers him into the room where Dent is sitting, chained as predicted. They’ve forgone the glass and the table between them is open. Jim doesn’t come into the room, but a guard stands by the door. Bruce checks behind him before sitting down; he is slightly but not entirely reassured by the sight of Jim right outside.

Bruce is not sweating with anxiety but he’ll be going home tense all over just the same.

“Harvey,” he says in greeting.

The other man lifts his face. His fingers, splayed on the table, twitch in habit but there’s no coin. One side of Dent’s face is perfect, unmarred-- slightly aged, but with the luck of a born politician is still handsome and bright. The other side, a gaping wound of shriveled muscle and deformity for years, is not the purplish horror Bruce expects. It is stretched over with something skin-toned, artificial and sunken around the cheeks and eyes but clearly the initial stages of a more permanent mask.

“Bruce,” Dent replies. “It’s been a while.”

Bruce is a detective and a man of logic, intellect. He has a hard time walking away from puzzles and hates missing pieces. There are so many things he wants to clear up, wants to push to have answers for, but he knows it would be counter-productive and he settles on leaving it all for later.

“You’re looking well,” he says instead. “They told me you’ve been improving.”

“I’m not a financial report.” Dent sounds almost bitter, but the healthy side of his mouth twists in a smile. “You always were focused on results. You’re the worst optimist I’ve ever met.”

“I know plenty of people who’d agree with you,” Bruce says wryly. “I’m hardly an optimist, though.”

“Compared to the rest of us?” Dent looks around even though the room is empty. It’s symbolic. “Damn it, Bruce, you’re downright cheerful when it comes to Gotham. I never did understand why.”

He sounds so strange it takes Bruce a moment to place it as the absence of Two-Face’s characteristic growl. There’s still a hoarseness, the result of damaged vocal cords, but Dent isn’t playing it up for effect.

“They said you wanted somewhere quieter.” A moment after the words are out of Bruce’s mouth he realizes he might have misjudged. Dent’s countenance darkens and he looks down at the table.
“Business,” Dent says. “Yeah. I have to admit, I wasn’t sure you’d come. I wasn’t sure they’d let you.”

“Who in this city could stop me, if I wanted it?” Bruce asks, his challenge full of cheerful mirth. He’s not a terrible actor, not with the practice and the lessons from Alfred. And he needs Dent to not derail right now.

It works, and Dent laughs.

“You arrogant son of a bitch. You know, that’s what I liked about you? Rules didn’t have to apply to you and you lived like they did anyway. It meant something to me.”

And for a brief moment Bruce is more certain than he has been in years that Dent actually doesn’t know he’s Batman. It passes almost as quickly, though, because Dent matches his gaze and his next words are hard.

“They said that Gotham is a better place now. It’s not as bad in here, ever since Joker went out in a bodybag. But it’s Gotham, Bruce. It’s just pretending. It’s not real.”

“There are always bumps, Harv,” Bruce says, as gently as he can manage. “Rome wasn’t built—you know the cliche. Building codes and whatnot.”

“Rome fell,” Dent snaps. “I’m just warning you. You’re one of the last good things this city has but it’ll chew you and spit you out, too. God knows we’ve tried but you won’t always get lucky.”

A coarse grating is seeping into Dent’s voice on the last words. His remaining eyebrow tips downward and his lips bare his teeth in a sneer. It lingers for a few seconds and then he shakes himself and he’s left with a wide-eyed, anxious expression. In the table cuffs, his wrists turn and pull fretfully and his fingers flutter as if searching.

“Harvey,” Bruce says, catching his eye and trying to bring him back. The other man looks right through him, maybe seeing something internal instead of Bruce sitting across the table. “Remember the hospital fundraiser? You made fun of me for drinking Shirley Temples, in front of my date.”

“A waste of grenadine,” Dent says in a faint voice, turning his attention onto Bruce and holding it there again. “She gave me her number. I don’t think I ever called her; I went home and had my secretary double-check you weren’t a recovering alcoholic.”

“Just a lightweight,” Bruce says, though this isn’t true, not by a long shot. “She didn’t like me anyway.”

“You’ve always been terrible with women. You had almost everyone fooled. Are you still that bad?”

“Yes,” Bruce says, glad to keep him talking and at ease again. “The tailored suits help, but not for long.”

Dent doesn’t laugh but he smiles, a hollow and wistful twitch of his mouth. He leans forward over the chain linked through a ring in the table and ducks his head down, lowers his voice. It’s like sandpaper on fine wood in the room, the hum of ventilation the only other noise.

“Pam and Jon had help,” Dent says suddenly. “Not the usual. Not a doctor. They’re better now, than they used to be. But they had help and they have deals.”
“Deals?” Bruce asks, leaning forward and matching the low tone. His knee protests at the movement, the way it bends when he leans; there a sharp rap on the door behind. Jim or somebody back there must not like how close Bruce’s head is now to Dent’s. He ignores it.

“Somebody made promises, big promises. But Gotham’s got big holes right now, holes everywhere, he’s been too effective. Too many of ‘em now, too cohesive.” Dent’s hands jerk in the chains, but Bruce decides with a glance that it was a reflexive movement and not a threatening one. His wrists strain at the short chain; he’s trying to cover his face.

“Slow down, Harvey.” Bruce doesn’t touch him. “You aren’t making sense. What kind of promises?”

“Long term promises, it’s a long game, they did their part and now they have to wait. It was part of the plan. They’d kill me if they knew I told you, kill me. They think I’m confessing something.”

Dent is growing increasingly agitated. His wrists haven’t stopped tugging at the cuffs and his skin is reddening. He’s beginning to rock in the chair.

“What’s his name?” Bruce ventures, hoping to salvage something useful out of this before Dent folds entirely. “Nobody will know it was from you.”

“His name?” Dent freezes and there’s another warning knock on the door. “I tried to kill you, Bruce.”

“I know,” Bruce says. It doesn’t matter which of the times Dent means. There have been enough.

“Is it better to tell or keep my mouth shut? Which one is better? They’re not great odds.” The rocking resumes, more frantically, and Bruce breaks the rules-- he reaches out a hand and puts it on Harvey’s shoulder.

Dent’s body recoils violently and his head, pulled up without warning, slams into Bruce’s jaw.

The door behind them flies open and within a second there are shouted instructions filling the air and two guards flanking Dent and Jim bodily hauls Bruce back by his upper arm. The chair he was on tips over and clatters to the floor. Dent is shouting back, one hand trying to cover an ear and they slam him across the table.

“What the hell were you doing?” Jim demands.

“Hands flat! Don’t move!” A guard has a baton across Dent’s neck.

“It was an accident!” Bruce yells over the noise, at Jim.

“A what?”

“An accident!” Bruce roars back, rubbing his jaw.

Dent is not resisting and the guards stop yelling and the room goes quiet like the noise has been sucked out of it.

“It was a damn accident, Jim. It was fine.”

“We’re done here,” Jim decides and Bruce can’t and won’t fight him on it here, not as Bruce Wayne.

One of the guards is giving orders into his walkie-talkie and Dent begins whimpering.
“Dr. Ritter. I need to talk to Dr. Ritter.”

Bruce holds his ground for a moment and then decides it wouldn’t help to say anything else to Dent now. He leaves the room ahead of Jim and waits in the hallway where the next door requires a keycode or a remote open.

“Did he tell you anything?” Jim asks when they’ve left Dent far behind.

“Somebody helped them,” Bruce says in a low voice, after checking over his shoulder for a guard. “Not one of the doctors. They’re still planning something, but I didn’t get a name or specifics.”


“Give him the cell,” Bruce says, as they’re waved through the last gate.

“The deal was solid dirt.” Jim’s voice turns hard as they step outside into the bright light. He’s still squinting against it when he turns to Bruce. “He gave us a bunch of mumbo jumbo. Anybody could have made that up.”

“Give him the cell,” Bruce repeats. “I’ll come talk to him again.”

Jim shrugs. “The DA’s not going to be happy, but if you think you can get him to give you more…”

“He’s telling the truth, he’s lying because he’s desperate for relocation, or he’s involved. And until I know which one, I’m not willing to just leave loose ends.”

Alfred has seen them approaching and is already standing with the car door held open. Bruce pauses long enough to shake Jim’s hand in farewell and Jim steps back when Bruce ducks into the car.

“I don’t like it,” Jim says. “But I don’t have a better plan yet, so have it your way. I’ll talk to you soon.”

Jim and Alfred exchange farewells after the car door is shut and because the glass is tinted, Bruce lets his head drop back on the headrest before Jim walks away.

Alfred takes the driver’s seat a moment later and Bruce can feel him watching through the rear view mirror, even with his own eyes closed. He opens them to confirm the feeling and holds Alfred’s gaze in the reflection.

“Home, Master Bruce?” Alfred asks. It’s dangerously close to an order.

Bruce didn’t register much of his own inner state during the meeting with Dent, not beyond the conversation or his distant memories of their early friendship. But now, he feels hollow. He can still hear Dent’s final pleading with the guards ringing in his ears, smell the bleach and the phantom scent of rosewater.

His cheek burns under the makeup, his knee is spiked through with pain, his jaw throbs where Dent’s head cracked against it.

If he goes home, there will be a bed he cannot sleep well in, questions he isn’t ready to answer, concerned attitudes he doesn’t want to face. They only reason to go home would be–

“Have you heard from Damian and Tim?”
“They took the motorboat out of Bristol, Tim informed me. Birdwatching, I believe.” Alfred’s concern is already plain on his face, as plain as his reserve usually allows.

“The office, then,” Bruce says, looking out the window so he doesn’t have to see Alfred’s frown. “I have work to do.”

Instead of the car starting, there is silence. He waits, growing slightly annoyed with each passing second, until he looks toward the driver’s seat and finds Alfred with his hands on the steering wheel.

“You do no good running yourself into the ground.”

“Are we just skipping sarcasm and going straight to blunt reasoning?” Bruce asks, weary. It frightens him a little, actually, the dropping of usual pretense. It makes him feel nervous and close to being exposed and he’s not even sure what he’s hiding.

Alfred twists in the seat to look at him directly in the back of the car.

“I have put the utmost effort, short of physical restraint of some kind, to urge you to give yourself sufficient time to recover. But if you are determined to be deaf and stupid to all kinder attempts, I will not persist to the point of insanity.”

Bruce blinks and sighs. He runs a hand through his hair and then rubs his knee unconsciously, the motion halted when he realizes what he is doing and Alfred’s pointed look.

“I am aware the circumstances have been time sensitive,” Alfred says, a bit more softly. He turns back to face the windshield. “But you are far from a lone agent these days. It would not be so great a setback as you seem to believe, to remove yourself for a short time, however much a blow to your pride that may be.”

“Al,” Bruce says, leaning forward against the seat belt he’s already buckled. “I’ll take it easy, I promise. I’ll sleep tonight. But I have things I have to take care of today.”

I need to stay busy is what he means and does not say.

Alfred nods, once.

“Very well. The office.”

“I’ll stay off my knee,” Bruce relents. “As much as I can.”

The key is turned in the ignition and the engine rumbles to life. Alfred’s hand is on the gear shift, pushing it into reverse, when he speaks again.

“I suppose it’s hardly worth telling you this reckless golfing isn’t worth the toll it’s taking.”

The words are as dry and serious as ever and Bruce gives him a smile in the midst of all his turmoil, relieved at this certain sign that Alfred is choosing to move on. But his gut twists at the thought of returning the joke and he’s got Dent’s frantic words mixed with Ivy’s bitter ones and another soft voice making promises meant to be broken.

He’s silent and settles back into the seat.

“We get through this alive and I’ll stay in bed as long as you want, Al.”
The tea is steeping in the pot when Alfred Pennyworth cuts thin slices of pound cake and lays them on a plate. In a day filled with service, this act is a selfish one. He knows Kiran would be just as content with tearing open a package of Jammy Dodgers and sitting at the kitchen counter with a mug, but the formality of tea is a gift Alfred gives to himself. He knows Kiran appreciates it, certainly, but the fineness is indulgence in a patient luxury that soothes Alfred’s busy mind and hands. He consoles himself with the satisfaction of small rewards.

*There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour.*

The past days have been so hurried and frantic that tonight, before it swells fully into storm once more, he will not fill a crossword puzzle with inked letters or simply sit and chat. The price of tea, late tonight and after dinner and already misplaced in the day (proper teatime was a cup of tea hastily sipped while cutting celery), is the work of a menu and to-do list. There are things missed and overlooked that must be absorbed into the schedule of coming days, lest they fall too far behind.

He is alerted to Kiran’s arrival by the opening of a door and footsteps in the hall outside the kitchen.

“Hullo?” Kiran calls into the silence of the house, just as the egg timer chimes for the tea. He steps into the kitchen as Alfred lifts the infuser out and sets it on the edge of the sink to drain. “Oh, there you are. I’d begun to think the house empty.”

“Everyone’s gone to sleep,” Alfred answers, glancing at the clock. It’s a quarter to nine now, and most of them will sleep until ten before going down to the cave or out. He hopes that Bruce and Timothy, at the least, will sleep through their alarms and the night. Damian was in a far better mood throughout dinner and would do well with new company.

“Sorry I rushed off this morning. Had some rounds to do,” Kiran says, offering to carry the tray. “Here or the Room of Manners, then?”

“The parlor,” Alfred confirms, a slight smile tugging the corners of his mouth.

“I’ve forgotten my jacket,” Kiran says over his shoulder as he leaves the kitchen. “You’ll have to lend me one if you want me properly dressed.”

“It is an oversight I’m afraid I can’t quite allow,” Alfred answers, pausing and snatching a rag to wipe the end of the counter. He tosses it in the laundry bin after and follows into the hall, and then the parlor room. Kiran’s just setting the tray onto their usual small table.

Alfred’s left his menu ledger behind in his small pantry office and he hesitates with a hand on the chair, preparing to go back to fetch it.

“Everything alright?” Kiran asks.

And in a moment, looking over the tea things, Alfred changes his mind. He takes his seat. The menu can wait half an hour; he’ll be awake anyway, overseeing a late snack for those going down
to the Cave or out to the city.

_Better is a handful with quiet than two handfuls with toil._

“Putting some tasks off,” Alfred says, pouring cups of tea. The service is porcelain, rimmed with blue—it is not a Wayne heirloom, but his own set. “How was the hospital?”

“Bloody hell,” Kiran answers, pressing the heels of his hands against his eyes and rubbing for a second. He lets them fall away and accepts the cup of tea. “I mean that literally, for once in my sodding life. Still an absolute disaster. Thank god for the nurses. Rounds were late, and there were chart mix-ups someone at the desk caught just in time. And for every patient I sent on their merry way, I had to have conversations with two others I never want to have again. But I likely will, and tomorrow at that.”

“How long were you working before last night?” Alfred asks, taking this in. He himself hasn’t slept much, but Kiran had come into the house nearly toppling over. “And how’s your head?”

“What’s this doctoring you’re doing?” Kiran returns, his tea already half gone when he sets it down. “I worked from Sunday night on. My head’s better, thanks, but just barely. How are you? You’re not hiding any injuries or exposure to toxin or secondary illnesses, are you?”

“I’m sorry you have such cause to be suspicious in this house.” Alfred would enjoy just sitting much more if his conscience wasn’t pricking him just now, in a bothersome and insistent way. He’d rather hoped he could delay things a bit in case they went sour.

“When I worry about the lot of you, I worry about all of you,” Kiran says. He has a small plate with pound cake and he pokes it with a fork. “You’ve been a bit off, you know.”

He says this tentatively, and Alfred knows his conscience was after him with good reason.

“I’m afraid I owe you an apology,” Alfred says. And it is humbling to say but also easy, because he knows Kiran and that the younger man doesn’t hold grudges. It’s unfortunately probably why he bore the brunt of things earlier. “I’m getting old, Kirry. I ought to be accustomed to the stress of weeks like this one by now, but my stomach for them isn’t what it used to be. I’m afraid I took it out on you.”

“You let your guard down, you mean,” Kiran answers with a cheeky grin. He settles back in the chair and is chewing a mouthful of pound cake before Alfred can reply. “I’ll take it as compliment, then. You feel safe with me. No worries, Alfie.”

“You sound entirely too self-satisfied for it to be a healthy attitude,” Alfred grumbles. “You could at least pretend to be angry.”

“I’m not the actor, out of the two of us. I’ve ruined more than one holiday surprise because of misguided trust in my skills. I’ll be cheerful and you’ll just have to live with it. You’re doing alright now, then?”

Alfred sighs and savors the pound cake. “I am not entirely at ease, but I think I’ve salvaged myself enough to bear it more graciously.”

“Hm,” Kiran says.

They sit in companionable silence for several moments before Kiran sets a plate empty even of crumbs back down on the tray and clears his throat. When Alfred looks over at him, after having relaxed in the quiet and the restored routine, he’s concerned. Kiran is studying his hands the way
he does before he makes himself say something he’d rather not.

“I had reason to think you were miffed with me,” Kiran says. “And now that it’s clear you weren’t, it means Wayne’s kept his end of the deal and I’ll keep mine.” He looks up, directly at Alfred, before he says the next part. “I told him I wouldn’t stop him after three weeks, not for an emergency.”

For a moment, Alfred is too stunned to speak. It must show in his face because Kiran drops his gaze and takes his tea again, but doesn’t drink it. Alfred is bewildered both at the confession and that this was a detail he genuinely didn’t know, when so many other things make their way to him one way or another.

Kiran scuffs his shoe against the rug and then stops and frowns at it. “I don’t suppose it’s much in my favor to say I didn’t expect an actual emergency. I mostly hoped to keep him to three weeks strictly off it, at a minimum, rather than four or five weeks with cheating and excuses. But you ought to know I said I wouldn’t stop him, and I meant it. So, if you’ve been upset, you might as well properly distribute it without feeling bloody guilty.”

Alfred sighs and considers, his limbs stilled and his heart torn. Ever since the breakout, he’s been thinking more and more of Ecclesiastes and how he’d once regarded it as such a dour thing to read. It’s rather consoling now, in its frank outlook.

_Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof: and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit._

“I suppose I ought to be unhappy with you,” Alfred says. “It wasn’t the brightest thing to do, as a doctor or a friend, but I’ve done worse with similar motives. And since I’ve already set myself to put an end to my frustration with Master Bruce, it’s only fair that I don’t turn it on you instead.”

“It’s more than I likely sodding deserve.” Kiran gives him a sheepish smile. “I’ll serve out a term of uncomfortable days if you think it wise. Oversteep a cup of tea or whatever my sentence ought to be. I should have been more honest with you, at the least, from the beginning.”

“I think we’ve all suffered quite enough this week.” Alfred takes another piece of pound cake and intends to enjoy it. He purchased it from a local bakery and there’s the added pleasure of not having had to make it himself.

Kiran yawns and stifles it with a hand. “Bloody hell. I know you said you’re getting old, but I am, too, and I feel it today. Don’t give me that look. It’s going to take me days to recover and it’s made me glad all over again that I didn’t go into trauma work, primarily. Downstairs notwithstanding.”

“Will you stay here tonight?” Alfred asks. He can’t remember the last time he cleaned, properly cleaned, any of the bedrooms though it can’t have been more than seven or eight days.

“No,” Kiran shakes his head and drinks another cup of tea. “I came back out for tea, but I’ve not been to my flat since Sunday. I work tomorrow and I’d rather drive tonight and sleep the extra minutes in the morning. Ring if you need me, anyway. How’d Wayne’s thing at Arkham go?”

“About as poorly as one could expect,” Alfred confides. He will not voice the entirety of the stinging worry he felt when Bruce emerged from the building earlier. “But fell short of intentional physical assault, which I suppose is an improvement.”

“I need to pitch these,” Kiran says, studying his trainers again. “Blood isn’t a good look and I’m afraid they’re beyond my usual methods.”
“You ought to just ask,” Alfred says, amused.

Kiran looks up with a startled expression and for a moment Alfred can see exactly what he must have looked like as a child, caught in the act of doing something he wasn’t sure was allowed.

“What?”

“You’re curious about something. You might as well just ask; my skills fall short of actual mind-reading.” Alfred sets his plate and fork down and pours a last cup of tea, the liquid bubbling cheerily into the porcelain.

“Bugger me,” Kiran exclaims. “Fine, then, if you’re determined to prod instead of letting me practice some sense or patience or just minding my own sodding business. Why Wayne? Two-Face wanting to have a word with Batman I can understand, but unless he mistakenly thought Wayne an easy target, I’m missing pieces of the puzzle.”

Alfred sometimes forgets, as familiar and normal as it is now to have Kiran just around the Manor and involved in things, just how much the other man doesn’t know and has to string together. It’s not unusual for him to bring up a concern now when they’re talking alone, but he gets the sense that even those aren’t all the questions– others must be directed at others or buried.

“Mr. Dent and Master Bruce were friends, before.” Alfred has a saucer in one hand and a teacup in the other– he lets himself stare at a pattern on the rug a few feet off. He lowers his voice, just slightly, even though the rest of the Manor is asleep. “I had harbored a foolish hope, at one time, that with Mr. Dent’s influence, Bruce would give up the few years of his crusade as a youthful fling with danger and direct action. I thought then, that maybe he’d turn more to business or politics. But we were all foolishly hopeful, then, I suppose– Mr. Dent was a charming and persuasive man, but unselﬁsh and someone I was glad to welcome.

“Then things went sour, there was the attack and the burn, and I’m afraid it broke his mind. Bruce retreated into his work and Two-Face, for many years now, has held twin grudges against both parts of him. He felt betrayed by Bruce and hounded by the Batman. One was certainly more accurate a perception than the other. I don’t think Bruce has ever fully given up hoping Dent would recover, in a way; return to himself or mend a divided mind.”

“Hm,” Kiran says in response to this, looking thoughtful. He likely will mull it over for a bit before asking more questions or forming an opinion. “So, a sensitive topic, then.”

“Rather,” Alfred agrees.

“That clears up a lot, then, thanks,” Kiran says, standing. “Want me to take the tray in? I will, don’t argue. I need to go kip for what I can, after.”

Alfred rests in the empty parlor for a minute after Kiran disappears with the tray, humming as he goes.

Then he rises and stretches and sends Kiran on his way and remains in the kitchen to clean the tea things and move on to making sandwiches. He’s nearly finished when he begins to hear movement upstairs, quiet and padded steps and the sound of water running through pipes.

His hands stay busy with work and he juices oranges and then fetches his menu ledger.

Damian enters the kitchen, his cat in his arms, and he sets the creature down on the tile to serve himself a sandwich from the platter. He looks fully alert despite the hour. He gives Alfred a stiff, one-armed hug around the shoulders when he pauses beside him. It’s an automatic motion, sweet
for all its rigidity, and it warms Alfred’s heart. The past days of toxin had chased such gestures away and it’s a solace that Damian is recovered enough to not shy away from small displays.

*God our creator, we thank you for the gift of this child, entrusted to our care.*

“I assume, then, that you are going out?” Alfred asks, when Damian sits at the kitchen table. The cat jumps up onto his lap and after a plaintive mewl, is rewarded with a torn piece of spinach. Alfred watches over the counter, his pen in hand, while the cat licks the offering and rears back in offended rejection.

“ﻚﺒﺠﻌﻳ حﺮ ﺍﻤﻪﻧا ﻒﻠﺘﻠﻗ,” Damian says in a soft and serious tone, a bit chiding. He picks up the sandwich and the cat slinks off, tail twitching. “I do plan to go out.”

“Who are you going with?” Bruce’s voice, rough with sleep, carries into the room just ahead of him. He limps into view, just in the far doorway, and pauses to survey the layout. It’s old habit and Alfred has seen it happen a thousand times, but tonight Bruce looks more guarded and defensive. His question contains none of this emotion, however: it is matter-of-fact, a simple inquiry.

Damian waits until he’s swallowed to answer. “Jason.”

“How long are you going to be out?” Bruce asks. He’s as far as the counter now, in front of the sandwich platter. It’s divided in halves, one side vegetarian and the other with chipped leftover roast beef. He doesn’t take one.

“As long as the task requires,” Damian says stiffly.

“Don’t you have a biology test in the morning?” Bruce still sounds hoarse and Alfred sets aside the ballpoint pen to pour a glass of juice. He sets it in front of him wordlessly.

“I will not stay out later than three.” Damian’s bracing his shoulders, now, and Alfred prepares himself to intervene with a significant look in one direction or another. The conversation belies the nature of the subject and sounds for all the world like an average household exchange, negotiating curfew and companions.

“Two,” Bruce answers after a pause to drain half the glass of juice.

“Two-thirty. We have a two hour delay and that gives me sufficient time to sleep when I return. I’ve already studied.” Damian hasn’t eaten anymore since they began talking, but the sandwich is still in his hands.

“Fine,” Bruce says, his hand wrapped around his glass. “You stay with Jay the whole time. I’ll be downstairs and I need to know if plans change.”

“Tt.” Damian takes another bite now and Alfred ducks his head to smile quietly at the ledger.

“Tim’s downstairs?” Bruce asks a moment later.

Alfred shakes his head. “Still asleep.”

“Good.” Bruce takes a sandwich and begins to eat it, standing at the counter. Alfred snatches a plate from the waiting stack and slides it in front of him. Bruce doesn’t give any indication that he’s noticed.

“I’m taking the car,” Damian says, in a clear attempt at nonchalance. It’s a bit ruined by his voice cracking on the last word.
“You mean Jay is picking you up,” Bruce corrects.

And to his credit, Damian doesn’t scowl or argue. He shrugs one shoulder, just a slight movement Alfred suspects from familiarity with it that Damian picked up (unconsciously or not) from Timothy.

“Jason or Cassandra will pick me up.”

Alfred is aware of how Cassandra drives but he hopes that right now, at this quick concession and slight modification on Damian’s part, that Bruce will overlook it.

“Either’s fine,” Bruce says and Alfred breathes an inward prayer of thanks. “Be careful.”

“Of course,” Damian gives Bruce a sudden, bold smile. “I am not the son you need to worry about. I am always cautious.”

Alfred is bemused that Bruce doesn’t fully return the brass show of self-confidence with an equal smile, but instead busies himself straightening out something on his sandwich.

“Except when Dick hides in your closet,” Bruce replies, at contrast with his troubling manner. Alfred can still remember Damian’s terrified shriek and then furious shouting seconds after, mixing with Dick’s laughter and then thuds of fighting in the hallway.

“I responded with appropriate and immediate force,” Damian says haughtily. But his proud expression softens as he leaves the table. He comes around the counter and he gives Bruce a stiff side hug, the same way he had hugged Alfred not long ago.

Bruce’s free arm goes up around his son’s slender frame and pulls him close for a second. “Be careful. I mean it. Watch Jay’s back. He’ll watch yours.”

“Tt,” Damian says, stepping back. “I’m going down.”

“I’ll be down soon,” Bruce promises and Damian leaves them in the kitchen alone, except for the cat. The returned animal is curling itself around Bruce’s socked foot, purring. He dangles a piece of roast and the cat snatches it and flees to a few feet away.

Far down the hall, the faint click of the closing parlor door echoes across the marble floor of the foyer. Bruce turns and leans heavily back against the counter, supporting his weight with one leg and stretching the other out to rest on his heel.

“I’m glad you have the sense to take the night off, in a manner of speaking. It saves me the trouble of persuading you.” Alfred makes no effort to disguise his concern, watching Bruce pinch the bridge of his nose and then rub his forehead just above his browline. Other than the drive to Arkham and then the office, they’ve hardly had a moment alone together for Bruce to let any of his guard down.

“I haven’t been sleeping,” Bruce says. “Not really.”

“Your knee?” Alfred ventures a guess he knows is the wrong one, hoping it’ll prompt Bruce to actually talk.

“No,” Bruce shakes his head. “It’s just–” He cuts himself off. “Nothing. Just haven’t been sleeping well.”

“Do you want to take something?” Alfred suspects the offer will be rejected, but they have a fair
stock of non-addictive aids if Bruce would consent to them. His worry is now climbing again, at being shut out.

“No,” Bruce says curtly. He takes another bite of the sandwich and chews mechanically.

Alfred shuts the ledger and sets it aside. He stands in front of Bruce and opens his arms, in a welcoming gesture.

Bruce swallows quickly and regards him with a kind of mild suspicion. “What is happening. What are you doing.”

“If you’re determined not to discuss whatever’s bothering you, I’ll leave it be for now. But accept some form of reassurance before you end up shouting unnecessarily at someone.” Alfred raises an eyebrow.

And to his relief, Bruce turns and sets the sandwich down behind him and then returns the hug.

Alfred would himself be content with brief contact and a pat on the back, the extent of his usual comfort with such displays, but Bruce leans his forehead against Alfred’s shoulder and takes a deep breath and then lets it out, all without moving.

“Thank you,” Bruce mumbles when he does pull back, his gaze dropped as if embarrassed. “I’m sorry. About everything the past few days.”

Whether it’s healthy or not, Alfred will not risk giving much thought to, but it’s always been difficult to remain angry at Bruce for long when there’s such evident self-directed fury inside the younger man. It seems counter-productive except in the most dire of circumstances. Alfred pats his arm and moves to resume his work in the ledger.

“It might be time to consider giving up designing these convoluted Arkham plots to busy yourself with. You’ve made plenty of trouble for everyone by now, I should think.”

Bruce chokes a half-laugh and finishes the orange juice. He sighs, leaning again against the counter, but Alfred feels a touch of consolation at the reaction.

“I should go down,” Bruce says after a moment’s silence. “I should make sure Damian actually called Jay.”

“That may be a wise choice,” Alfred acknowledges.

“Get some sleep, Al,” Bruce says. “I can manage for a bit. I think it’ll be a quiet night.”

Alfred considers for a moment giving in to this, letting rest seep into his weary bones. He feels himself spent, but the menu ledger sits before him with blank lines and Bruce is still shadowed by something Alfred cannot quite decipher.

“I’m not very tired,” he lies, glibly. “And I have a number of things to work on. I’ll keep you company downstairs tonight, if you don’t mind. After I put these sandwiches away and tidy up a bit.”

Bruce studies him for a moment and then looks at the pen in Alfred’s hand, the cream-colored paper and all its waiting boxes.

“Alright,” he says, after some thought. Maybe it is Alfred merely being hopeful, but he thinks Bruce sounds relieved. “I’ll see you down there.”
Damian says, "I told you that you wouldn't like it," to the cat. :)
The Crime Scene

The work on the docks is constant but it has physical gaps; there are megawattage lamps set up a few dozen meters down the waterfront, flooding the area with harsh, bright light. Men in waterproofed coats and hard hats are busy, shouting at each other over the hum of machinery and the lapping of the water against the concrete below them.

A duplicate of this scene is another hundred meters in the other direction, leaving a densely shadowed run of buildings for Robin and Red Hood to investigate. It’s fortunate that they don’t have to avoid stevedores directly outside the windows.

The second story of the building they’re in looks like abandoned office space inside, with faded wall calendars and musty vinyl paneling. It isn’t the high end workspace of the financial district, but the remnants of dock management—maybe an importer that failed or moved on to bigger and better spaces. There’s an ancient printer on the counter and a pile of bulky computer monitors in a far corner.

Robin is silent as he moves around in the dark space, each step in his combat boots intentional and controlled. They came in through a roof door after picking the lock and their target is a set of windows scrubbed clean, near the front. Rather than going straight down the stairwell to the ground floor, they’ve paused to scope out the territory as they move.

“Nothing,” Red Hood says in a low voice.

“We don’t have any video feeds for this building,” Oracle says over the comm. “It was wired for cameras once, according to the permits on file. Maybe CCTV. Do you guys see anything?”

“Because they definitely stopped and turned the fricking cameras back on to record themselves,” Red Hood drawls. Robin’s already spotted the big black cameras in the corners of the room, the lenses thick with gray dust even in the low light. Red Hood has noticed them too, because he cranes his neck up to see and clicks his tongue. “Yeah, actually, considering it’s Gotham they might have been stupid enough.”

“We should be so lucky,” Oracle says wryly. “I’m hoping one of them actually did flip an unlabeled switch and accidentally turn it on instead of off. It’s long shot, but details. And don’t get snarky with me, Mr. Second-Hand Pixie Boots.”

“Second hand,” Red Hood scoffs. “Maybe if your boy had normal feet. I got mine new.”

Robin moves closer to the stairwell. Neither of the older vigilantes are upset but his stomach is suddenly tense; his hood is down, but he quickly pulls it up. It’s his part of the uniform, just like the tall, laced boots.

“His feet are fine. You were just tiny.” Oracle’s typing and there’s a faint clicking in the background on the line. “Every time I saw you, I wanted to squish your cheeks and squeeze you.”

“You don’t now?” Red Hood asks, sounding offended. “I’m fricking adorable and there’s more of me. What’s turned you against me? Is it the brat? Is it maternal instinct?”

“Yeah, no. It faded pretty fast when you started talking,” Oracle says, her voice dry. “Funny how
that works, the angry cussing diminishing the charm.”

“We need to focus,” Robin says sharply, heading down the stairs. Red Hood follows him, lowering his voice.

“Sorry, O. We’re distracting Mini Bat.”

“You’re distracting yourself,” Robin snaps. “This is serious. And my name is Robin.”

Robin is wary as he pushes open the door to the ground floor. He’s also miserable and he doesn’t know why it’s so hard to just let it go, that Jason hadn’t wanted him to go out the other night. He has grudgingly accepted Pennyworth’s excuses of Father’s prolonged protectiveness, but Jason should understand— Jason was one of them, a Robin, after all.

The room is empty, with what might have once been a plain reception desk and a line of filing cabinets along one wall.

“I’m muting comm to… focus,” Red Hood says behind him and there’s a click in the earpiece Robin wears.

“Fine by me,” Oracle says. “I’m checking in with Black Bat.”

Robin switches his comm off, too, but his tension doesn’t ease. It’s not helped by Hood stepping directly in front of him, blocking his view of the room, and tugging off the red mask so all he’s got on his face is the domino.

“Hold up, there, Little Britches. Something’s eating you alive and I aim to know what.” Jason’s voice has a false southern twang and Robin shoves his arm off.

“We don’t have time for your childish playing.” Robin tries to step around him and Jason side steps with him, first left, and then left again when Robin fakes a right and fails.

He’s fast but so is everyone in his family.

“Okay,” Jason says plainly. “Then what the fuck is wrong?” He sounds genuinely concerned, again, even with the harsh language and it irritates Robin. “You don’t usually care about a bit of joking around. Is it toxin, still? I’ll take you back to my place if you just need to crash.”

“No.” Robin clenches and unclenches his fists. His voice betrays him, that terrible cracking he can’t control. He pretends that it didn’t happen and clamps his mouth shut.

He looks down at his gloves, long and stiff along his forearms. They’re new, after the previous ones were too tight for over a week. His boots are new, too, and not completely broken in even with a week of wearing them every second he could around the cave.

*Spring shopping,* Pennyworth had called it, stitching the hem on his lengthened cape. Again.

Robin’s entire uniform was new for the second time in twelve months. His school pants were new, even with only a few weeks left in the year— his shirts, his dress shoes, the thobe he’d ordered just in case he needed it. His new hoodies didn’t feel right yet and he kept taking one of Richard’s to wear instead.

Jason interrupts his wandering thoughts. “Your mouth is saying no, but the most of you is saying a lot of yes. I can come back and do this alone or with Black.”
“It’s not toxin,” Robin snaps, looking up at his brother. He doesn’t have to tip his chin, crane his neck as much as he used to. There’s a sick tightness in his gut. “I’m fine.”

“You’re lying.” Jason says, putting the helmet back on. “But now we’re really wasting time. Let’s just take care of this first.”

Robin bites his tongue because the alternative is getting in an argument and proving Jason right. He detaches himself as best he can from his feelings, which are unrelated to the building, and begins examining the room.

The windows first. They’ve been scrubbed clean, but only in the corner. He’s halfway there when he stops short, looking down at the floor. There are rectangular indents on the shallow carpet; Red Hood has noticed them, too, and unmutes his comm. Robin does the same.

“O, I’m sending you pictures from the helmet. Looks like somebody moved furniture to make room or left a couple of heavy boxes standing for a few days, moved ‘em recently. Do you have enough light in these?”

“They’re pretty dark,” Oracle answers and Red Hood waves a hand.

Robin slips a flashlight out of his utility belt and sets it to a wide, low spray of light.

“Better,” Oracle says a second later.

They work together easily now; Red Hood doesn’t try to joke around and Robin stops glaring at him. With the mental step back, and the room to study, it’s easier to see Red Hood’s movements and his occasional dialogue with Oracle as something separate from Robin and not designed to provoke him. Robin has learned that when he’s already unsettled, he has a tendency to misread people and their intentions aside from physical threats.

Paranoia.

Father says it runs in the family.

That isn’t precisely a reassuring thing to be aware of as he grows.

Robin steps closer to the wall by the clean windows. He doesn’t use his flashlight here; residual lighting from the work lamps fades in and it is only the angle of the building that prevents dock workers from seeing them.

And then he sees it: the stain on the thin carpet, the flecks somebody missed on the walls. The wall is smeared down to primer in huge splotches and when Robin creeps around the carpet stain to peer at it more closely, he realizes the flecks are not overlooked spots of blood but holes.

“Hood,” he says softly.

“Shiitake mushrooms,” Red Hood answers. “This was a sloppy clean up.”

“They didn’t anticipate anyone entering this building again for some time,” Robin decides. “The windows were a precaution. Perhaps they were more visibly dirty.”

“You have tweezers? See if anything’s in one of those holes. I’m gonna get some carpet fiber. We get pictures and get the hell outta here.” Red Hood crouches behind him with a plastic baggie in his hand. “There’s not much else we can do here.”
Robin slides a magnifying lens in front of one eye and spots a tiny metal sliver from the wall, lodged only a few centimeters inside.

“Be right back,” Red Hood says, the shadow of his head falling over Robin’s workspace. It vanishes and Robin relaxes his jaw when he becomes aware he’d clenched it in annoyance.

By the time he’s pried the sliver out with tweezers and taken some measurements of the holes, Red Hood’s returned.

“Found a security closet. Cameras aren’t even plugged in. You ready?”

“Tt,” Robin says in agreement, sliding the bag into his belt.

They parked the Batmobile only a few blocks away and they make the trip in dark silence, without flashlights or words. Even Oracle is quiet on the comm– she might have muted her end of things this time, though she’s likely still doing peripheral monitoring.

Cocooned inside the car, Jason takes off his helmet but not the domino. Damian leaves his entire uniform intact. Now that there’s little else to do except hand things over to Father or perform any follow-up tasks he assigns them, his earlier agitation returns like a dense storm cloud moving to block the sun.

They’re half a mile closer to the Manor when Jason adjusts the vents, his movement catching Damian’s attention so he notices the tight-lipped expression on the older boy’s face.

“Are you hungry?” Jason asks.

“No.” Damian looks out the window at the rundown buildings they’re passing.

“Uh.” Jason sounds more reluctant than Damian has heard him sound in a while, a syllable full of hesitation hanging in the air. It was obviously forced and Damian’s current mood is stoked like a bonfire. He will not give his brother the satisfaction of an easy out, whatever the question is, but he resents it. Jason motions by his ear and Damian flicks off his comm in compliance, glowering all the same.

Damian’s hands are in fists.

Jason clears his throat. “Is, uh…frick. If it’s not toxin or the case, is this, uh…about a girl? Or a guy, I guess?”

All his outrage drains out of him into wide-eyed shock and he whips his head around to look at Jason, who is driving with his gloved hands at a perfect driver’s manual position. And then, almost as quickly, he studies the landscape– now of towering skyscrapers– outside the window again.

“No,” he says acidly, his ears red. He focuses on slowing his heartbeat. It’s a stupid, foolish thing to be embarrassed about and so off-the-mark he’d laugh if he wasn’t already so annoyed. And it’s true: half-hearted attempts to match his peers’ conversations about girls or boys at school have never sparked anything more for him than passing cover story.

“You can talk to me,” Jason says, and this sounds sincere even if the earlier question was forced. “I mean, I haven’t dated in forever and have literally nothing to offer for advice, but if you don’t wanna talk about it with Bruce or Dick…”

“No.” Damian says again, more roughly this time. He wishes he didn’t have to spell it out, that he could turn and yell in Arabic instead of English and that Jason would follow fluidly instead of
limping along after the words and missing things.

“I mean, I sure as hell felt awkward talking to B, and I would have given my right arm for Lily Sanchez to even look at me.” Jason’s rambling a little now, still nervous and putting on a show. Damian wants to appreciate it.

“Why didn’t you vouch for me?” Damian can’t stand it anymore and it spills out of him, hot and accusing. “Drake did.”

Jason’s face, flushed under the domino, hardens into something fierce and closed off in an instant. Damian is watching him carefully and sees the change; a tiny part of him begs for retreat but that is a weakness and he silences it. Instead, his rage and hurt grow.

“Don’t,” Jason says, a warning that Damian hears but doesn’t understand. Perhaps it interferes with Jason’s faulty idea of himself as the big brother who lets Damian get away with things.

“Drake of all people. Father, I can overlook a weakness in– he is crippled by his emotions for me but you? You ought to understand how important it is for me to be out with the family, working. I am not an incompetent ally and yet you insisted on treating me as one. I am fifteen–”

That’s as far as he gets, in the rapid speech he suspects he might not fully mean, the words driven by the hurt that’s come between them.

The car jerks to the left, skidding into a dead-end alley, and Damian clips his own words.

For a moment, they are statues.

Damian braces himself to argue with whatever flawed reasons Jason gives him between gritted teeth– no measure of patient control will appease him, short of an apology.

But what comes is not a hissed defense or mumbling penance for the slight, brother against brother.

It is Jason’s gloved hand hitting the steering wheel so hard Damian winces and a roar from his older brother’s mouth.

“I was fucking fifteen!”

The furious energy Damian holds is sucked out of him like the breaking of a dam; it is not the volume or the fury pouring out of Jason that puts out the fire, but the flood of his words.

“You think they care? You right, you aren’t a fricking kid anymore, not when you look like that. Those colors don’t protect you, they haven’t since before Dick stopped wearing them. You might have gotten away with looking small for a while, even though it fucking didn’t work for me. And don’t give me that shit about being trained, I was trained. You think anyone from Arkham will hesitate to kill you if they can? Tim probably saved your life keeping you from going out alone but hell if I want you to think it was okay. They’re fricking crazy, they hate your guts, and all it takes is one mistake. Just one.”

Damian’s sparred with Jason before and knows how hard he has to push to get Jason to gasp to catch his breath like he’s doing now. Damian is stone, drained of blood, while Jason rips the domino mask off and tears slip down his cheeks.

His voice, moving in registers of extremes, drops to barely above a whisper and he leans his head on the steering wheel.
“I was fucking fifteen. I remember. You still think you’re invincible.”

Inside Damian, a war is raging. His chest aches, his interior writhing with agony at the way Jason is sagged forward. Tears drip from the older boy’s shaven chin onto his padded knees but he isn’t sobbing or making any noise.

Another half of Damian is smoldering– he wants to shout that he’s not the same, his training more thorough and skills more honed. But Jason has never spoken seriously to him before of his death, only in biting jokes and careless humor, and a breath of patience tells him his shouts would be a struggle against the fear he does not want to admit is blooming afresh.

And any fighting he does now would not be an equal reasoning, or even a skilled opponent cutting down a weaker foe. It would be a thrashing, wounded animal clawing blindly at another animal– like Malcolm’s sharp teeth slicing into Titus’ furry throat for a trod-upon tail.

Damian is not a child; he is also not an animal.

Slowly, Damian peels his own mask off.

“I’m sorry,” he says, soft and genuine.

“Me, too,” Jason says bitterly, lifting his head. He looks haggard and old and it frightens Damian more than all the shouting. “I’m not mad at you. I’m scared shitless for you. You won’t listen. Dad tells you to stay the fuck home and Tim throws himself in the middle of it just so you aren’t out there by yourself.”

“I helped,” Damian says, an insistence that is now more like pleading and less like pride. Tim himself had said he helped but he doesn’t like seeing Jason like this; he stares at the faint glow of the dash computer instead. The car’s diagram says one tire is slightly below average inflation but still in normal ranges.

“Of course you fricking did,” Jason says, putting his arm across the wheel and burying his face there. “But you go home with toxin or a couple stitches and it doesn’t make you cautious. It just makes you feel more invincible because you survived. And that’s what scares me. B is alive because he knows he could go down easy, he’ll die for Gotham if it wants him. But you keep fighting like it’s something to prove, like you’re gonna make it because you’re just that good. Nobody’s that good, Damian.”

Damian licks dry lips and the icy tendrils of fear are curling around his heart again; it’s like ice dense in his stomach. He wants to get away from it and this time, it isn’t toxin.

“Do you think I’m growing too old to be Robin?” he hears himself ask anyway.
Jason, his head still pillowed on his leather sleeve which is propped on the steering wheel, blinks.

“I don’t know,” Jason says. “Do you want to be Robin?”

“Yes,” Damian says quietly. He’s irrationally afraid Jason or somebody will take it away from him with a word or an order. “It would be preferable for me to be aware ahead of time that I had aged out of the title.”

“Yeah,” Jason says, sniffing and sitting back in the seat. “No, kid. You aren’t too old. It’s yours as long as you want it. I’ll make sure.”

The clock on the computer is a good diversion from the lump in Damian’s throat, constricted into something swollen. The digital numbers read 01:49, bold and black against the background.

“I promised Father I would return by two-thirty,” he says, his mouth clumsy around the syllables. “Pennyworth made sandwiches.”

“You trying to tempt me into staying over?” Jason asks, with a laugh that is fragile and lightens the mood into something bearable. It is soothing in a binding sort of way, a sedate nearness.

Jason backs the car out of the alley and Damian loosely reattaches his mask for the remainder of the ride.

“I shouldn’t have blown up at you like that,” Jason says when they’re pulling into the car bay of the cave. “But I meant every word.”

“I know,” Damian says with a nod. He struggles to find words, even in Arabic, that would convey his thoughts accurately, but he cannot. “Thank you,” he settles on, which isn’t quite acknowledging an apology because now he isn’t sure he wants one.

Jason cuts the engine and they climb out in unison. Damian takes his mask off again.

Father is sitting at the computer, Pennyworth dozing in a chair next to him with an unfinished chess game between them on the desk.

“Oracle sent me the pictures,” Father says in a low voice as they approach. “I’ve reviewed them already. How did it go otherwise? Any trouble?”

“Got blood and bullet samples,” Jason says, tossing a bag in front of Father. He bends over and gently shakes Pennyworth. Damian thinks he’s avoiding looking at Father, from the way his shoulders are turned. “Al. Demonbird told me there are sandwiches. Help me find ‘em.”

“Food and then bed,” Pennyworth mutters, blinking gogginess away. “For myself and all of you. Everything can wait a few hours.”

“He’s right,” Father says, to Damian’s surprise. “Put the blood in the lab fridge and the bullet in the cabinet. We all need sleep or we’ll miss something important.”

Damian detaches his hooded cape, letting it hang over his arm. He wants to clean himself off—his skin feels dusty and gritty after the grime of warehouses, even under the suit. And there’s a pile of lined paper with notes waiting for him in his room, next to a textbook with flagged pages.

“I’m going to shower,” Damian says. He wants the absolution of confession and he wants company, he doesn’t want to be alone with his thoughts even though solitude is normally something he craves. His toes curl in his boots and he steels himself for the exposure, the indirect
admission before he compels himself to speak again.

Far be it from him to avoid a necessary action because it is uncomfortable. Damian thinks there is some honor in crafted deceit if it is beneficial to one’s cause, but he has become more convinced that there is less honor in it when wielded for selfish purposes, when used against family.

“Jason, would you review my biology material with me while we eat? I have a test this morning and I have not thoroughly prepared.”

“Sure. Surprised you got to go out,” Jason is saying easily, at the same moment Father fixes a stern look in Damian’s direction.

“You told me you’d studied.”

“I lied,” Damian says, not denying it, because this is half the reason he asked for help. “I’m sorry. I wanted to let Drake rest.”

“Hn,” Father says, standing. Even with Damian’s added inches, his father has a way of towering over him. “Still. Three days, no patrol. Not even for emergencies.”

“Very well,” Damian says, bowing his head slightly out of habit. It was ingrained into him long ago, to accept rebuke in a certain fashion when it is well deserved. He is acutely aware that he does not practice it as often as his older masters would like, but it has been difficult to separate their beneficial teaching from the things he has come to regard as harmful.

He accepts it now, this consequence, and for once he has no intentions of hunting loopholes or disregarding orders.

When he sits at the table with towel-dried hair, leaning over his gathered notes while Jason points to a definition and eats a sandwich, and Father sips from a mug while adding a clarification, it is solidified for him that this is a peace he has no wish to mar.

Chapter End Notes

For those wondering, I do not specifically headcanon Damian Wayne as ace OR not ace. I’m not making a decision either way. But it is a side effect of long-term trauma that some kids have a delayed social age and meet milestones (like relationship interest or friend groups outside of family) much later than their peers, once they are in a stable or attached family unit. :)


The Alley

There is an art to being in the right place at the right time. It is a pirouette performed to end on the exact note of music to carry into the next stretch of limbs and arch of spine. It is not artless to have structure and boundaries and timing—these are tools that improve the beauty of a thing when wielded correctly.

And Cassandra Wayne believes there is also beauty in improvisation, in letting the learned steps and movements be carried by mood and heart. She has felt the prick of happy tears at synchronized, counted grand jetés and also the release of an empty ballroom, recorded piano, and solitary, unscripted dance.

They are both beautiful.

This is not beautiful.

This is important, that she is on a window ledge in the glow of a neon blue sign at a time she did not plan, to see a thing she was not planning to see.

It is information, the dulled metal gun and the combed goatee and the hockey jersey.

She is watching the argument, taking in the terror and the anger swirling beneath her, and it is over the second the gun is pulled from a waistband.

It is ugly, the fighting and the brutal trigger. There is no hesitation between the draw and the boom, not the reluctance of someone torn and debating. This man is a man who knows how to use a gun and does not waste his time.

Cassandra observes as Black Bat. She swoops down and has taken the gun and zip-tied wrists before the barrel is lowered. She ignores the man’s cursing, mesmerized and disgusted by the blood gurgling and pumping out of the other man, the dead one, lying on his back.

His gut is dark with it, it seeps from beneath him, and he makes little, helpless noises from his throat. He is not dead but he is dead. It’s a matter of minutes with that close range, that blood loss.

She is deaf to the cursing man tied to a fire escape.

Black Bat kneels on the pavement next to the dead man, takes his wet hand in her own. His eyes are white and terrified but not of her, not anymore. He still cannot speak proper words—Cass knows what that is like, to need to talk and to feel like the mouth is broken.

His teeth are slick with red, the noise from him is the sucking of liquid against a valve, he is ash as life burns away from his thudding heart.

It will give out soon, struggling to meet the needs of shredded organs and flesh crying to his brain for help and then leaking it all over the blacktop.

She is there, with him, his hand tight and then loose and then tight on her fingers. His grip is not strong enough to be painful.

But it hurts her, watching him, her ribs constricted with it. Not as much as he is hurting, but his suffering is shared as he splutters blood past his lips and drowns, and drowns, and drowns and is gone.
“Cassandra!” a voice, a trusted voice, bellows in her ear. She has been dead to the world while he was dying and now that he’s gone, his eyes with blown pupils gazing emptily at the navy sky above them, she wakes again.

Batman lands in a run from a grappling line, his boots loud to her on the broken pavement as he pulls himself to a stop.

Cassandra is furious at the man bound to the ladder rung but confused by how fast Batman came into the alley, his quickness the one reserved for emergencies. She has things under control, she is wild and wounded inside but doesn’t need help. Her tracking and comm would let them know if she–

She understands. She rises to her feet.

And he, He who is always controlled and reserved, tips forward as if falling and steadies himself with his palms against his knees. He stays that way for a few seconds, breathing so hard she can hear it without even trying.

“She’s fine,” he rasps over the comm a moment later, in a gathered growl, as Cassandra registers the chatter she had so effectively shut out.

They had not.

They knew her location, heard the gunshot, heard the bubbling of blood and the tortured dying.

A misunderstanding, like smoke alarms while sleeping or braking seconds before a near crash. The panicking heartbeats and the sweating all over, that’s what happened to him, to them.

He is straightening now, uncurling from his dread and the swift absence of it.

“Okay,” Cassandra repeats into the comm. “Sorry.”


“There’s a victim’s body and an apprehended suspect,” Batman reports, devoid of emotion and technically correct. Black Bat is watching and sees the storm of him, the high and low pressures of relief and concentration and the same wary sorrow that’s hung on him for days now. It is a sheltered distress she does not know how to approach or bandage.

She is not hurt but he is, somehow.

The man at her feet is beyond hurting and remembering this gathers her anger, her silence the low shoal depths of a towering wave on the horizon.

“Thief,” Cassandra accuses sharply, furious with the man rattling his bound wrists against the ladder. She turns, the mask’s blank stare fixed on him. “You stole. Life.”

Her gloves are slick with blood and she toes the gun, the safety on, toward Batman.

He crouches near her to pick it up, to check the chamber and pry bullets into his own gloved hand. While he is close, low to the ground, she tugs a glove off. Her bare fingers could contaminate a bullet or the weapon, ruining them as evidence, but she doesn’t want to touch them.

Cass brushes her knuckles against the short stubble of his cheek and then pulls them away, pulls her soiled glove back on. It is a brief reassurance and she is soothed to see that it soothes him, even
if it is only a little.

A candle in the dark is better than a charred, cold wick.

“Where did you get these?” Batman demands, his voice like winter wind.

The man spits. “Found ‘em.”

Cassandra tilts her head sideways, disbelieving. The man in the jersey is nervous but hiding it and what she does is not threatening. Tim has told her she looks like a young dog– a puppy, she knows the word– when she does this with her head. It is not something she thinks to do, only something that happens when she’s thinking and turning over the words of someone to decipher them.

But the man looks at her and his nervousness folds out into fear; he is pale and his hands in the zip ties begin to shake.

“I-I-I-” he stutters.

Batman glances from the man, who is not paying attention to him, up to Black Bat with her head tipped toward her shoulder. She is a little delighted that she has power over this man, who destroys things like heartbeats and coiled guts.

She is curious about the extent of it, and tips her head toward the other shoulder. The man tries and fails to suppress a whimper.

“I’m not going to give you ideas.” The man’s face shines with his sweat. In the neon sign’s blue light, it makes him look sickly and inhuman. A damp machine.

“I told you to stop eating suspects,” Batman says sternly to Black Bat.

“I told you to stop eating suspects,” Batman asks, his low voice twinged with amusement. No, that isn’t right. He does not sound amused, he is amused. His voice is hard.

“You know that doesn’t mean I’m not going to give you ideas.” The man’s face shines with his sweat. In the neon sign’s blue light, it makes him look sickly and inhuman. A damp machine.

“I told you to stop eating suspects,” Batman says sternly to Black Bat.

“Hm,” she says in reply. It’s a good noise. She likes how much she can say with it, just by changing her face and her tone and her body.

And right now, what she says with it elicits an animalistic groan from the man in the zip ties.

It is not an insult to the dead man, Cass thinks, to joke like this. The humor is survival for them, a connection that makes life more full. It helps her remember not just the intense conviction that life is sacred, but why it is so.

If it is a dying kind of humor, a death kind– morbid, she recalls now– it is because they are two who carry tombstones etched into their spirits. One must learn to joke and tease common companions.

And it is a useful tool, to prod this man by fear he deserves and should have felt without them, just for taking a life, into terror. That is also an honor to the dead man.

“We’ve talked about this,” Batman says to her, quietly, standing now. She looks up at him, a delighted and wicked grin in her eyes beneath her mask. She knows it’s there, beneath the cowl, for
him. It is not words, it is bright eyes with mirthful lines in the pale skin around them, so she can imagine it easily. He still sounds stern, resigned, like a mournful bar of music.

“Only fingers,” she protests, holding a splayed hand up. “Only after removing.”

The man in the hockey jersey no longer looks like a broad man who is fast with a gun; he is a sniveling, sinking mess. A crumpled straw sleeve falling to bits in a drop of water.

“You have two options,” Batman growls, to the swaying man. “You talk while we wait for the police. Or I go do better things with my time while she waits with you.”

“Somebody gave ‘em to me!” the man chokes out. His tongue is tripping on his words, fighting instinctive paralysis to get them out.

Speech, Cass knows, is a secondary function when it comes to survival. It is not easy even for those who do not usually have trouble with speaking.

“Who?” Batman asks. His mouth, his posture, his gloved hand around the bullets– they are all just angry again. He isn’t joking anymore.

Cass looks back at the body on the ground.

“GCPD enroute, ETA under 10 minutes,” Oracle says over the comm. “Do you want the Commissioner?”

Babs won’t call him Dad over the comm, no matter how secure she insists it is, no matter how frequently they break the rules and use each other’s real names.

“I want a name,” Batman says.

“Yes,” Cass says in a whisper to the comm.

“I don’t remember,” the man says.

“Black, keep him company,” Batman orders. He’s reloading the gun, holding it like a snake. Cass remembers watching snake handlers in a plaza once, maybe some sort of wildlife group; they did not hold the animals as if afraid, but with firm hands. That is how he pushes the bullets back into the magazine, as something dangerous and needing controlled.

“It was Young Paul!” the man wrenches at his wrists with a cry. “Paul, uh, I think Winters. Paul Winters. He goes by Young–”

“The pimp?” Batman asks.

The man frantically nods. “He said they were just a sample, only gave me half a dozen. A bonus he was throwing in with his best girls. Told me to come back if I wanted more.”

“He gave them to you,” Batman says flatly.

Cassandra frowns at this.

“Not, well, not exactly,” the man says, flinching as they both take a step toward him in unison. “The girl, she said, she said Young Paul was, she was supposed to…after I paid her, y’know? I didn’t beat her or anything, I swear, I’m always nice to ‘em, all of ‘em. A frequent shopper’s bonus, that’s what she called it.”
“Name,” Cass says, not moving closer. If she does he might become a babbling, muddy puddle, and no use to them. And this, too, hurts her a little– the fear of her– but she remembers the dead man on the pavement and it becomes a good kind of ache.

“Dave Smith,” the man says. He is colorless and trembling and might spew his guts all over the pavement. He should have been like this after killing a man, Cass thinks.

She knows.

“The girl’s name,” Batman snaps, irritably. Cass is too fond of him to be frightened but he is tall and shadowed and mad. Dave Smith can see these things.

“I don’t know!” Dave Smith yelps. “She goes by Willow but I never got a last name.”

Sirens blare fitfully a block away, the warning noise of a squad car trying to get around someone moving too slowly.

“Go,” Batman says to her, a gentle release with words of iron. He is studying the gun in his palm, his expression beneath the cowl blank. “I’ll wait for Jim.”

Cass doesn’t like the feel of his feelings rolling off him, in those brief seconds. They are all cloudy grief and sour anger and bitter hurt. It is not just the gun, though the gun is sharpening those things. She wants to stay with him but she also doesn’t want to deal with police.

She throws a grappling line into the air toward a rooftop and goes without a farewell. She leaves but she doesn’t really leave.

There is the matter of keeping him company, but also her gloves are filthy and she is weary. On the dirty roof, she is like a wilting plant. Removed from the dead man’s horror and the murderer’s terror and Batman’s bottled storm, she can find her own feelings and they are full of frustration and sadness.

She lies down on the roof, her ear close to the edge so she can hear things below. She thinks about Stephanie and the university letters Cass found open and carefully read to make sure she understood. They are both places inches away on a paper map, miles of grass and rock and road. They haven’t talked about it yet and she doesn’t know when they will.

She thinks about showering at Tim’s empty apartment and forgetting it was not empty; her hair smelled like his coconut and tea tree oil shampoo when she went hunting for cereal and found Dick there instead. He’s living there now, just for a few more weeks while his new place is fixed and changed– remodeled– and she likes her oldest brother but she went to Tim’s for quiet and a nap on the cushiony couch.

Things are changing and Cass, with her cheek on cold waterproofing vinyl, doesn’t like it. She’s happy for them, happy for their happiness when it is there, but she has been comfortable.

She listens to the man being cuffed and cut out of zip ties below.

She thinks about going to dance class and getting to go to dinners at the Manor after, where family has not been a broken and jagged thing. It has not been perfect but it has been good, so good, for her and for all of them. She’s liked the smiles not being so rare, so guarded.

Liu Bao left for home, for Shandong, five months ago after a December graduation, with his handful of plans for teaching dance near his parents’ home. Dance class has not been the same without him, and so everywhere in her life is now changed. She feels like a rattled jewelry box, all
the pieces missing or tangled.

Not everything is bad, like Gotham again, but everything is different and it reminds her that things will keep changing. They will not stop. Everyone will make decisions—Steph about which dot on a map to move to, Bruce about if he will talk or be crippled by this new-old sad, Babs about her plans with Dick, Jason about kids he wants to help. Damian will keep growing and then he will make decisions, too. Even if Tim and Alfred and Dev stay the same, it is useless to build a puzzle with only half the pieces.

Below her, far below, Jim Gordon has arrived and Batman emerges from wherever he hid himself, to talk.

She can hear the conversation if she listens hard, only snippets if she’s distracted.

“–but the ID checks out, David Smith. I’ll be damned. I was sure it’d be fake. Any idea why he killed the guy?”

“No.”

“But you, uh, hung around anyway. Had them call me in.”

“The bullets, Jim. Five left in the gun, all with the same flechettes we pulled from the Port Adams warehouse.”

“Christ. I guess that makes it official for us, then. Gonna have a hell of a time keeping this from going public if I put all my men in Kevlar. Last thing we need right now’s another panic. Did you get anything out of him?”

“He said a prostitute gave them to him, told him he could come back for more. One of Young Paul’s girls.”

“Gave them? Damnit. You think he was telling the truth?”

There’s a long pause here. Cass almost peers over the edge; there’s a chance Batman left.

“Yes,” he says right before she moves. “He thought they were from Young Paul.”

“But you don’t?” Jim is chewing on something. Maybe gum.

“Paul Winters has never moved anything. He talks too much.”

“I guess you’re probably right. Get a name for the girl? Think it’s related to my victim?”

No, Cass thinks. They were arguing about money, a gambling debt, a hockey game. A stupid thing.


“Well, you’re gonna find her before I do. Keep in touch if–” Jim stops talking and swears again.

Batman crouches beside her, recoiling his grappling line manually so it isn’t loud. He pinches it with fingers to slow the automatic turn.

They leave the roof together and it’s not until three buildings over that they stop, to talk, to make plans.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” he says first.
“Sorry I scared you,” she says and she means it. Other scares are good. This one was not.

“Are you okay?” he asks, checking something in his utility belt. She likes talking to him because he knows when to look at her and when to not look, when looking or touching make it harder.

“It was hard,” she says, remembering how the dying man panicked when he couldn’t breathe. “I’m okay. But it was ugly.”

“Hm,” he says, that word that isn’t a word and can be so many different things. Right now, it is agreement. A sharing. “Do you want to take the night off? A would be glad to see you.”

Cass thinks about this. She is close to saying no, when she feels how weary she is and how she doesn’t want to find a prostitute and feel all the lonely desperation that the Narrows reek of, all the time. Not tonight. There are other places, but that one is where Young Paul’s girls are.

“Yes,” she says. She is not giving up, she is giving herself a break. It is the right thing to do, to avoid mistakes. “You, too?”

And he gives her a smile; a real smile, even if it is tired and haunted at the edges.

“I’ll come home soon,” he says. “We’ll listen to something if you’re still up.”

“Promise,” Cass says, smiling in return. “City won’t die. Not overnight.”

“Promise,” he says.

Cassandra knows it is dangerous, in Gotham, but it is always dangerous. That has never changed. And sometimes she needs things to stay a little the same, so she can find her feet and where to put them next.

She goes home across the rooftops. She stops to hug Babs in the tower and deliver a late night coffee and cranberry orange muffin, an apology, and then takes one of the hidden cars to drive across the bridge.

At home, there is Mendelssohn in the study and a bedroom that is hers, her own, for as long as she wants it.
The Apartment

Chapter Notes

This chapter comes with some caveats.

1. It's not graphic in any way, but it is clear near the end that the characters are discussing sex in a teasing way and headed that direction. It's more relationship oriented but definitely more blatant than most of what I write. If just the themes or ideas are squicky for you, feel free to comment or anon ask on Tumblr and I'll give a summary of plot stuff.

2. I am not disabled and I've tried to incorporate Babs’ interactions with the physical world in a realistic and not-obsessive way. It matters more here than it has in previous chapters but if you DO have personal experience and something seems off or insensitive, feel free to let me know.

3. Depending on how this week goes, the next update might be Thursday. I'm leaning toward switching to a Tu/Thur schedule until I get caught up on chapters after a week of illness and in prep for batfam week— I'm unfortunately still a bit behind. Thank you for your patience!

The elevator is full of gleaming metal and recessed lighting and it carries her smoothly to the top floor of the apartment building. Barbara Gordon rolls over the slim gap between elevator and hallway; it is too small and flush to catch the wheelchair.

There are only two apartments on this top floor but the foyer between the front doors is wide and well-lit, decorated with a small table and a vase of flowers. She approaches the door to the left, experimentally holding the digital key up, and the tell-tale snick of a bolt lock sliding rings clear.

“Babs?” Dick Grayson calls from inside. The door swings open on its own, on an automated hinge.

“Fancy,” she remarks, entering the apartment. It closes behind her and she’s inside.

“I’m back here!” he yells.

“Where’s here?” she asks, looking around the spacious entryway. There’s an open floor plan just beyond, with a low kitchen counter. Most of the furniture is covered in plastic sheeting and the walls are unpainted.

“The– ow– bathroom,” he answers. Then, she can hear him muttering under his breath, “Damn it.”

“You’re on your own.” Babs grins. “Ass-wiping is a line I won’t cross, not even for you.”

“And here I thought we transcended ordinary limits,” Dick says, coming down the hall. He’s examining his thumb as he walks. “I was putting the lid back on the paint can and the hammer slipped. I don’t think I broke it though.”

“Lemme see,” Babs says, holding out her hand. He stops next to her and after another second’s self-inspection, holds out the injured digit. She looks it over while he complains. She surrenders
his own hand back to him. “I don’t think it’s broken. What were you doing with paint? I thought you said you hired someone.”

“They wanted me to double check all the colors before they started,” Dick answers. “And then they’ll paint and I can get out of Tim’s hair. I hope take-out’s okay. Most of the appliances are still unplugged.”

“Sure,” she says, following him through the living room. “It looks great.”

“Yeah?” Dick says, surveying the room with a broad smile. “They worked fast.”

“You changed a lot,” Babs observes, trying to keep her voice neutral. “It’s…nice.”

Dick continues as if he didn’t hear the hesitation in her tone. He’s in the dining room now, folding a sheet back from one edge of the table. “You like it? I made sure it’d be easy to get around, and did you see how low the counters are? With the lip? When you’re over, we can cook together and it won’t even be a problem.”

“Dick,” Babs says, a knot of nervous reservation settling in her chest.

“What?” He looks over, with that boyish grin– the last few times she’s seen him, he’s looked so worried and tired that his excitement makes him look years younger.


“What are you in the mood for?” he asks, opening a cabinet. He pulls out two glasses. “Wanna order or want me to?”

“Anything but pizza,” Babs says. “I’ve lived on it for two or three days now, I’m burnt out.”

“Thai? Indian? Chinese?” Dick peers into the bottoms of the cups and rinses them out at the sink; it’s set in a counter like a desk, with space for a wheelchair to roll up close.

“Tacos,” Babs decides. “How about tacos?”

Later, after giving her opinion on paint colors splotched on the walls and a tour of the rest of the place and its altered floor plan and various changes, and eating carne asada tacos, they end up on the couch with the rest of the sweet tea.

“It’s a good night for a movie,” Dick says, leaning back on the couch. The sheet plastic is in a sloppily folded pile on the floor. “Too bad the TV isn’t here yet.”

“We could huddle around my phone screen,” Babs teases. “You should have told me. I would have brought a laptop.”

“I guess we’ll just have to entertain each other,” Dick says, setting his empty glass on the coffee table. He offers to take hers and she takes a last drink, the ice clinking in the glass, and gives it to him.

“Not for too long,” Babs says, looking at her phone. “Are you going out tonight? I’ll need to start managing things soon.”

“I don’t think so.” Dick slides closer to her on the couch and begins playing with her hair, teasing strands through his fingers. “I work early in the morning. I think they’ve got it under control, unless you have a reason I should go out.”
Babs sighs, a contented sound, and reaches up to move his hand to the back of her neck instead.

“God, that feels good. I think they’re fine. Your dad and Steph are trying to find that girl, still. She’s disappeared from all her usual spots. And the fewer out, the better, right now.”

“You think I can’t handle myself?” Dick asks. It’s one of those things where Babs has to pause, make sure she’s not missing an undercurrent of anger. But she’s pretty sure he’s just joking around.

And if she wasn’t sure, the fact that he’s leaning forward to kiss her behind the ear is a pretty clear indicator that he’s not pissed.

Unfortunately, it’s bad timing because now she’s thinking about Cass and how capable she is and how little that quelled any of the horror she felt when the world bottomed out a bit the other night. A muffin and coffee soothed her some, Cass’ shy and apologetic smile helped. They’re always putting their lives on the line, but the last week has had a sharper quality and it’s setting Babs on edge.

She pushes his shoulder, not too hard, but definitely away.

“You okay?” His brow furrows with concern and instead of the anger that was rising, she finds herself looking away from him to hide tears.

She’s not an easy crier but it’s been sort of a shitstorm and her period is late, not in an alarming or exciting way, but in a “we’re dragging this hormone thing out extra long, have a stupid song on the radio to cry about” kind of way. And she hates that he’s just there, another gray area to deal with, being all concerned and worried when she’d finally gotten used to the idea that she’d just be okay alone.

She wasn’t waiting for Dick Grayson to come around, but she wasn’t really waiting for anyone and that was part of the problem. Girl nights and coffee dates satisfied a deep emotional need but there was a different level of resignation involved in semi-closing that door, the boyfriend and maybe someday husband one. And closing it was easier than leaving it propped open while she didn’t really put effort into pursuing anything, until he started shoving his foot back in.

And the problem is that it’s so easy with Dick, to just slip back into flirting and spending time together and talking. They talked, of course, while he was in ‘haven, but this– having him back in Gotham, when it doesn’t take days in advance to plan hanging out around schedules– has changed things.

“I’m fine,” she says, to his increasingly worried gaze in the silence that follows his question.

“Don’t lie to me, Babs,” he says, and there it is, that undercurrent of temper. She still doesn’t know how he tamed it to take care of Damian. If anything, she appreciates the monumental effort it must have taken and she’s so incredibly fond of him that it tugs at her heart.

And it’s her heart that’s making a mess of all of this, the no-strings-attachment they seem to have mutually agreed to, the friend who is so kind and thoughtful that he’s literally incorporated her into his apartment remodel. They’ve tried before for commitment, more than once, and it always sours and it’s her own stupid heart that’s going to screw up the one weird balance that might make it work.

“I can’t do this, Dick,” she says, flatly.

“What?” he asks, startled. “I mean, we can hang out another–”
“I can’t do this,” she says, gesturing aimlessly to the apartment around them. “The playing house, the making out, while we’re both free to move on whenever. I thought it was what I wanted but I’m tired, Dick. I’m so tired and I’m too old for this, or maybe I’m just old-fashioned.”

“What are you talking about?” He’s moved away now, to the other end of the couch. That guarded temper is back in his tone, with the hurt and the confusion and damn him for being so dense. He’s about ten seconds away from leaping up to pace and even the idea of his need for movement doesn’t irritate her like it used to. It just makes her sad.

“Look at this place,” Babs says wretchedly. “It’s perfect.”

“You lost me,” Dick replies helplessly, the temper flitting away again into abject bewilderment on his face. He still hasn’t gotten up to prowl around, to stride back and forth and throw his arms in the air.

“It’s perfect, if we were together. But I don’t think you’re thinking ahead and it scares me. What happens when you move on? When the next girl wonders why your apartment is built around a life you don’t have, with someone that’s supposed to just be a friend? Even if she’s not the jealous type, it could screw everything up for you.”

“You don’t think we’re together?” The lift of Dick’s eyebrows is amused, even if he sounds a little wounded. “Babs, I…”

“Wait, are we?” Babs can feel the open shock on her face, how it mirrors her wildly confused stomach. Eating before this conversation might have been a bad idea.

Dick’s head swivels as he looks around the apartment, at the covered furniture and gleaming new counters.

“Uh,” Dick says, with a wary grin. Babs realizes he’s anxious, that she’s made him anxious with whatever misunderstanding she just voiced. “I’m, uh, I mean…I was pretty sure we were, y’know, dating.”

“Oh my god, Dick, why.” Babs covers her face with both hands, to hide her own embarrassed flush and avoid having to deal with whatever emotion he is now not even bothering to disguise. That boy can put on a mask like it’s nothing, but he’s an open book when he wants to be. “Why would you think…I must’ve sounded like a complete idiot.”

“You were making me pretty damn nervous, that’s for sure.” Dick breathes out long and slow and Babs peeks sidelong at him. He’s sagged forward with his head in his hands. He lets out a shaky laugh. “Fuck. I thought you were breaking up with me again.”

The tension is seeping out of Babs and she wishes there was a throw pillow to whack him across the back with, but any apartment decor or accessories are still packed away somewhere.

“You…I mean, we are dating, right?” Dick asks after a long silence. “Did you want to be?”

“Yes, god, Dick. I want to. But you just moved back and I was afraid I was putting too much pressure on you,” Babs exhales. “We’ve never sat down to talk about it and after everything I was starting to think you didn’t want to. You seemed so happy just leaving it alone and being friends.”

“Because I thought we were dating!” Dick throws his arms in the air now, exasperated and laughing for real. “I mean, I know we haven’t hammered out long-term plans but I just thought we were taking it slow. Between that night at your place and your dad having me over for a beer and the ‘don’t hurt her again, or else’ lecture, I guess I just assumed if it wasn’t working, then we’d
“He didn’t,” Babs gasped. “That’s what he meant when he said he had you over for dinner? I thought that was shop talk.”

“No!” Dick exclaims, a twitch of a horrified expression twisting his features. “No, just one of the most uncomfortable evenings I’ve ever had outside the mask. So, we are dating, right, just to clarify?”

“Yes,” Babs says, leaning back on the couch. She looks over at him and his dopey grin and she loves it, loves that he can be so hard and fierce underneath or when he needs to be, but that he can be so boyish and tender when he wants. Her laughing relief fades to a serious smile and she reaches out and pushes the hair off his brow. “Yeah. I think we are. Who else am I going to find that puts up with me and all my crotchety, stubborn moods? It’s always been you, Dick. I mean, you don’t deserve me, and you can’t keep up with my intellectual prowess, but I can’t be completely unrealistic about my options.”

Dick snorts and stills her fingers, taking them in his own hand. He pulls her closer, while scooting to close the distance between them. Instead of the kiss she’s mostly expecting, he puts his arm around her and holds her against him.

“I don’t want you to feel like you have to move in,” he says, his breath warm on her ear. “I sort of thought that’s what you were freaking out about. I just wanted you to be able to come over and be comfortable.”

Babs leans into him and sighs. “We are eventually going to have to talk. To talk. We’re getting too old to act like kids, and go back and forth like we used to. We had good reasons then, but I want something…I guess stable? Or as stable as we can afford. I don’t have many more breakups and changes of heart left in me before I just give up entirely and resign myself to spinsterhood.”

“You think it’s inevitable? That we’ll break up?” Dick asks, his voice low. He’s gone motionless and tense underneath her.

“We do kind of have a pattern, Boy Wonder. I’m not saying I want it to be that way, but we should be realistic. We’re not going to avoid it by pretending it isn’t true.”

“He who fails to plan, plans to fail,” Dick says, relaxing. “Sometimes I think I fell in love with you because you’re just Bruce with more emotional range and better hair.”

Pillow or not, Babs whacks him in the chest with the back of her hand.

“Ow. C’mon. I’ll concede you have a point. So we need to talk, for real. A five year plan or something. But not now?”

“Not now,” Babs says, caressing his knee. “Let’s deal with this mess out there first. I know there’s always going to be something, but this has been a pretty big something.”

“You’re worried.” Dick says, dropping a kiss in her hair. “Don’t be. We’ll pull through.”

Babs could argue that he’s not exactly in control of this, but she likes his optimism. Whenever he starts showing a lack of trust in his family’s abilities, it’s a bad sign, and she doesn’t want to try to talk him out of his surety right now.

“Yeah,” she says, something between agreement and hope. “It’s just been a rollercoaster. Cass scared the shit out of me the other night, and Tim before that. Sometimes, I feel so helpless, just
listening.”

There’s a tiny part of her that’s willing him not to ask, *Do you miss it?* She wants to vent without rehashing old wounds and tensions. It makes her regret saying anything, almost immediately, even though he’s one of the few people she feels like she can vent to at all.

One of the downsides, she supposes, of always working with kids and professional colleagues.

“I wonder if that’s how Al feels,” he says, instead.

Babs could kiss him.

“I’ll bet,” Babs says in agreement, relaxing against Dick. His arm is still around her shoulders and even if all they do is sit like this for another hour before she goes, she’d be happy.

The remnants of ice melting in their tea glasses is leaving puddles of condensation on the coffee table. Babs studies them while she and Dick lapse into silence and after a bit, he drops his chin heavily against her hair.

“What’s going on with you?” she asks.

“Worried,” he admits. “About a lot. Bruce. My job. Juggling everything. Wearing out my welcome at Tim’s. He needs his space. And that’s not even mask stuff.”

Babs sits up and kisses his cheek, then offers her opened arms. He leans into her this time, resting his head on her breasts, and sighs.

“I don’t know what I did without you, Babs,” he murmurs. “I feel like I’ve just been treading water for a long time and not really getting anywhere, and then everything changed all at once. I guess it’s my own fault, though.”


“Wanna go get ice cream?” he asks, an arm tightening around her waist.

“Or we could check out the bedroom,” she says, casually. “You know. Make sure the paint color still looks okay.”

Dick laughs, his shoulders shaking with it, and in a fluid motion he disentangles himself and stands.

“Chair or valet service?” he asks, with a grand sweep of his arm toward the hall. Her chair is beside the couch, in easy reach for her to pull around.

“Gimme a lift, Boy Wonder,” she says instead. “Keep those muscles in shape. Just bring the chair in after so I’m not stranded if you conk out on me.”

“You think you know me so well,” Dick grumbles, lifting her off the couch. “I might sit in bed and read instead, just for that.”

“Oooh, what are you reading?” Babs asks impulsively, as they round the corner into the bedroom.

“I shouldn’t have mentioned books,” Dick says with an exaggerated sigh. “You wouldn’t like it anyway. It’s one of those cop drama paperbacks. I got it at the grocery store.”

“Someday, I’m going to teach you about libraries,” Babs says. “And quality.”
“You’re one to talk,” Dick says irritably, but it’s betrayed by the smirk on his face. “I’ve seen your teen fantasy collection.”

“Let’s agree to leave our guilty pleasures out of this,” Babs says with mock defensive urgency, calling after him as he disappears to grab her chair. He returns and sets it near her. “Entertainment’s a safe zone.”

He flops down on the bed next to her; it’s covered with a fitted sheet and nothing else.

“How’s the paint look?” he asks. “Decent?”

“Dick,” she says, kissing his forehead. “Shut up. I have to leave in an hour.”

“Then we shouldn’t waste it, since you’re my girlfriend and all. You are my girlfriend, right? Still? It’s not unclear or anything?”

There’s a whole world to weigh on her shoulders outside the door, but Babs shuts it out for a while. It’ll be there later.

“I’m your girlfriend,” she says. “So act like it.”
The Bathroom

Chapter Notes

I am back to this story after a long and unintentional hiatus. I apologize for leaving you all waiting! I make no (or very small) apologies for: poor proofreading, self-indulgence, etc. etc. Hopefully, I can keep this show on the road again.

Warning for graphic depictions of previous violence/gore.

The apartment building hallway is musty and the yellowing overhead light flickers in and out, basking the cracked concrete floor in dirty light and then drenching it in blackness. The strobe effect has a weird frat party vibe and the crushed beer cans, broken glass, and cigarette butts swept into corners aren’t helping much.

Batgirl crouches at the door with the crooked numbers, boots planted on the cheery but thin doormat. It’s generic and flowery, chipped teal and white brushed across the bristly brown. It’s shedding on her boots and the floor around her and she’s pretty sure she saw this exact same pattern at a Dollar General near campus the last time she went on a frozen pizza and dish detergent run.

Knocking produced no results, no stirring from inside, so she’s manipulating picks in the lock and waiting to hear the tell-tale click that she tripped the tumbler. She has a magnet for the chain if it isn’t broken.

Stephanie is glad her hair is pulled back in a tight, flattened bun under the cowl. She’ll have to wash it out of the mashed shape later but it’s worth keeping it out of her face while she works, and the additional safety. She used to be proud of the thick blonde locks streaming over her shoulders, a clear sign that she was not the red-headed Batgirl of earlier years, or even the dark-haired terror that Cass had been.

But after resisting mild worry from Tim, outright orders from Bruce, and disparaging comments from Damian, the thing that had finally changed her mind was Jason yanking hard on a handful any chance he got. The helmet betrayed none of his expression but the implication was clear: Don’t be an idiot, Blonde Bit.

She started putting her hair up.

The lock gives way and she turns the knob slowly, easing her way into the shadowy apartment. Batman is waiting just on the roof, overlooking the windows and the fire escape in case someone makes a break for it. They’ve caught four girls that way already tonight, going through the long list of apartments Young Paul puts his girls up in.

Willow, no last name, doesn’t live in any particular one on paper and so they’ve had to check each and every one, asking questions along the way. Some of the girls were too high to answer anything and they detoured from their hunt to deliver them to Leslie Thompkins’ clinic, where they might at least ride out whatever was in their system without getting raped in the meantime.

Well, Batgirl had escorted them there. Batman had mostly stuck to the rooftops and maintained a
lookout and whatever else the hell he was doing tonight. His mind seemed to not be entirely on task.

They got answers out of some others, vague descriptions or denials of even knowing anyone named Willow. And now they are on the last of possible places, if she’s even at home. Red Robin is supposed to be keeping an eye on the rooms set aside for clients and GCPD is crawling the streets themselves.

Batgirl is hoping that this kind of attention will drive Willow back into whatever she considers home, her safe place, to ride out the poking around.

Stephanie looks around the apartment with an appraising eye. It’s small, a beaten up efficiency place with peeling vinyl floors, but somebody has tried to make it look like home. There are fake flowers in a vase, a mirror with bubbly inspirational phrases in marker, and a cheerful but dented little tea kettle on the stove.

There aren’t any visible signs of life. All the lights are off. Except, there’s a humming noise that Stephanie can’t quite place. Her comm is still on and while she’s scanning the room, again, she belatedly remembers to whisper, “I’m inside. So far, empty.”

“Bedroom?” Batman asks, when she’s already stepping toward the first closed door. It swings open under gentle pressure, but it’s as dim and lifeless as the living room/kitchen combo.

“Same,” she says. “Bathroom now.”

It’s a little rushed when she says it, because she wanted to get it in before he could. She knows this drill.

When she’s a step away from the door, she realizes where the humming is coming from. It’s the bathroom fan running, though she hasn’t heard a single other sound from the bathroom—no running water, no flush, no clatter of hair products.

And she feels like an idiot because with an apartment this tiny, and the life Willow has, it’s no wonder she’d hide instead of calling the cops if she heard someone breaking in. There’s also a very real possibility she’s hiding and armed, so Stephanie edges to the side of the door and knocks.

“Willow? I just want to talk.”

“Batgirl,” Batman says over the comm.

“Shh,” she says under her breath. There’s no answer, so she turns the knob and gives the door a small shove.

The light is off but the fan is still humming away and as soon as the door swings into the bathroom the thick, iron smell of blood mingled with the stench of piss slaps her so hard that Stephanie gags.

“Oh, fuck,” she says, still in a whisper, and she reaches around the corner and flicks the light on with a gloved finger.

There’s a body sitting propped up in the small shower stall, the curtain half drawn to obscure the huddled form. There’s blood everywhere, running in sticky rivulets from the melamine walls, and half the girl’s face is gone. What’s left is wide-eyed with fear and done up in perfect makeup, now flecked with gore.

“Batgirl,” Batman says again.
“Come on in,” Stephanie says. “I found her.”

Batman doesn’t ask over the comm or maybe he guesses from just her tone. When he enters the bathroom under a minute later, he doesn’t look surprised in the least. His mouth is actually doing that flat line thing that is still hard for her to read, even after years.

“You’re certain the apartment was empty?” is the first thing he says.

“Yes,” Stephanie says, letting acid sharpen the sound.

The cowl turns, just slightly, to regard her. Then he crouches to examine the body. She wants him to reach out and close the panicked, empty gaze of the remaining eye, but she knows he won’t. She won’t either— preservation of dignity or salvaging social comfort don’t fall into the “necessary” categories of interfering with a crime scene.

“O, incoming photo evidence,” he says.

“Roger dodg— goddammit, B, warn me next time. Should I call it in?”

“Batgirl will handle it,” Batman answers.

Stephanie is staring at the body, blinking beneath her own cowl. She’s seen bodies before, she’s seen too many bodies. Some of them in uglier condition. But this girl looks…her age. She might have even crossed paths with her at Dollar General or something, if the front mat was anything to go by. Her age and dead, just like that, while Stephanie was spending an afternoon doing cost of living comparisons online for Pittsburgh and Ann Arbor.

“Should I call it in now?” she asks, after a long silence. Her mouth is dry.

“Should you call it in now?” he asks, because of course he’d pick now to go into teaching mode. Stephanie would resent it if it didn’t immediately pull her out of her own thoughts and force her to go through the memorized protocol.

“No,” she says, shaking herself a bit. If she keeps talking, reciting the checklist, she can keep her mind on work and not things that make her feel like puking. “No. We sweep for forensic evidence in case GCPD botches their sweep. I, uh, I can dust doors and windows for prints if you…um… wanna estimate trajectory. And uh…”

“Batgirl,” he says.

“I’m fine,” she snaps. She will be. She can be. This is hardly the first or even dozenth time; she doesn’t know why it’s hitting her so hard right now.

“Was there any sign of forced entry?” he asks, standing. The bathroom seems smaller, when they both stand. The shower curtain flutters slightly, in sync with their capes, from the motion.

“No,” Steph says. “It was a simple lock to pick. But no sign of a fight. She could have hidden immediately.”

“All it rules out is that she didn’t fight back,” Batman says, his mouth going back to that flat line.

“She was afraid.” Stephanie makes herself look at the face one more time. She’ll look at evidence photos again later, when she lets herself cry, but right now she shoves that nauseous terror down and forces herself to study the body in person. It’s like a way of promising she won’t let it go, she’ll do everything she can to make sure this girl doesn’t end up as just a statistic.
It’s the least that Stephanie can do.

“It was sudden,” Batman says, glancing out of the bathroom toward the door.

Stephanie’s mind, detached from whatever is happening in her stomach, is fitting pieces together as she studies the scene. Willow has her clothes on; there’s blood splatter on shower curtain and shower walls.

“It doesn’t matter if she knew the killer or not,” Stephanie says. “She either let them in or heard the lock being forced, but she tried to hide in here instead of fighting when she realized what was happening. This wasn’t an interrupted shower.”

“Or someone forced her into the room at gunpoint,” Batman says. “I’ll calculate trajectory. Sweep the room.”

Stephanie leaves the bathroom without looking back. By the time she’s done dusting for prints or searching for hair, he’s joined her in working through the other small rooms.

She knows even before they speak that he’s already reached the same conclusion.

“You?” she asks, anyway.

“Nothing,” he says.

The apartment isn’t clean. It had been cleaned.

“Not even on the dishes in the sink,” she says, with a sigh. “They wiped everything, even her prints. Professional job?”

“No,” he says. “It wasn’t professional. Someone was trying too hard. Call it in.” He sounds weary.

“Maybe we’ll get something from the bullet,” Stephanie says, trying to feel hopeful. The apartment that had looked optimistic and cheery, if dim, is now a stinging sort of dread, like peering over the rim into hell.

“Maybe,” he allows.

“Should we both go out the usual way?”

Batman pauses by the window, turns his head back. He doesn’t move for a long span of breaths, for two dozen thudding heartbeats while Stephanie tries to hold off on thinking about the girl.

Willow. Her name is— was— Willow.

Not just a girl.

“Dust the door knob,” he says.

“The outside?” she asks, to verify.

He nods. He’s gone before Stephanie moves, grappling up and out of sight. She used to be desperate for him, for any of them, to trust her with things like this on her own. She’d do them on her own anyway, but it’s different to know she’s being trusted with it.

But right now, a shaky “Wait!” almost tears out of her throat and she knows she’s going to lose it if she doesn’t get out of the sterile little apartment with “never stop dreaming” written in pink marker
on the mirror in the corner.

She flees into the building hallway without checking it first. It’s sheer luck that nobody is there. She catches her breath and listens for any voices or footsteps before she stoops to scan the knob.

“Batgirl,” Batman’s voice comes through the comm line and she jumps, but just a little.

“What?” she spits, when there’s nothing after her name.

“We’ll find him,” he says finally. “It won’t be for nothing.”

Stephanie doesn’t want to need to hear it as much as she does, but she does, and that’s life, she guesses. She sighs.

“Yeah,” she says, softening her tone. “I hope so.”

And then the knob, wonder of wonders, has something.


“Meet me at the cave,” he orders, and the line clicks quiet.

Stephanie gets out of the building before piggybacking onto a line registered to an actually defunct payphone and giving a detective the barest details.

The trek to the cave is a long one. She stops a few times to intervene in petty crime or help with other situations; it should, in theory, be a chance to clear her head but she can’t stop thinking about how unfair the world is. It’s always been unfair and she’s always known it, but tonight twists the knife in her gut a bit harder, a bit sharper.

It burns.

When she does pull into the cave on her motorcycle, the bay is empty of most other visiting vehicles. She’s grateful, because other than this print business she really doesn’t want to talk to anyone right now.

Bruce is already there at the computer, cowl off, ice on his knee. Dev is yawning near some medical cabinets and when he sees her pulling off her own cowl, he’s apparently satisfied that she’s uninjured and shoves himself to his feet with a, “Right then, I’m off.”

He approaches her, heading for the elevator, and she forces a smile. He pats her shoulder and slows just long enough to whisper, “We’re having a chat about school, and bloody soon.”

“Did Jason talk to you?” Steph moans, turning to watch him go. “That was confidential information.”

“Jason?” Dev echoes, as the elevator doors slide open. “What’s he got to do with anything?”

Steph sighs and trudges over to the computer.

“What about school?” Bruce asks, without looking away from the screen.

“Ohmygod, not you, too. Forget it. Later. I don’t care, but not now. Let’s deal with this.”

Whether it’s his own exhaustion or actual relief at the insistence on focus, Stephanie doesn’t know, but Bruce drops it willingly enough. He’s got a section of screen filled with identification
“Aw, shit,” Steph mumbles, rubbing her eyes. “Were those the door knob prints?”

It’s Willow herself, in the picture. With an actual name: Sarah Willow Efaw. So, it was actually her name.

“One,” Bruce answers. “One of the full. The other full and the partial don’t match the ones I took from the body.”

“Ah.” It shouldn’t surprise her that he handled the body, it doesn’t surprise her…it just makes her insides do a funny kind of flop.

“The other full and the partial are still running. We know now who to notify, though.”

Stephanie sits on the desk and sighs.

“Is there a problem?” Bruce asks, in that way that used to piss her off. The way he talked to Tim that Tim was never bothered by, that made her rant to him later he’s an asshole, Timothy. She’s well-versed enough now to know it’s Bruce-speak for are you okay. Other times, maybe, she’d give him grief for it. Tease him about dancing around what he wanted to say, until she got a half-smile out of him. She’s almost as good at it now as...well, definitely not Dick, but better than Damian.

A tiny psychology textbook in the back of her brain is already analyzing her tendency to compare them against herself and telling her to shut up. Or, refocus at least.

She’s not in the mood to tease.

Or to fight, really.

“This is hitting me harder than it usually does,” she says, quietly. She doesn’t want to look at the smiling picture anymore. It looks like maybe a school ID photo.

“It’s been a hard week,” Bruce replies, not unsympathetically. For him, anyway. “Go get some sleep. You did good work tonight. I’ll finish up here.”

“You okay?” she looks sideways at him.

He huffs and rubs his jaw. “People keep asking me that.”

“Maybe there’s a reason,” Steph retorts. “And that’s not an answer.”

“Go.” He waves toward the elevator. “I wouldn’t sleep anyway. It’s too late.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” Steph says, with a sloppy and mocking salute. “You gotta talk to someone at some point.”

It’s easier to focus on other people’s problems. It kind of always has been. But Steph knows she has the unfortunate ability to make other people’s problems her problems.

“Hnn,” is all he says.

Stephanie doesn’t cry while taking her suit off in the other room. She doesn’t cry while showering the layer of sweat and grime off her skin, while squeezing water out of her washed hair. She doesn’t vomit in the sink or the trash can.
She rides the elevator up into the Manor when it’s nearly 5am and she doesn’t head for the guest room that is officially hers alone, the place she leaves random crap or changes of clothes or previous semesters’ textbooks.

It’s dark when she slips into Cass’ room. There’s a faint rustle of sheets and blankets and then Cass is sitting up, peering owlishly at her in the dark.

“What’s wrong?” she asks.

Cass.

Oh god, Steph thinks, realizes, while staring at her. They’d all heard the gunshot and the gurgling blood and thought Cass was…

…well, like Willow.

Gone.

She’s crying before she climbs into the bed, next to Cass, who wraps her arms around Stephanie without another word.

Stephanie really doesn’t want to talk.

“You’re afraid,” Cass says, against her damp hair. It just makes Stephanie cry harder.

Afraid. Of dying, of living, of being alone, of being broke in a new city all by herself.

She’s always been okay on her own.

But somehow, now? She’s not.

“Don’t be,” Cass says and Steph, for a heartbeat, stiffens, cutting an ugly sob in half with a painful gulp. Cass’ grip on her tightens and she hurries to say, the words stilted in haste, “Don’t be…afraid, of being afraid. Fear isn’t…bad. Being sad isn’t…a crime.”

“Is that a joke?” Stephanie chokes out, laughing and crying at the same time.

“Could be,” Cass says, neutrally. Steph has to shove her away to see the impish grin. “Yes.”

Then, her expression sobers.

“But it’s not. Not weak. You know. Some fear and some sad are good.”

Stephanie sniffs and wipes at her cheeks with the cuff of her hoodie.

“Is it okay? If I’m sad, here, for a little bit?” Stephanie studies Cass’ face, the impassive and steady gaze of Cass’ dark brown eyes. “I need to be sad and it’s for someone else, but I don’t want it to hurt you, too.”

In response, Cass slowly pulls her own sleeve back, up over her elbow and bunched up around her shoulder. Steph raises an eyebrow but Cass doesn’t falter. She bends her arm and flexes her muscles.

“I’m strong as fuck,” she says seriously. Her swearing always sounds rehearsed, like someone reading from a script. “I can take it.”
Steph snorts a broken laugh and collapses sideways in the bed. Cass fixes her sleeve and lies down facing her, the humorous glint gone while Stephanie’s eyes fill again with tears.

“Thank you,” she whispers.


Stephanie doesn’t remember crying again, exactly, but the last thing she does remember before she falls asleep is thinking about weeping willow leaves trailing over river water.
A tinkling, glittery sound—delicate and icy—is how Red Hood knows the broken glass of the window has hit the alley blacktop below. The sound is whisked away by the stiff spring wind and the shouting, as he drags Angus Keaton up one thudding, swaying fire escape step at a time.

They’re headed for the roof, Jason’s gloved hand locked onto Angus Keaton’s bare ankle. Keaton was in boxers and a threadbare undershirt when Red Hood broke into the apartment.

Jason didn’t give him time to change into the worsted wool tailored suit hanging in the bedroom, or even a pair of sweats from the laundry hamper.

Every step, Angus fights. He’s keeping his head up to yell, so Jason isn’t worried about a concussion. It’s shoulders and back that are going to bruise.

*Thud.*

“—fucking son—”

*Thud.*

“—of a goddamn—”

*Thud.*

“—bitch!”

Jason stops because Angus has snagged a railing with his fingers. And because he can’t let that just hang there in the air without being addressed.

“Sorry,” Jason says, his thumb unclasping the snap button on the leather sheath. It’s worn and gives way easily; the knife is in his hand. “What’d you just call my mom?”

Without more warning, he drops Angus’ ankle and before the man can scramble away, Jason leaps the few steps down the length of his body and hammers the hilt of the knife down on Angus’ hand.

The man howls, recoiling the arm against his chest. Jason grabs a flailing, kicking leg again and continues up.

“First rule for tonight,” Jason says, steeling himself against the gulping sobs. “You gotta talk about a lady, you’re going to be fucking polite. Capiche?”

“Fuck you,” Angus hisses between his teeth.

*Thud.*

“Now, see, I’m a reasonable man,” Jason says, like he’s not dragging a wannabe professional assassin from his apartment at one in the morning. He says it like he’s at a business lunch, with Caesar salads and steak. “You wanna insult me? Go right ahead. I’m not your buddy. I get that.”

*Thud, thud.*

Angus is kicking at Jason’s hand on his ankle, trying to push it off. They’re nearly to the roof now. Jason’s grip doesn’t slacken.
“But my mom— any woman, really, let’s just make this a blanket rule—is off-limits.”

The smack of shoulders against metal steps is exchanged for the scratch-scraping of body against concrete. Angus is no longer yelling; he’s pouring all his energy into thrashing like an animal, kicking at Jason in any way he can manage while being dragged. The anger takes a feral, desperate turn into something with the scent of sheer panic dripping onto the scattered pea gravel along with Angus’ sweat.

Jason knows when he ties a line around Angus’ ankle that he was right to volunteer for this, that even if he won’t drop him to end his life on a stained sidewalk, that Angus believes he will. Red Hood still has a reputation because reputations are the sorts of things that take a long, long time to die.

When Angus is wheezing hoarse sobs as he writhes head down in the air, hitting the rough brick with his shoulders, Jason hauls him halfway up again.

“Who ordered the hit?”

“I don’t know his name!” Angus cries, tears and snot trickling past his eyes. He’s trying to use his abs to curl himself upright but he either doesn’t have the strength or his panic has rendered his muscle control useless.

“Hm. Wrong answer,” Jason says, tapping the cable line with the blunt edge of his knife. He lets Angus fall a few feet again. The shriek stirs something in him, something hard and dangerous, like a siren song. The fact that he has to resist it makes him feel ill. Letting Angus dangle might be effective psychological torture, but he actually lets him sit that minute so he can wrestle himself back into focus.

“Fred Welch. Fred Welch!” Angus screeches and Jason drags him back up and stares into his face.

“Keep talking,” he says, and Angus flinches when Jason leans in. The puppet-string jerk of the reaction hums with siren melody. He orders him to spill, and Angus does.

Angus spills everything—the name of the man again, his position on the janitorial staff at Arkham Asylum. That he’d gotten the contract to kill the woman directly from Fred Welch.

He claims he doesn’t know who Welch answers to, that he has someone higher up.

“Please, please, you have to believe me, I swear that’s all I know, I fucking swear on my grandmother’s grave,” Angus pleads, while swaying in a stiff wind. The sensation of lilting sideways while upside down this high up drags a guttural, terrified moan from his throat.

Jason believes him, not because Angus makes a strong case but because he knows how it sounds when a man is broken.

Jason is good at this.

He ties him up against an exhaust pipe in the building’s roof. He makes Angus wait, listening to hiccuping sobs, while he pulls paper out and writes a note with his non-dominant left hand. The GCPD are going to know before they get to the roof why they’re picking him up, but Jason likes the tradition and it gives him a few more seconds to evaluate him and see if he’ll remember anything else while staring right at Jason’s holstered guns.

The note is stuck to Angus’ bare chest with a strip of high-bond adhesive tape. Jason pats his cheek, almost a slap. Then he leaves with a mental folder of information and Angus’ now-angry
shouts ringing after him.

Jason is good at this and it’s easy.

It’s easier than college classes, it’s natural like breathing, like cleaning a gun, like swinging between buildings.

Interrogation is a learned skill, but it helps to have a knack for it, and Jason has both the years of study and the aptitude.

It makes him sick. It makes him want to puke over the side of the building right along with Angus Keaton, to think this might be the only thing he really is any good at. He wonders if it’s selfish to want more, to want a different way to make a difference, when he’s already so useful here.

How is Bruce ever going to let him walk away?

This, this skill and the grit it requires, paired with the ghost of his trigger-happy reputation, is an asset the Bats need. It would be foolish to throw that away.

But Jason knows, he knew before he told Stephanie, that he can’t do both.

And as good as he is, his taste for this is souring. It’s like a dish he’s made and eaten too many times. He has to keep reminding himself that Angus killed a woman, killed her in her own home. He has to fan the flame of his stomach for this work with that anger, hold on to it and then keep himself from sinking a hollow point into Angus’ head out of rage.

Keeping his fury chained up is something he’s gotten world’s better at since the first days out of the Pit, but it’s fucking exhausting.

He doesn’t know if he can maintain it anymore.

He doesn’t know if he wants to.

Wants?

What he wants…is to see himself making a difference by filling pages with new ink instead of burning the world down to scorched bindings. He wants to see new stories instead of being the final page for dozens of them.

The missed calls from Kendall Chalmers sting.

Maybe it’s selfish.

But Jason knows what he wants. He wants mornings pouring bowls of cereal and tying shoes and afternoons of helping with math homework the way Bruce used to help him. He wants to make popcorn and sit on the floor with blankets for movie night, spend Saturday morning in bed reading a stack of books. He wants to fix tie knots before the prom he didn’t even get to go to himself, he wants to accidentally burn dinner and get Happy Meals from Batburger.

He’s wanted it ever since he helped Martha Kent carry groceries inside to put away and thought, I could do this. I could have this kind of life.

He’d told Kendall Chalmers he would take older kids, because he’d been told it was easier to place older kids with single men— especially young ones.

But Jason knows he’d take anyone. Any age. He just wants the chance to be that pivotal point for
as many as he can, to keep them from ending up on the street with a gun pressed to their temple, and a rap sheet that says they deserve it.

The problem is, Jason now isn’t sure if interrogating Angus just proved that those wants are too selfish to entertain.

Lots of people can take care of kids.

Not a lot of people can do what he does on rooftops. Not even all the Bats can do it as well as he can.

Jason takes the motorcycle ride back to the cave to mull it over, deciding to share the information in person after he decides if he’ll go through with the conversation he’d been planning on having with Bruce. He could just… not say anything. He could withdraw his name from Kendall Chalmer’s files, shred the paperwork, graduate and immerse himself in full-time Red Hood work again.

He could do it and do it well.

He could help so much.

If chaining up his own anger becomes too draining, he could take breaks— vacations until the green tinge recedes and he can play by the rules again. He can work with everyone and keep that role he fills now from falling to anyone else.

By the time he pulls into the cave, he’s so torn up he doesn’t even know what he wants anymore. He shuts off the bike engine and strides to the desk on autopilot, then leans against the desk and gives a terse update:

Fred Welch. Custodial at Arkham Asylum. Hired Angus Keaton to kill Willow, no last name provided, at the specified address. Angus was paid in small bills, laundered somewhere.

It’s late and nobody else is there except Bruce, who pushes the cowl back while he talks. Bruce takes it all in quietly and then turns to the computer to type.

Jason means to go peel off his suit, shower, and change while he gives himself another twenty minutes to think. To try to talk himself into… what? What he knows he should do?

What should he do?

“Jason?” Bruce’s voice cuts through his thoughts, louder than he was at any point during Jason’s update on Angus Keaton. “You alright, son?”

It’s not until he pulls his hands away from his hair that Jason realizes he was sitting slumped with his head in his hands. It startles him, his unawareness, and feels uncomfortably like the periods of dissonance he dealt with at the Kent Farm a few years ago.

“I don’t want to do this,” Jason blurts out, lifting his head. His surprise at himself matches what he sees in Bruce’s face.

“What, exactly,” Bruce asks warily. Has he been this on edge about everything recently or just Jason? Jason shakes himself to clear his mind.

“This,” Jason repeats lamely and miserably. “I know I’m fucking useful out there. I can’t just stop. But I don’t want to do this anymore. And this is a shit time to bring it up, I know, and I’m sorry. I
“Jason.” Bruce is crouching in front of him and Jason didn’t even see him move. He feels like the world is slipping out of his grasp, blurred around the edges. It sharpens into hard definition when one of Bruce’s hands presses on his knee. The worry in his voice is replaced by something commanding. “What happened?”

“I didn’t fricking kill him, if that’s what you’re asking,” Jason snaps, wrenching away and standing. He makes it a dozen strides away before he stops, breathing hard. When he glances back, Bruce is only just then rising slowly, using the desk for balance. He looks stunned.

“I didn’t ask that,” Bruce says, and this time, his posture is rigid and he’s starting to look angry.

“I didn’t even want to kill him,” Jason says, scowling. There’s a sensation of dirt shifting on his shoulders, like unearthing old arguments. They haven’t fought about this in a long time. It hasn’t been an issue— Jason stopped making it an issue— a while ago.

“If not, then what is this about?” Bruce demands. “If this is affecting you that much, then that’s a problem.”

“That’s not the goddamn problem!” Jason yells, whirling and advancing on him. Even if the desk weren’t behind him, he knows enough to know Bruce wouldn’t have ever stepped back. He does look stunned though, and that expression intensifies when Jason is toe to toe with him, the shout ringing in the cave: “The problem is that I don’t want to be a fucking disappointment!”

Jason’s jaw drops and for a second, he’s doing nothing but looking right into Bruce’s startled gray eyes. The experience of hearing it come out of his own mouth hammers home how true it is, how it’s been the crux underlying every point of his internal battle. He throws himself back into the chair and forcefully mutters, “Heck.”

Bruce drags his chair around this time, maybe to avoid crouching with his busted knee, and sits to face him. “Jason. Jay-lad, look at me.”

Jason shakes his head, shielding his eyes with the hand propped against his face. He’s trying not to cry, he really is, but the next breath comes in a heaving gasp.

One of Bruce’s hands gently pulls his arm down and then tips his chin up. Jason would have to look sideways to not look at him, and he tries that for a split second, but then he doesn’t have to avoid it because Bruce has taken the hint and let go. The chair creaks as Bruce leans back, giving him even more space, before speaking.

“Jason. You aren’t a disappointment. You want out? You’re out.”

“It’s not that fricking easy,” Jason protests, throwing a hand in the air. “How can you just say that? What if someone gets hurt, or something happens, and I could have—”

“The mask doesn’t mean you can save everyone,” Bruce says, and it’s firm but he sounds so wretched Jason’s gaze is drawn to his just to make sure Bruce isn’t crying. He isn’t, but the hoarseness persists. “You know that. If you want out, you’re out. Don’t do this half-hearted. That’s more dangerous than not doing it at all, and I don’t want to lose you over a damn field error.”

“But the case,” Jason protests. “This is big. You need me until it’s over.”

“We could use you,” Bruce agrees, more clipped and controlled than before. Then, it softens. “But that’s your decision, Jason. I want to make that for you. You know I do. But I’m not blind. If I
make that for you now, it’s going to be almost impossible for me to stop again. I can’t take the reins on this, even if it’s just whether or not you wait a few weeks.”

“I…” Jason exhales, even more miserably than earlier. “I want to be done. But I don’t want to let everyone down.”

“I can tell them I benched you,” Bruce says, and Jason can’t tell if he’s joking or not. He’s not sure Bruce knows if he’s joking or not.

“No.” Jason runs a finger over the threads of the leather jacket sleeve, the one with hidden plates of light armor. It’s going to feel weird to not wear this again, but he’s already shrugging it off like a suffocating weight. “I’ll live with it.”

“I don’t think they’ll feel that way,” Bruce says, as Jason stands and drapes the jacket over his arm. “But even if they do— Jay— I don’t. What do you think I want for you? I told you once, at the Kents.”

“For me to be happy,” Jason says, turning that familiar memory over in his head. He’s thought of it often, actually, without really connecting it to now.

“Don’t sound so miserable about it,” Bruce says, with the hint of a tired smile tugging at his lips. “I meant it.”

Jason swallows to try to clear his tight throat. “Thank you, Dad.”

“Go shower,” Bruce says, turning away suddenly to face the computer. “And tell Alfred. He’ll want the excuse to make a cake.”

“Speaking of people I won’t be disappointing,” Jason says, with a rough laugh. Bruce is typing again, already. “Did I get enough? From Keaton?”

“You did well,” Bruce says. “It’s enough.”

Jason’s eyes are still stinging with the salt from a few minutes ago, but his chest feels like he’s finally come up for air. He moves toward the shower, tugging off his boots with hopping strides as he goes.

“Get some sleep, old man!” he yells, throwing one boot in Bruce’s direction. It smacks the back of the chair and Bruce catches it as it topples over toward the screen. He leaves it on the edge of the desk, muck and all.

It’s still there when Jason trudges from the showers to the elevator with damp hair, past the computer and the empty chair, to leave the cave for the Manor above him.
The City

The city hums with early evening traffic, the noise drifting up from the streets far below. Dick Grayson chews a mouthful of Philly cheesesteak without really tasting it, then follows it with a long swallow of ice water sucked through a straw. His eyes scan the page on his lap, one hand holding it firmly against the clipboard so the bottom half doesn’t flutter in the wind.

Behind him, the roof access door opens and he twists to see who his company is— it’s Jim Gordon, his overcoat collar turned up. Dick goes back to reading names and finishing his sandwich.

There’s a clicking sound and then a tired exhale, and the smell of cigarette smoke.

“Does Babs know you’re smoking again?”

“Christ!” Jim exclaims.

Dick leans from where he’s sitting cross legged against a ventilation shaft pipe to see Jim scowling at him, a cigarette jammed in the corner of his mouth. It’s like when Dick was little, just a Robin springing handstands around the GCPD headquarters roof while Batman talked to Jim in the glow of the signal. Except then, Jim hadn’t looked so angry and like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar at the same time.

“I don’t suppose you’ll keep it between us,” Jim offers, his thick brows a bunched line over his eyes.

“I’m trying to stay on her good side,” Dick replies, his expression schooled into something equally stony. He’s listened to Babs worry about her dad and her dad’s health too many times to let it slide as a joke.

“Damned nuisance,” Jim sighs, flicking the cigarette to the ground and grinding the toe of his shoe against it. They’re black New Balance sneakers, instead of the dress shoes he used to wear all the time, and Dick doesn’t regret being a pest. “It was the first one, just so you know, when you file your report on me.”

“Noted,” Dick says, sucking ice water through the straw.

“You’re on the wrong roof,” Jim says, jamming his hands in his coat pockets.

“Could say the same about you, sir.” Dick grins and finishes off his Philly Cheesesteak, then balls the paper wrapper up. The roof is the one of his own precinct, smaller and absent the massive signal.

“Oh, it’s ‘sir’ now, is it.” Jim grumbles, closing the distance so he’s standing beside Dick. He looks over the city. “You on or off duty?”

“Lunch break,” Dick says, holding the balled wrapper as evidence. He taps the clipboard. “And work.”

“Mm,” Jim says, squinting down through his glasses at the papers. “You caught the Welch case?”

“Arrested him coming out of Arkham,” Dick says. It had been a long afternoon, most of it spent in an interrogation room trying to find flaws in Angus Keaton and Fred Welch’s stories.
“How long do we have left to hold him?” Jim asks, looking pensive.

“You didn’t hear?” Dick glances up in surprise.

Jim shrugs. “Just got here. Lt. Delgrosso was occupied, thought I’d get some air first.”

“Welch confessed. He confessed to hiring Keaton not just for Willow Efaw, but Stanislaw Kolberg before that.”

“Did he now?” Jim’s white eyebrows climb on his wrinkled forehead. “In the room? On tape? What’s his motive?”

“Recorded, written, and signed,” Dick confirms. “Said he had ‘personal grudges’ and found Keaton. He claimed the bullets were from a box he bought illegally while out of state last year.”

Jim scoffs, a sound of curt dismissal, and frowns at the skyline.

Dick scans the paper again and rubs his brow. He should be happy— a confession is the ideal result here. But he’s mostly just stressed. His lieutenant seems eager to close the book on the whole thing, and Dick can’t even blame him. There are details that Dick knows, that he shouldn’t know from just working his cases, that complicate things and the Lieutenant couldn’t know that.

“Dammit,” Jim says finally, sounding equally peeved. “He’s covering for somebody.”

“Yep,” Dick says, enunciating the popping constant. He climbs to his feet, brushing crumbs off his lap.

“Well,” Jim says, reaching a hand for the clipboard. “What’ve we got?”

Dick gives him the papers, relieved. He’d been debating calling Bruce to go over it, but hadn’t gotten a clear chance and the roof didn’t seem secure enough. Being able to talk it through with Jim will be almost as good, and give him an ally internal to the force if he gets flack from his superior.

This job had started with Dick’s intention to keep professional distance, but he’s not going to maintain that if there are lives at stake. Some things aren’t worth protecting, and if the cost is exposure to personal criticism then that’s one he can pay.

“Arkham wasn’t the first correctional facility Welch worked at,” Dick says. “I did some digging before we picked him up today. He was in custodial at Blackgate for three years, a while back.”

“You think he met a convict?” Jim says, eyes flicking up from the paper. He harrumphs, a satisfied little noise. “That’s a good start. What am I looking at?”

“List of all the persons incarcerated during his three years, limited for now to the areas he worked. It would have had to be someone he had regular access to without attracting attention.”

“That would require him being smart,” Jim says, handing the clipboard back. “Do you think he’s smart?”

“Smart enough,” Dick says, shrugging. “He hasn’t contradicted his own story since we brought him in, so he’s keeping that straight at least.”

Jim takes his glasses off to rub the bridge of his nose. “Plots. I hate plots, Dick. Whatever
happened to crimes of passion. Catching ‘im in the act.”

“I don’t remember it being much different when I was a kid, sir,” Dick says, tacking on the term almost as an afterthought. Up here on the roof, he keeps forgetting which uniform he’s in.

“When you were a…” Jim exclaims and trails off, gaze snapping over to him. Despite his age, his blue eyes are still clear and sharp. “A kid, hm. Guess you aren’t so much anymore, Detective. How’s Bruce, uh, feel about all this, by the way?”

“Not as mad as he was when I first joined, that’s for sure,” Dick says, tucking the clipboard under his arm. “He’s not trying to talk me out of it anymore, at least.”

“He’s at least talking to you, though, right?”

There’s something hard in Jim’s tone, far more resolute than the easy way he’d caved about the cigarette. For a moment, Dick does feel like a kid again, all spitting temper and red closing in around the edges of his vision.

“I think if Bruce isn’t talking to me, he has reasons,” Dick says, reining himself in just enough to be cold and even.

Jim, to his credit, doesn’t look startled. He chuckles, and claps Dick on the shoulder. “Easy, son. I’m not attacking him. I just know how he can be.”

There’s a sense of deflation as all the fury rushes out of him, and he remembers who he’s talking to-- not just a superior on the force, but someone who has known and put up with Bruce for even longer than Dick.

“We haven’t really had time,” Dick says, rubbing the back of his head. “I moved back here to see family more but I’ve been too busy, pulling double shifts and setting up my apartment.”

Jim gives him an appraising look and then shakes his head, a defeated slump to his shoulders. “It’s been a hell of a month. You know, I’d tell you to learn from my mistakes and not work too much?”

“But?” Dick drums his fingers on the clipboard.

“But hell if I know how to tell you how. And I’m not going to talk you out of work when I need men I can trust.” Jim pats his pocket, pulls a pack of cigarettes halfway out, scowls and shoves them back in. His hands stay jammed deep in the coat pockets, his shoulders hunched against the mild wind. “I should tell you to stop picking up second shifts and spend time with my daughter.”

“She understands,” Dick says.

Jim makes a noise of disgruntled assent, an irritated little *hrumph*.

Dick leans to pick up the waxy paper cup of ice water. He takes a sip and then lets it dangle from his fingers pinched around the lid, and he hopes he’s right. He tries to imagine Babs’ reaction if he skipped a shift to see her, and in his head it looks a lot like falling asleep on a couch in the Clocktower while she works, or putting on another suit for a couple hours.

He doesn’t think either of them know how to stop working for long, really, and he doesn’t think it’ll help right now to mention how much Babs herself takes after Jim.

Together, they watch the streetlights click on along the distant stretch of 6th Avenue.
Jim sighs. “I thought it would be better for you kids. I thought we were making enough of a difference.”

“Didn’t you?” Dick asks, turning to look at him.

In response, Jim waves his hand dismissively. “Don’t listen to me. I’m just whining because I feel too old for this damn city anymore. You know we’ve got an app now? The police department?”

“Yeah.” Dick nods.

“You spend your whole life thinking you’re making at least some progress, and then you wake up one day to thousands of domestic assault and theft reports.” Jim takes the cigarettes out of his pocket again and this time holds the pack out in Dick’s direction, shaking it, and grumbling: “Dammit, take these before I light another one and have Babs down my throat about it again.”

“Did you try nicotine patches?” Dick asks, fumbling the clipboard around and slipping it under his other arm, so he can hold the water and take the pack at the same time.

“Yes,” Jim snaps, running a hand over his face right after. “I’m sorry, Dick. I’m turning into a mean old coot.”

“Weren’t you always?” Dick teases, dodging the lousy swipe Jim makes at his shoulder. His expression sobers. “Jason said candy helped. Suckers, I think.”

“And then she’ll be on me about diabetes. ‘You’re getting old, Dad, you have to think about yourself, Dad, take a vacation, Dad.’” Jim’s voice climbs in a hushed falsetto and then falls again. “I don’t need a vacation. What I need is for this goddamn city to stop eating itself alive.”

“Hey,” Dick says, his limbs restless and tense all over to keep from moving to work it out. Jim’s stress is so palpable it weighs the air down and Dick’s only got five minutes left of his lunch hour. Nobody will say much if he’s late, but they’ll notice, and he doesn’t want to start taking liberties too often.

Leaving Jim without trying to alleviate the pessimism doesn’t feel like an option, though. Just considering it hurts Dick and makes his skin crawl with guilt.

“I know, I know,” Jim says. “This is just me yelling ‘get off my lawn.’ You can go tell Babs she’s right and I’m an idiot.”

“Actually, I was going to say, all those reports from the app?” Dick traces a figure eight on the roof with the tip of his shoe. “I mean. At least people trust the police enough to try. That isn’t true very many places. And I know it wasn’t true when I was little.”

For a second, Jim’s hard gaze doesn’t waver; then he glances out again at the sunset, a small smile tugging on his lips. “Yeah,” he says, the worried lines around his eyes relaxing a bit. “Yeah, I guess things have changed some. Say, what made you attach Welch to the Kolberg case? Did the forensic analysis confirm the bullets?”

“Didn’t have to,” Dick says, shrugging. “Welch attached himself. Seemed a little too eager, if you ask me.”

“You don’t think he did it?”

“That’s the thing I can’t figure out,” Dick admits. He thinks Jim accepted his reassurance but his body still craves motion and he bounces on his toes, trying to shake it off. He has a few more hours
and then he can go out or work it off in other ways. “I think he did do it. I think he hired Keaton and now he’s rolling on him. What I don’t know is why he gave himself up so fast. I don’t know if protecting someone is part of a deal he made, or if he’s just so scared shitless of being caught in a screwup he think he’s safer behind bars.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” Jim mumbles. “Well. I guess we keep them both and see what happens. Even the smart ones can panic. We’ve beat the bush; we just need to watch and see who else goes running.”

“I’ll keep going over this list,” Dick says, nodding toward the clipboard. “We’ll dig up something, one way or another.”

“You think he’ll want access to Welch?” Jim asks, staring at the clouds rolling in over the deep teal sky.

Dick considers Bruce and his preference for controlling or leading investigations. He’s improved, possibly from necessity, at delegating, but there’s still that chilled unease whenever things move forward without him, that Dick now understands is plain anxiety. Even with his relatively deep involvement recently, Dick’s sensed that frost every time he’s talked to Bruce in the past week or two.

He wasn’t exactly avoiding Jim’s question. Bruce hasn’t been not talking to him, but Dick was also telling the truth about busy schedules since he moved. They’ve barely had a moment to talk to each other at all, except in passing, and there are half a dozen things Dick feels like he’s managing on back burners until this current crisis is over. And he’ll get to those if the next crisis isn’t too close on its heels, and it feels like the last year was a fluke lulling him into false security.

This isn’t overwhelming because he’s never done it before; this is suffocating because it feels like it’s all he’s done since he was sixteen or seventeen and it’s just never really, honestly stopped. He was talking Jim out of blunt pessimism, but he feels it pooling around his own feet and rising like flood waters.

He’s on the verge of calling Bruce as soon as he gets back downstairs, just to ask how are you and can we talk soon, or maybe he’ll just show up at the office in the morning with two large coffees and ignore his own guilt at the meetings he knows Bruce will cancel or postpone just to see him.

Having that plan makes him feel a little better, a little less panicked. Then, he can ask things like, ‘Do I wait until this mess is over to stop carrying this ring in my pocket, or just stop waiting?’ and ‘How do you balance work when you’re not just a small cog, when people depend on you all the time every place you have to be?’

It’ll even be worth the questions he gets in return, like ‘How long have you had the ring?’ and ‘Are you sure you aren’t trying to do too much?’

Dick can already hear himself: ‘I am trying to do too much, just like you; now tell me how you do it.’

And maybe he can get Bruce to tell him what’s going on with him, in the bargain. He considers just talking to Jim, while Jim’s right there, but he’s a couple minutes past the end of his lunch hour. Just imagining visiting Bruce in his WE office in the morning while Bruce sips a mocha and Dick lets his coffee grow cold to talk and pace makes a lot of the tension in his shoulders melt away.

“Dick?” Jim asks.
“I don’t know,” Dick says, sipping from the cup of water he’s still holding. Focus. He can focus until tomorrow. “You’ll have to ask him. He might be fine with the transcripts of my interrogation, he might want to ask him questions I can’t. I do know Lt. Delgrosso wants to treat this as open and shut, a fluke not related to Ivy or Crane at all.”

“I was afraid of that,” Jim says. “And I don’t have much to convince him otherwise. I can outright order him to keep it open, but I don’t want to push him without much cause. You’ve got a few days of red tape, though, before I’d have to directly interfere. Think you can find something through that list by then?”

“I can or he can,” Dick says with certainty. “We’ve got a lot of solid material to work with.”

“Will you–” Jim stops and presses his lips together underneath his bushy silver mustache. “No. Never mind. I’ll give him Welch myself. I thought quiet might be good, but no.”

“I can get you a phone number,” Dick jokes, after scanning the rooftop out of habit. He should have done it sooner, even without incriminating names, but Jim’s presence makes him feel safe and in-between identities. Maybe it’s how well Jim has always juggled knowing and not saying too much.

“No,” Jim huffs a laugh. “I’ve got one, you know. But no, tonight, I’m lighting up the signal. It’s been too many days and it might make Welch’s boss, whoever he is, nervous. I want to remind whatever’s crawling up from the gutters of this goddamn city remember how we beat them back before, in case anybody else is getting ideas.”

Dick’s heart swells with a surge of confidence and pride. He might be wearing the GCPD badge, he might be carrying the ID that says Detective Grayson, but he remembers the thrill and the urgency in seeing that light flood the sky when he was little and knowing they were about to go help, they were about to change something and save people.

It’s been too long since he was in Gotham all the time, too long since he’s watched the gray clouds and city smog glow with that signal. It makes lasting the night until he can talk to Bruce seem easy, seem like nothing compared to what he’s survived before. He doesn’t even know why he was feeling so dire about this situation, and suddenly, the city doesn’t seem so bleak.

It’ll be good to see that light again-- it reminds him why even after years in Bludhaven, Gotham still feels like home.
Bruce is at the bathroom sink dabbing concealer over the dark crescents under his eyes and
snatching gulps of hot coffee when Alfred materializes in the doorway, a house phone in his hand.

“For you, sir,” Alfred says, his tone so thoroughly displeased that Bruce almost takes a drink of
liquid foundation sitting where he thought his coffee mug was, while processing his shock at the
tone. Alfred’s eyebrow rises in a singular, critical arch when Bruce sets the foundation down and
gestures for the phone.

So, he’s still upset about the not sleeping much thing, clearly.

“So, he’s still upset about the not sleeping much thing, clearly.

“Hello?” Bruce says, frowning after Alfred’s retreating form. The house line doesn’t often result in
calls that make it to him anymore. It’s usually more for services and goods that Alfred arranges,
and the older man screens anything else pretty stringently.

“Bruce?” Harvey Dent replies, his rasp distinctive even over the phone. “Thank god. I thought
Alfred hung up on me, and I’ve only got the one call today.”

So, perhaps the sleeping thing is not why Alfred is pissed.

“Harv? Where are you?” Bruce catches a glimpse of himself in the mirror and immediately turns
away.


“That’s great, Harvey,” Bruce says, meaning it but stepping out of the bathroom to peer across the
room at a clock. Down the hall, he can hear the faint sounds of Damian slamming things around,
probably looking for something for school. “It’s seven in the morning.”

“Yeah, sorry about that. I have to make my call while the others are served breakfast. Less trouble
if everyone is busy.”

“Huh,” Bruce says, feeling too stupid with fatigue to think of anything interesting. He went to bed
too late; woke up too early. Image-remnants of nightmares stick to his mind like rotted refuse left
by the bay tide. He doesn’t know how to wash them away.

The surrealness of getting a phone call on the house line from Harvey Dent at seven in the morning
makes that littered beach feeling more, not less, intense. Dent seems content with his minimal
responses.

“This is the second day. Lucky I remembered your house number. It was unlisted even back then,
wasn’t it?”

Alfred returns to the room with a lint roller and switches out the pressed shirt hanging on the hook
next to Bruce’s suit for a black turtleneck. It’s a small consolation that Alfred is willing to make
adjustments like that one for Bruce’s comfort, despite his annoyance, or maybe it’s just cold
outside. Bruce glances out the window at the foggy field, the gray mist unbroken from grass to sky,
and frowns. Cold and wet.

“How? Yeah, it was.” Bruce goes back for his coffee and can’t even muster the energy to scowl at
the empty mug.
“I can’t talk long. I know you’re probably getting ready for work—you still go to work, don’t you?—but I have, uh…”

Bruce catches Alfred’s attention and holds the mug out, going for what he hopes is a pleading expression. It’s one of the few instances in which he actually wants to generate pity. The look Alfred gives him isn’t actually an eye-roll, but it’s so scathingly similar that it makes Bruce cringe inside. Alfred does take the mug, though, and Bruce mouths, ‘thank you’ at him. Dent is mumbling, arguing with himself.

“No, you idiot, just ask, just do it. Son of a bitch, what is wrong with you. You know how serious this is.”

“Harv?” Bruce says, coming to a halt. His attention zeroes in on the conversation, like it should have from the moment he took the phone from Alfred and realized it was Harvey Dent on the line.

“Fuck,” Dent swears. “I thought…I’m sorry, I don’t need to drag you back into this. I can’t do that to you, Bruce.”

“Do what?” Bruce says, suspicion pricking up along the back of his neck. “What’s going on?”

There’s a deep sigh. “The, uh…the wing, the one they were going to move me to, it’s closed for uh, construction. Security updates or something. Couple months at least, they said. Part of why Dr. Ritter signed off on phone privileges, actually. Consolation prize. Don’t do it, you freakshow. Don’t. You’ve embarrassed yourself enough.” Dent’s volume keeps breaking, and the words addressed to himself are in a deeper and harsher growl. “Bruce, I…”

Bruce waits until the silence has stretched too thin. “Harvey, whatever you need to ask, just ask. The worst that could happen is I have to say no.”

There’s a sharply pitched and hysterical sob of laughter in return, and Bruce’s hand tightens reflexively on the phone. Dent sucks in air so hard to calm himself that he can hear it through the receiver.

“Okay, okay. Yes or no. Those are good odds, right? Fifty-fifty. It’s one or the other, it’s one or—” Dent stops abruptly and his voice gets much quieter. It takes on a more natural rhythm and pitch, though it sounds slightly muted from the sheer defeat in the tone. “I’m having a really hard time, Bruce. I can tell I’m making progress and I’m afraid I’m going to lose it all. It might…I hate to ask, I really do, but it might help if I could see you. It helped last week, even though it might not have seemed like it. It’s good to remember who I…who I can be. Do you think you could fit it in today?”

The question hangs there between them while Bruce waits for the haunted pounding of his own heart to settle. It takes effort to keep reminding himself that this is Two-Face, asking for a visit in Arkham Asylum, and not just Harvey Dent the attorney asking if Bruce will meet him for a drink. The house phone he hardly ever uses, pressed against his ear, is a dissonant detail.

He has to be careful. He’ll have to be incredibly careful, going in alone, as Bruce. There are weapons he can get by the metal detectors, that isn’t a problem at all. There will be guards, at least. Not having Jim there feels like an excessive risk, but Bruce thinks that’s probably a false sense of safety. And he was planning on visiting again.

“Of course I’ll come, Harv. When do visiting hours start?”

“Eight,” Dent says immediately. “Thank you, Bruce, I know I don’t deserve you.”
“Everybody deserves a second chance,” Bruce says. “I’ll be there by nine.”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.” Dent’s smile is evident in his voice.

Bruce is back at the bathroom mirror covering concealer with foundation, the phone on the vanity counter, when Alfred returns with coffee and an eyebrow raised in question.

“I’m going to Arkham,” Bruce says without preamble. “I’ll drive myself and go from there to work.”

“There’s really no need,” Alfred says, looking slightly taken aback in the mirror reflection. “Master Timothy has taken Master Damian to school.”

“I’ll drive myself,” Bruce says again, screwing the cap back on the foundation with a bit too much force.

“You ought to drink that before it cools, sir,” Alfred says icily, stepping around him to gather a discarded towel from the floor and shake it out. He hangs it over a rod while Bruce berates himself internally for not remembering to pick it up, as if he needs to give Alfred any more proof that he can’t take care of himself right now.

Alfred leaves the bathroom and busies himself remaking the bed. Bruce can hear the rustling of fabric even before he leans back a bit to see out of the doorway. He turns to face the mirror again, studies his coverage work, and then presses his palms against the chilled counter and breathes out through his teeth.

“I don’t…want to feel like I’m fighting you all morning,” Bruce calls, just over his shoulder.

“Then I recommend you do not,” comes the curt reply.

“Al…”

“Master Bruce.”

Alfred doesn’t look up from where he’s straightening a pillow until Bruce has been leaning on the doorframe for several seconds, watching. When their eyes finally meet, Alfred’s thin-lipped chill has not thawed in the least.

“I’m going to Arkham. I’ll be fine. I’m taking precautions. I want to believe Harvey is getting better, with or without your approval,” Bruce says, not bothering to dampen the iron-fire in his tone. It means he’s equally unprepared to temper the next words: “But I could use at least one place in my life where I don’t feel like I’m swimming against the current right now.”

Alfred’s expression softens, but then he looks down, smoothing out the duvet.

With a suppressed sigh, Bruce goes to the hanging clothes and pulls the turtleneck over his head, stretching the collar out over his face to avoid smearing the makeup covering shadows and scars. He’s just put on the suit jacket when he turns, and Alfred is not far behind him. He steps forward and straightens the lapels without looking at Bruce’s face.

“I rather forget,” he says quietly, “how much you value my good opinion. You’ve been so willing to forgo it in the past.”

“Only for good reasons, Al,” Bruce says, a tightness in his chest. “You know I hate it.”
“I know,” Alfred says, looking at his face now. He then steps back to survey Bruce, a quick up and
down flick of his eyes. “You don’t think of yourself as often as I’d like, so I’m left to do it for you.
I know you’re capable, Master Bruce. I’ve never doubted that. Forgive me, if I’ve been letting my
own worry darken my countenance to a counterproductive end.”

“Nothing to forgive,” Bruce says, with a slight and fond smile. “‘My right hand man, Bunter;
couldn’t do a thing without him.’ Not even think.”

Alfred dusts off the shoulders of the jacket with his fingertips, frowning slightly at a cat hair he
plucks off. “You know quite well that isn’t what I meant at all.”

“Not ‘a’ tall,” Bruce says, echoing the accented words. Alfred swats at his arm, a light swing that
Bruce doesn’t even bother pretending to dodge.

“Go on, then,” Alfred says, with a short laugh. “Drive yourself, Lord Peter. I’ll remain home today
and improve the current. I suppose it goes without saying that you ought to be cautious?”

The relief in Bruce is immense enough that it’s easy to nod. “Of course,” he says readily.

His phone vibrates on his dresser, rattling the few decorative frames he keeps there, and Alfred
slips out of the room while Bruce reaches for it. The most recent message is from Dick.

<keep your lunch hour free I’m coming with agnolotti and bicerin from frassinetto’s no arguing
my phone is on silent I’m sleeping>

The idea of getting to have lunch with Dick is exactly what he needs to have in the back of his
mind while he goes to Arkham. He suspects that however things go with Dent, he’ll leave the
asylum viscerally unsettled and in need of decompression so he doesn’t end up with a tension
migraine for the rest of the workday, like the last time.

Even though he stops to leave an empty mug in the kitchen, he doesn’t see Alfred again on the way
out of the house. The Tesla Roadster Tim prefers is missing from its bay in the garage.

The drive is through a city drenched in mist. Fog swallows the Sprang bridge like a storm cloud
rising up from the bay and he plunges into Upper East traffic along streets swamped with the soft
gray color of newsprint. The car cuts through it without dispersing it. On a day like this, the sun
and city heat will burn away the last pockets within the hour, but the evening chill might slither in
from the bay without the lowest eddies of fog ever vanishing from the low hollows around the
Manor.

Arkham and the sewage treatment plant are a scar upon the city landscape. The spindly trees, their
trunks encased in yellow tubing, are tied with white cords to keep them from blowing over in the
frequent wind that tears along the banks of the small island. They obscure nothing—not the
Asylum from view of the neighborhoods and back alleyways, nor the dilapidated row houses and
noxious smoke stacks from the barred windows.

For a place so buffeted by strong breezes, the air is strangely heavy and still around Arkham itself.
Maybe it’s the sinking weight of the toxic fumes from the incinerators at the sewage treatment
plant, where they collect so much littered refuse from the polluted river and mainlines that they
must burn it so it doesn’t dam up the overflows.

Whatever it is, it seeps into the car even before he opens the door. He steps out into the parking lot
and inhales the reeking mixture of rot and bleach, and approaches the visitor’s entrance cursing the
fact that for all his effort he’s never been able to relocate Arkham to somewhere mainland and
possibly more conducive to recovery. No matter how many proposals or grants or offers he’s presented, Bristol County and the suburbs to the west have overruled every single one. There are some things even his name and money can’t make happen; it’s bitter poison that severing Arkham from it’s destructive symbiotic relationship with Gotham is one of them.

The guard is too weary to look surprised at signing Bruce Wayne into the logbook. His personal items go into a green plastic bin while the polycarbonate stiletto knives nestled in his socks go undetected by the scanner or the pretense of a pat down. He’s led through endless hallways he knows like the back of his hand, by another guard who seems thoroughly uninterested in conversation. He doesn’t try to chat, so Bruce doesn’t either.

It’s twenty minutes of sitting in a hallway alone, watched only by a blinking security camera, before two guards emerge from a room with a steel door and say that Harvey Dent is inside. One of them gives him a quick rundown of policy, just in case he’s forgotten:

He has half an hour. No contact. He must knock on the door if he wishes to leave early; opening the door without warning may result in being tased or restrained. The supervising guards have authority to terminate the visit early.

The rules don’t overwhelm him, but he’s on high alert anyway when he steps into the room. The knives are like tent stakes nestled against his skin, harnessing him to a sense of control.

Harvey Dent is sitting calmly, worrying the chain looped through the bolted o-hook on the table between his hands. It’s a nervous motion reminiscent of rolling the coin over his knuckles, and the only visible sign of anxiety. Bruce’s own paranoia and precaution seems excessive in comparison.

“Hey,” Dent says, with a smile. The scarred side of his face twitches, which is an improvement on the paralyzed grimace from before he allowed any attempt at reconstruction.

“Hi, Harv,” Bruce says, taking a seat. “You look good.”

“You just missed me,” Dent says. “It’s only been a week.”

“I have a thing for pretty faces,” Bruce says, with a shrug. It could be clever or it could be cruel, but Dent’s reaction will tell him a lot about his psychological state. To his relief, Dent laughs. It’s hoarse but it’s real and normal, rather than cold. The chain rattles between the cuffs as he tugs it back and forth rapidly, but that’s a relatively minor stress outlet compared to what it could be.

“Dr. Ritter,” Dent says, and then he pauses, his expression falling into something openly wounded for just the briefest of moments. If Bruce had blinked he would have missed it. Dent shakes it away and smiles again. “Dr. Ritter says I should find a few hobbies. I was thinking about chess. I need, uh, something to think about.”

“I could get you a set,” Bruce offers, wishing he could let the stiffness ease out of his limbs. He’s still like a compressed spring, ready to leap at the first sign of danger and he hates it, hates himself for not being able to just accept progress at face value. “Do you think Dr. Ritter could find a way for us to play?”

At the mention of the doctor’s name, Dent’s fiddling with the chain becomes more pronounced. He bites his lip before saying, distractedly, “Yeah, yeah, that’d be great. I’d love that, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“Harvey,” Bruce says, leaning forward toward the table. Dent’s fear from the visit before that Crane or Isley or whoever they were working with would retaliate is at the forefront of his mind,
crowded in with the desire to lead the conversation to get some sort of information about who Welch’s contact is. Suspicion twists in his gut with a painful certainty. “Is Dr. Ritter alright?”

Dent’s good eye widens like a deer caught in the headlights. His mouth opens, and closes, and opens again before he manages to get out in a harsh whisper, “Bruce, you gotta….you gotta help me. They’re going to kill us, kill us both.”

“Who, Harvey?” Bruce frowns, his hands in fists by his sides. There’s no reason right now to reach for a knife but the atmosphere shifted to something crackling with dangerous energy and the impulse is there.

Dent bends his head over the table, the chain going clck clck clck as he launches into a hurried, harried low speech.

“The Actuary. He’s in Risk Management now. He did time in Blackgate after working with Oswald. How the fuck he got a job here, I don’t know, except maybe no one else would hire him. He’s been working with Tommy Elliot; they’ve been producing ammunition in the empty wing, right under everyone’s noses. They have buyers overseas. They’re planning a takeover, they’ve promised everyone cuts in exchange for silence. Jon and Pam get bonuses.”

“How…” Bruce blinks and curses himself, for not seeing it right there. It was right there in Arkham the whole time, if Dent is telling the truth. He had been looking at someone trying to import ammunition. He’d never considered that it was leaving Gotham when Kolberg was murdered.

“Paper sacks. Paper lunch sacks,” Harvey mumbles, rocking in the chair. “Oh god. Shut up, shut up. You’ve said too much. No, you fucking idiot tell him everything. This is your only chance. Uh. Uh, the paper…the lunch bags. Welch brings a lunch in, takes a different bag out. The Actuary’s been doing the switches during his lunch break. They pass messages, too. He’s already got millions in promised contracts based on the last batch. Welch was supposed to buy real estate next, on the docks. They want Roman’s land, now that he’s gone, and it’s sitting cheap in federal holding after the last trials. They want to be the next empire.”

“And they told you all of this?” Bruce demands, thinking fast. He’s absorbing and parsing it all, trying to analyze what is likely true and what Dent couldn’t possibly actually know. It rankles that he doesn’t trust him, but he doesn’t, and he’s distracted just enough by the news itself that acknowledging that doesn’t come with guilt.

“You’ll tell the Commissioner, won’t you? That I helped?” Dent pleads. “I have to get out of here, Bruce. I have to. The wing isn’t enough, I need to be somewhere else. I’m not safe here. They arrested Welch and now things are falling apart; the Actuary and Tommy are arguing about everything.”

There’s a pounding on the window, a barked, “Too close! Back up!”

Bruce whirls, because the voice is too familiar.

It is Tommy Elliot’s face-- his own face, almost exactly-- peering at him through the glass with a cruel grin. The chair topples he stands so quickly, a knife pulled out in the same upward motion, while he thinks ‘where are the damn guards?’ He can only fight with limited proficiency right now; explaining the knives is going to be tricky enough.

In hand to hand combat, he can take Tommy Elliot alone pretty quickly, even holding back. Tommy’s not exactly an accomplished martial artist.
If, that is, it was Tommy Elliot alone.

Bruce registers the whipping hiss of a chain snapping through air in the same split second that Dent lunges across the table and slams into him. The handcuff chain, that Dent’s hands constantly held and tugged to hide the broken link, wraps around Bruce’s neck and tightens. It would be quick work to cut his hands and throw him off, except Dent hurls his full body weight so hard while Bruce is already moving toward Tommy that momentum carries them to the floor. The knife skitters away from his hand, rolling with little plastic clicks across the concrete.

The door opens while Bruce is pushing himself up, Dent still on top of him and sobbing near his ear. He glances at the hallway and catches a glimpse of the motionless, prone legs of the guards. When he rolls to flip Dent off, he notices with a lurch of horror that the security camera light is dulled, the lens stilled. It’s when he throws Dent and the chain off, and gasps for air, that everything else stops.

Tommy must have taken a baton or carried in a pipe, because the blow that lands on the back of his head is that of brutal, unbending metal. Pain explodes across his entire skull at once, no distinction given to the origin point. It’s consuming instead of radiating, the screaming of a hundred klaxons. He manages to stay conscious, but is stunned for just a moment too long. If he hadn’t dropped the knife, if he had anticipated Dent, if he’d moved a little faster…

If, if, if.

“Let me,” he hears Dent say, through the ringing haze.

“If you really want to,” Tommy says. “Right there. Trust me.”

Bruce is swallowing bile, squeezing his eyes shut, trying to stand, when the next blow lands.

It would be a lucky hit except it’s Tommy who pointed, and Tommy who knows him, who would think about the flaws under the skin.

The pipe lands on the vertebrae held together by pins and wires, the ones that shattered against Bane’s knee a handful of years ago.

If guards don’t come now, it’s because they’ve been bought off, or maybe the sound is too common at Arkham, because they don’t need a security camera to hear Bruce’s scream.

His body has been dipped in acid and even when the scream dies away from the air, he cannot move. He gasps, the pressure in his head nothing compared to the white hot paralysis seizing every part of him. Bruce sees Tommy stoop with the syringe, but he doesn’t feel the needle go in.

“You said you wouldn’t kill him,” Dent snaps, when Tommy tosses the syringe aside.

“It won’t kill him,” Tommy says. Bruce is staring at the ceiling trying not to cry or puke, because either would require moving and he can’t. “It’s just a sedative. I’d love to kill him but I don’t want that much heat on my trail. Help me get his clothes off.”

“No,” Bruce slurs, his lips refusing to obey.

“Shut up, Bruce,” Tommy says, yanking his jacket off. The movement jostles his spine and he shuts up, not because he wants to listen but because his vision is going black and he can’t breathe.

It’s an eternity before Tommy has shucked off his inmate’s garb and slipped into Bruce’s clothes, but it must only be a few minutes in actuality between the first blow and when Bruce is in his
boxers pressed against the frigid floor. His teeth won’t stop chattering and it isn’t the cold.

“Dr. Ritter?” Dent demands, as Tommy reaches for the door.

Tommy pauses, and scoffs. Bruce feels like he’s under the bay tide, watching and hearing everything through the waves while he drowns, buried in lava that the water won’t extinguish. It hisses in his ears, dampening the voices.

“Will the Actuary let her go?”

“Oliver Stenger is dead, Two-Face,” Tommy says. “We never had Dr. Ritter, you idiot. I told you, I don’t want that kind of heat. I’m cutting my losses and getting out of here while I can. Oliver can rot in hell, for the way he was using me, and nobody will care that a corrupt ex-con is out of the way. But I wonder what Dr. Ritter will think of your excuses? Do you think she’ll believe you?”

The door slams and Dent sinks to the floor next to Bruce, the chains from his hands trailing on the floor like nails on a chalkboard.

“Fuck,” he exhales. “Fuck. Bruce, you…you have to….I thought he was going to kill Dr. Ritter. You have to believe me.”

Bruce’s tongue is a block of wood. He can’t formulate a coherent reply to this, much less say anything.

“He was going to kill you, I thought he was going to do it. That’s why, you understand why it had to be me? I protected you, Bruce. Tommy didn’t want to stop after your head. I could see it in his eyes. That’s why I took the pipe. You’ve always…believed…” Dent’s breathing takes a sharp turn into ragged panic. “Harvey Dent. You told me, you’d always…you have to…I thought they were going to kill her, Bruce, I was…I was stuck and…”

“Harv,” Bruce groans, managing to flutter his fingers. He has to get out of here. He has to stop Tommy, before he goes wherever he’s going disguised as…as Bruce. Where the hell does he think he’s going? He can’t possibly think he’ll get far.

“This is all I am. This is all I am, I’m just split. I can’t do this. She was wrong, she was fucking wrong.”

“Harv,” Bruce says again, sucking in air through his gritted teeth. The world is a swirl of gross smears of color. “I…believe you.”

He needs help. He needs to get up and focus, get out of here before Tommy waltzes past the guards in his clothes, with his face. If he has to reassure Harvey to do that, to get there, he’ll do it and figure out the ramifications later. Whatever Tommy injected him with isn’t numbing the pain but his limbs are gelatin.

“Then you’re…a fucking liar, Bruce Wayne,” Dent sobs, scratching his own arms as he staggers to his feet. “Nobody…nobody believes in Harvey Dent anymore. You shouldn’t. Look what I did to you. Why are you so stupid? You can’t just decide like that.”

“Harvey, I have to get out of here. I need your help.”

“That’s what the problem is, I let her take it away from me. I can’t make decisions anymore, look at me. I’ve been stupid ever since. I don’t want it, I don’t want to have to think that way, I wasn’t stupid I was free and Tommy….they….nobody cared, nobody cared except you, and look at you, look what I’ve done. I have to…I need to think, I need to think and calm down and…”
Bruce can’t follow when Dent wanders from the room, stumbling over guards’ bodies as he goes.

“How!” Bruce shouts. All his effort to sit up results in another surge of pain from his spine and his head. “Harvey!”

Dent doesn’t come back. His muttering fades as he gets further and further away in the hall.

It’s a full minute later when Bruce’s head clears just enough to think both that Tommy is probably already gone, and that if anyone finds him he’s going to have a hell of a time explaining the minefield of scars to paramedics they’d inevitably call. If he can’t get out alone now, he’ll have to hide until he can.

There’s a disused utility closet twenty feet down the hall outside of the room, a thing he knows because he’s memorized the layout of Arkham and could walk it blind. And he might have to, the way his eyes keep closing of their own accord when he shifts at all.

His own body is too heavy, heavier than almost anything he’s ever lifted, and he feels entirely disordered. With every step the universe tilts and spins, and he throws up on the floor twice while scraping himself along the wall, a numb arm propping him up as he goes. The closet is empty and he collapses, pulling the door shut behind him, and blacks out.
The Study

The engine purrs when Tim presses the pedal flat against the floor. He lets up just as the speedometer shoots over ninety and lets the needle drift back down, growling as he jabs the end call button.

Of all the days to forget his work laptop, it had to be one when he has a whole block of morning meetings reviewing grant proposals. The tech startups seeking Wayne Enterprise backing and funding for their patent applications are almost always populated by people a decade or two older than him, and he already has a hard enough time being taken seriously. Showing up late will not help.

He’s short, he’s young, he has an even younger face: there are days Tim wishes he could just wear a cowl full-time because then at least people assume he’s an actual adult instead of a kid who stole his dad’s briefcase and badge.

They’ll be polite, of course— they all will, because they want the money and name. But the sidelong glances at partners and the repeated attempts to dumb down their explanations will make for a grinding, boring morning.

Tim wishes he could blame this on Damian. He wants to blame him so badly, as if Damian ate up his time and forced him to forget things. Unfortunately, Tim knows that this is entirely his fault. He was the one who walked into the kitchen still in his sweats and tank top stolen from Dick, saw Alfred’s expression full of pale fury while he poured coffee, and offered on the spot to drive Damian to his fancy independent-study charter school.

That face meant someone was being stupid and Tim had had a pretty good guess. If he took Damian, then Alfred was free to deal with stupidity and Tim wouldn’t have to spend the day worrying. Or, worrying as much, anyway.

He’d trudged up the stairs, delivered the news to Damian while the younger boy flew around his room angrily opening and slamming drawers. A darkly muttered comment about the time had them both sprinting to the car and Tim’s work laptop left sitting in its case by his desk.

It isn’t Damian’s fault. It isn’t Damian’s fault he left it, it isn’t Damian’s fault he didn’t even realize it was left behind until he’d gotten all the way to his office. Without it, the work day is almost entirely useless, because his secondary laptop is sitting in pieces in his apartment, waiting for a hard drive update.

Because Tim himself is a disaster and somehow still has minimal time management skills or just routinely forgets he needs sleep. It doesn’t help that he’s only spent a handful of hours even at his apartment in the past week, spending most non-working time at the Manor while detoxing from fear gas and hawkishly watching Bruce.

Tim is worried but what else is new?

He takes the Manor drive a solid twenty miles per hour faster than the posted limit— a sign Alfred reportedly put up when Bruce was sixteen— and the Tesla Roadster brakes whine when he slams them. It’s the first sound of complaint the car has made.

The Jaguar that Bruce has been driving recently is still in its parking spot in the garage. The only cars missing, actually, are the SUV that Jason claimed when his foster paperwork was finalized.
and the two-seater Cassandra likes to wrack up speeding tickets in when she’s stressed. The Jag still feels warm when he walks by and presses a light hand to the hood, which means even if Bruce left he must have listened to Alfred after all and come back. Alfred won’t drive any of the Jaguars on principle, having once disliked the transmission on an earlier model, so he probably didn’t just drop Bruce off.

It’s halfway to lunch already but Tim didn’t have breakfast and he’s starving, so he swings through the kitchen and rummages in the fridge for something fast. There’s a row of the glass bottled yogurt protein shakes Bruce drinks—they’re all plain but at least it doesn’t require prep. He grabs one to drink on the drive back.

“Alfred?” he calls, breezing out of the kitchen. “Al?”

“In the office, Master Timothy.” The reply rings loud without sounding like a shout. Tim’s never quite mastered projecting his voice like he’s still just chatting, and maybe he should ask Alfred for some tips if he ever has time. Hah.

“I took one of Bruce’s things,” Tim yells. “I’m in a hurry.”

“Everything alright?” There’s a note of pause in the disembodied voice. “I’ll replace the drink. Please recycle the bottle.”

“I’m just running behind,” Tim says, hand on the stair railing. “Forgot my laptop.”

“You may also require your charging cable. I last saw it in the library.”

“Alfred,” Tim turns on his heel. He should get the cord first or he’ll just forget it again. “Have I told you you’re the best?”

“More often than is necessary,” Alfred says, his voice finally syncing with his form when Tim stops by the butler’s office and gives him a quick hug from behind. Alfred pats the arm around his shoulders. “Don’t spoil me, Master Timothy. It’ll quite go to my head.”

“I’m in too much of a hurry to tell you why you’re wrong,” Tim replies. “But you are. Let that go to your head.”

Alfred shoos him out with a wave of his hand and a falsely affronted sniff. “Do drive safely,” he tacks on, before Tim’s gone.

Tim winces. “You saw me on the drive?”

“I’ve only just sat down,” Alfred replies, turning to give him a stern look. “Ought I have?”

“Nope! No reason,” Tim says, with a forced grin. “I’m running super late. Cass took the Lotus; did I tell you Cass took the Lotus?”

“Bother that girl,” Alfred mutters, turning back for his phone on the desk surface. He picks it up and Tim takes his chance to escape. The warning follows him anyway: “I’ll put speed caps on all the engines again if I must.”

“Why are we bloody shouting?” Dev yells from down the hall in the direction of the kitchen, sounding far away.

“Why are you shouting?” Tim jumps on the second chance to redirect away from his driving habits, since now Cass will know someone ratted her out and it was for nothing.
“I’m not sure you’ve noticed, Timothy, but I happen to be fairly sodding far off. Perhaps you’ve heard of sound waves.”

“Shut up,” Tim says, a smile on his face. “You prick!”

“Wanker!” is returned.

“Kiran,” Alfred says. “Do try to set a mature example.”

“Alfie,” Dev shouts back. Tim is only a few feet from the library door, some of the day’s worry smoothed away by getting to listen. “Alfie, have you properly looked at me? I’m bloody sure Timothy’s an example to me and not the other way around.”

“I suppose Master Timothy has never—”

“If this is about those bloody noodles—”

“—consumed dry ramen from the package—”

“I’ve sodding told you I’m not having this row again. I know it left you well traumatized but it was one bloody time.”

“—or failed so remarkably in justifying any of his culinary eccentricities, of which he has several.”

“Hey!” Tim interjects, while pushing the door to the library open. “Leave me out of this!”

The good-natured argument continues behind him as Tim scans the room, hunting for the charging cord. He finds it under a table and tucks it and the glass bottle beneath his arm, then heads out opting to go in the direction of the back stairs.

He passes the study. The door is open and Bruce is standing, looking up at the framed portrait of Thomas and Martha Wayne. Tim’s steps slow of their own accord, dragging him to a stop outside the room. Bruce’s shoulders seem off, an unusual slope to them under the jacket.

“Bruce?” Tim raps on the door frame. “You okay?”

There’s no answer but a stiffening of Bruce’s posture. Tim has been worried about Bruce for over a week and will cancel all his meetings if hanging out is an option, since Bruce came back home and just seems so…off. The energy in the room is all wrong, not at all the contemplative air Bruce usually has when staring at the painting of his parents.

Tim has been worried ever since the mental cyclone of fear toxin finally settled and he read through all the reports from that night, and realized Bruce had taken Ivy down alone. Tim knows Bruce hasn’t been sleeping, really, because Tim spent a couple nights not sleeping and his room is just down the hall— he’d go to find a snack and see Bruce leaving his room and disappearing toward the cave or study again. It’s stirred an old concern in Tim, one he hasn’t thought about in a while, not since putting some of the pieces together.

He didn’t talk to him about it then— he didn’t know how, and Bruce seemed okay around the time Tim stumbled across it while digging up unrelated information. Well, kind of related. Partly. And now he still doesn’t know how to bring it up.

Bruce hasn’t replied so Tim steps into the room, frowning. His arms are tense, ready to fight if he needs to, which is only kind of insane. There’s always mind control and toxins and—
Bruce turns.

It isn’t Bruce.

It’s Tommy Elliot.

He’s got a gun, a silencer screwed onto the barrel; he also has what looks like Bruce’s passport.

Tim doesn’t waste time exclaiming. He slides the glass bottle along his palm to grip the cap alone, and tosses the charging cord to his other hand where the power brick swings from the end like a mace.

He flips over the desk, curling his body to make himself a rapidly moving target, harder to get a bead on. His foot is inches from Tommy’s face and the charging brick hurtling through the air when Tommy fires the gun.

The soft pneumatic pew, like a blowdart, is drowned out by the power brick smacking Tommy’s gun hand in the same instant. The gun flies across the room and cracks a window pane when it hits. Tommy hisses, cradling his hand, and he’s already on his way after the gun.

Stop him, you idiot, Tim thinks to himself, glaring at the window. Tommy compounds the crack with the swing of a statuette, snatches up the gun, and kicks the glass out of his way.

Tim watches from the place he landed on the rug, panting, willing himself to get up. Tommy vanishes from sight and Tim blinks at the ceiling, trying to figure out why he’s not on his feet.

“Master Timothy?” Alfred’s inquiry sounds muddled and blanketed in wool. “What ever was that horrendous crash?”

Tim experimentally touches his twinging side. His fingers come away drenched in blood the color of wine. The pain hits the moment his stupidly sluggish brain processes the fact: Tommy shot him.

He didn’t knock the gun far enough in time, and it threw him backward to the other side of the desk and onto the floor. The blood is burbling up through the cracked panels of the thin-plate body armor he’s been wearing under his day clothes, the same stuff he’s insisted Damian wear while not admitting his paranoia to anyone else.

Some of it went through the armor.

“Al,” he croaks, his eyes filling with tears. It’s too quiet but Tim can’t breathe.

Alfred rounds the corner and takes one step into the room before he must catch sight of him.

“Al,” Tim tries again, turning his head. His hand is held just inches away from the magma in his belly, dripping blood back down as his fingers shake. He turns just in time to see Alfred’s face go sheet white.

“Kiran!” The older man bellows and Tim doesn’t know the last time he heard him sound that loud, and then he blinks and the next thing he knows Alfred is kneeling and leaning right over him and pressing something into his side.

Tim groans and it twists between his throat and his lips, into a kind of scattershot little sob. His chest is thick, and while some distant part of his brain knows that gunshot wounds need pressure,
that part is very far away from him and he would beg Alfred to stop if his mouth and mind would work together.

“What happened?” Alfred demands.

Far back in a corner of himself, like a child hiding in a kitchen cabinet to listen to the bustle outside, his brain whispers, ‘he’s keeping you awake.’

“How?” Tim exhaled. “He…took…he’s…Bruce. He was fast, he was…”

His breath hitches and Alfred’s got one of those small, tight smiles that masks stress. Damian’s on the receiving end of those a lot; Tim not so much any more.

“It’s quite alright, Master Timothy. Focus on breathing, my lad.”

Tim closes his eyes and when he opens them again it’s because there’s someone else talking. Dev is there now, brow drawn as he and Alfred speak quickly. Tim can’t follow what they’re saying but his heart thuds in panic at the sight of blood on both of them, drenching their hands and seeping up their wrists.

“What…” Tim says, and it’s as far as he gets before he’s gasping from the agony. There are a hundred, a thousand, orange-tipped pokers being shoved into his side.

“Timothy, mate,” Dev says and the pokers dig deeper. “I’m sorry. I know. It’ll be over in a moment, yeah?”

His face is wet with tears. Tim tips his chin just enough to look down at himself, expecting to see fire and scattered organs, but instead he just sees blood and Dev’s hands peeling torn shirt and armor away. Some of the shards are sticking in his skin, raised like little gory needles.

Dev says something else to Alfred and the older man leaves the room. Tim twists his neck to watch him go, licking dry lips and trying to call after him.

“Timothy,” Dev says, “I’m sorry.”

“What?” Tim says, but it’s slurred and lacks hard consonants. Dev hasn’t cussed at him or the wound yet, which Tim thinks is a bad sign.

Then there’s blinding, searing pain that shears right through the middle of him and the whole of him and he’s cut off from consciousness.
The view from the corner office is always breathtaking, but the sea of fog that hides all but the
taller towers makes it even moreso. Dick stands looking out over the city— their city— for a
moment, the plastic sack of takeout containers dangling from his hand. Bruce isn’t in the office and
his secretary, a middle-aged no-nonsense veteran named Scott, had unlocked the door for Dick
after recognizing him. He’d said Bruce had called to say he’d be in around lunch, so Dick shoots
Bruce another text and then takes in the view while he waits.

He’s early for lunch, but figured he could kill time and be ready when Bruce was instead of
showing up to find they only had ten minutes before Bruce’s next thing. Dick’s hunting rooftops
for his precinct building, just to see if he can see it through the mist, when his phone buzzes.

And then buzzes again.

What he’d assumed was a return text is a phone call, and the caller ID says Alfred, so he answers
it.

“Hey, Al—”

“You need to go to Arkham immediately. Master Timothy’s been shot and Master Bruce is
missing.”

Dick’s stomach bottoms out. “What?”

“Hush has escaped. He was here, at the Manor. The last I heard from Master Bruce, he was going
to Arkham to visit Two-Face. I’ve no idea what condition he is in now, if they overpowered…”

There’s a sharp intake of breath and then background noise. It’s the beeping of medical equipment
and the hiss of an oxygen tank, then Dev’s voice asking for a set of clamps.

“Alfred?” Dick demands, turning his back to the office door. He presses a hand to his forehead.
“Al, how bad is Tim…where…”

“It’s difficult to say, sir. I must go. You’ll find him?”


The line goes dead. Dick sets the bag of food and the drink carrier both down on the desk, and
fights the instinctual desire to sprint. Running toward the problem won’t help if he doesn’t have a
plan and he has no idea how Tim is doing and—

He has to focus.

Bruce trained him to do this, Dick has trained others to do this. To think well and act smart under
pressure. It only takes him the span of a second to pull himself into that detached strategizing
mindset he needs. He has the privacy of Bruce’s own office right now, so he should use it.

An employee in the front office at Arkham Asylum answers on the third ring.

“This is Detective Dick Grayson with the GCPD. I’m looking for my father, Bruce Wayne. He was
supposed to meet me for lunch after a visit there. Do you happen to know if he’s still there? I can’t get in touch with him.”

The woman takes too long to ask around, to put him on hold and find out. When the Muzak ends abruptly, she says, “The visitor’s entrance guard says he left a little over an hour ago. He signed out of the logbook.”

“Thanks,” Dick says, wondering how in the world Hush pulled that off so smoothly in an inmate’s jumper. Unless…he was…

“That all?” she asks.

“No, actually,” Dick says quickly. “Two birds, one stone kind of call. I arrested an Arkham employee connected to a case yesterday and he’s got alleged ties to Harvey Dent. Can you connect me with whatever department I’d need to arrange an interview?”

“That might be a bit tricky,” she says, apologetically. “I know a bit more about this one. Inmate Dent is currently in solitary. He attacked two guards this morning and was found wandering the halls. You’ll have to subpoena Arkham to have him temporarily remanded to police custody to conduct an interview, or wait until his term in solitary is up.”

Dick says goodbye instead of chewing out someone who doesn’t deserve it for how utterly senseless the long-standing policy is, requiring custody transfers prone to escape attempts. He’s left with the knowledge that Bruce is likely still in Arkham, probably injured and unconscious or…even detached, his mind won’t let him finish that thought. If Hush took his clothes, that means an inmate’s jumper or nothing.

While Arkham apparently doesn’t know that Hush is missing and they’ll need to know soon, Dick’s processing the jumble of finding Bruce quickly, helping him, and maintaining identity protection by not letting anyone call an ambulance for him. There are too many questions if Bruce deals with a routine ambulance ride, even if they do intercept it at the hospital, and if Dev’s with Tim then that’s unlikely and—

Dick takes a deep breath.

He needs speed, injury assessment, more speed, and a non-traditional route out of the building.

A little bit of chaos wouldn’t hurt.

There is nothing more that Dick wants than to drive straight to Arkham and go into the building—as Nightwing, as a detective, as Dick Grayson alone. But Bruce taught him to utilize resources and protect their identities and plan before diving in.

Dick pulls up another contact on his phone, checking first to make sure the door is locked, and then retreating to a corner of the office.

“Jim?” he says, when the phone is answered. “It’s Dick. Hush escaped Arkham and I can’t tell you right now how I know. The staff there either doesn’t know yet or they’ve been bought off.”

“Hell in a handbasket,” Jim replies to the rushed speech. “I’ll call and send some men over. Any idea where he might be?”

At the Manor. Alfred said he’d been at—inside—the Manor.
“Bristol,” Dick says. “And he might be trying to travel as Bruce. He’s armed.”

“Everyone your way okay?” Jim asks, concern leaching into the exasperation.

“No,” Dick says honestly. “But we’re handling it. I’ve got to go. I’ll be at Arkham if I can.”

“Don’t bother,” Jim says. “If he isn’t there anyway, then you do what you need to do. For your family.”

“Thanks,” Dick says, resisting the impulse to say he’ll be there anyway, of course he will be, working is the best thing he can do to help. Being in the dark about Bruce and Tim holds his tongue— if he has to do something, there’s a pair of escrima sticks he can get out of the hidden compartment in his car.

He takes a deep breath after ending the call and then scrolls through his contacts, and presses connect.

The answer is almost immediate.

“Hey, Dick! You caught me on a coffee run. What’s up?”

Dick hopes he’s overreacting. He hopes he’s calling in the big guns before it’s really necessary. A feeling like the gray fog, sucking life and light from the day, convinces him otherwise.

“Clark? I need your help. It’s Bruce.”

Getting into Arkham Asylum is easier than it should be. The abandoned access tunnel in the sheer face of the bank is barred, but the metal hinges are rusted through and crumble like dust when he tugs. Clark is pretty sure he didn’t use *that* much super strength to do it, either.

He’s been moving at super speed until this point, getting into Gotham and up to the Asylum without being seen. The swirling fog he leaves in his wake— if it is noticed at all— will be chalked up to weird wind currents or large birds.

Clark stops, hovering above the littered, damp tunnel floor. He listens, to the echoing *pli-PLUNK-plunk-plunk* of water dripping further down the tunnel, to the cacophony of a thousand voices above. It’s pure luck that the piping he’s in isn’t lead. Some of the vast, tangled network in Arkham’s guts *is* lead pipe, distorting and warping both vision and sound as things bend around it. It’s the sort of place that might give him a headache if he had to stand in long.

So, he has to make sure it’s not long. He doesn’t have time to waste on hypotheticals or worst-case scenario musings.

When Dick called, he’d delivered his request and all the relevant details in that steady, steely manner that Clark has come to associate with any of the Bats suppressing emotion. Whatever Dick is doing while Clark handles this, he doesn’t think Dick will fall apart— no matter how much is going on. He knows people rely on him to be powerful, and fast, and he relies on the Bats to never crumble in emergencies.

Clark tunes out the bedlam overhead. He picks through the countless noises, like when he was little enough to sit on the bench in his Pa’s pick-up truck with his shoes just dusting the floor and twist the FM dial through all the bands of static. There’s the clanging of steel bolts sliding shut as Arkham goes into lockdown; the tread of guards’ boots on concrete; the shouts of riled prisoner-patients— he lets it blend into static nonsense and waits suspended in focused silence.
He hones in on one heartbeat after another, hunting, hoping, hearing…and there it is. Quick but steady.

Lois asked him once how he could tell, how he could distinguish one heartbeat from another, and he had shrugged. *'I couldn't tell you,'* he’d said. *It’s like recognizing a face or a voice, but without the physical descriptors to put it down on paper: *’I just do.’*

He speeds through the tunnel and halls faster than the blink of a human eye, absorbing the sonic disturbance as he goes. Stealth took a while to master, but he needs it for getting in and out of places sometimes. He doesn’t need people connecting small hurricanes of breeze and sound with Clark Kent disappearing from a room.

Clark finds him in a basement hall, where the utility piping is exposed on one side. Huge boilers stand at the far end in a vast room, but here in the hall of pipes and metal panels, Bruce is leaning on one stiff arm against slick, painted cinder blocks.

He’s on his feet and conscious, so those are both good signs. He’s also in nothing but boxers and there’s a wicked looking bruise sprawled across his back. The pale yellow light from the hanging bulbs gives the mottled edges a sickly brown hue.

*“Funny finding you here,”* Clark says from behind, his cape fluttering as it settles after his abrupt stop. The air is otherwise still and stale.

*“Hn,”* Bruce says, and that’s all it takes for Clark to know the hope he’d gathered in a single second was too much, too soon. The dry tone of that syllable tells him a lot that Bruce doesn’t have to otherwise explain; it’s the kind of noise that cuts mission assignments short when they’re with the League.

Clark zips around to face Bruce, and drops to his feet. Bruce’s eyes are pinched shut and there’s a dull creak from his clenched teeth.

*“Hey,”* Clark murmurs. *“Where are you hurt? Just your back?”*

Bruce’s eyes drift open, the bunched lines smoothing out with glacial slowness. He stares at Clark, one pupil fluctuating until it stops at twice the size of the other, and he attempts to focus before closing his eyes again.

*“Concussion, too, then,”* Clark summarizes for him. *“Anything else?”*

*“Hn,”* Bruce says. *“…Hu…Hush is…”*

*“Dick told me. They’re working on it, but I think we should get you home.”* Clark doesn’t even need to debate whether or not to tell him about Tim. Bruce can be furious with him later, but Clark barely knows anything about Tim to tell him. If he can’t convince Bruce to go home without a fight, he’ll play that card and be furious with himself for it, but otherwise Clark decides it’s better to wait.

*“Can’t…feel my left leg,”* Bruce says, frowning. *“It’s…it’s…it’s…”*

*“Numb?”* Clark guesses, after giving Bruce time to finish the thought on his own and watching as he trails off, his expression tensing into thin, grim lines.

*“Cold,”* Bruce corrects. *“Where are, uh…is…”*

*“Arkham,”* Clark says, with a concerned purse of his lips. He detaches his cape and shakes it out,
does a quick scan of Bruce’s spine and is relieved to see that none of the vertebrae are fractured. He throws the cape around Bruce’s shoulders and holds the edges for a second, to make sure he’s not going to fall over.

Bruce’s hand, the one not set against the wall like rebar to hold him up, bends to gather the cape at his neck. His eyes snap open and he looks down at his hand, without dipping his chin very far.

“This…isn’t mine,” he says, sounding confused.

“I hate to point out the obvious,” Clark says, “but you don’t have much of anything right now. Are you going to be alright if we fly?”

Bruce flinches. His hand tightens on the cape.

“I can…” Bruce frowns. “I walked.”

“Yeah,” Clark says, returning the frown. “How far did you make it, by the way?”

“Time?” Bruce asks. His arm is beginning to shake and Clark slips under it and puts an arm around Bruce’s upper back. There’s a hiss and then Bruce leans against him, albeit stiffly.

“Mm. About noon, now.” Clark says. “How far, Bruce?”

“Two floors. Lost…count of halls. S’bad, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I’d say for you that’s pretty bad.”

“Shit,” Bruce says, exhaling shakily. “Can’t feel my leg.”

Because Clark is listening, and Bruce is a bit mentally scattered, he knows almost before Bruce does that he’s on the verge of a panic attack. His heart speeds up and his breathing quickens to compensate.


This is where Bruce, if he was anywhere approximating a less-compromised condition, would make a snide remark about Clark’s inability to judge human injury or pain response. Clark nearly expects it, even now.

“Are…you sure?” Bruce asks instead, between rapid gulps of oxygen.

“Positive,” Clark says. “I wouldn’t be able to fly you home if I wasn’t.”

“Hn,” Bruce says, this time more like something that means okay.

“Bruce?” Clark says after giving him another moment to get his breathing under control. It’s a full minute during which Clark’s anger has time to rally and swell until he’s seeing red, until it’s threatening to spill out of him onto the concrete with literal fire and smoke.

He didn’t tame his tone enough because Bruce jerks slightly and somehow, manages to get even more tense.

“Kal?” he asks, dazed and wary.

“Tell me not to kill Tommy Elliot and Harvey Dent. I’m gonna be honest and say I really want to,
“Don’t kill Harvey,” Bruce says, automatically, like this response is one he doesn’t need a clear head to articulate. “He’s sick, Kal. He doesn’t…”

“Don’t say ‘deserve,’ Bruce,” Clark warns, cramming the rage down and holding it there until his vision clears. His temper is more under control when he speaks again, and it’s clear in his voice. It’s more measured, and softer. “You don’t have to talk me out of it. I know. Doesn’t mean I don’t want to, sometimes.”

“I know,” Bruce agrees, the syllables sloshed together and fading in a sigh. “M’gonna…m…”

Clark keeps him mostly upright when Bruce twists and dry heaves over the concrete, spittle spraying the gray surface. When he stops, he tips his head back and his eyes are closed again. Clark listens as he sucks air in through his teeth and a groaning whine dies in his throat.

“How often?” Clark asks, thinking mostly of getting details to hand over to Alfred if Bruce passes out at superspeed.

“Nn,” Bruce says with a wince. “How…many…no. What’s largest…”

“Bruce?”

“…m’awake. Shut up.” The command lacks heat. “Thinkin’. Number divisible by…three.”

“I’m not that good at math. I’m pretty sure it’s up there in the infinite range?”

“Meant smallest,” Bruce huffs.

“Three,” Clark says, curious and brow creased.

“Smartass,” Bruce accuses irritably. “After that.”

“Nine.” Clark wasn’t trying to be smart and he’d be annoyed if Bruce wasn’t, well, in the shape he’s in. He is sounding a little more coherent though, so that’s improvement.

“That many. Counted…in sets.” Bruce’s face is still tilted up toward the ceiling. “Why’s the sun so bright?”

Or maybe…not as much an improvement.

“Yeah, I think that’s our cue. Can you handle flying? We’re going to go fast and then we’ll be done.”

“M’not a child, Kal.” Bruce tries to snap. Clark can tell the intent is there even if it came out as more of a plaintive moan. One hand is still holding the cape in place, the other is across Clark’s shoulders.

It’s that arm that tightens, just slightly, to hold on.

“Kal,” Bruce says, sharp and urgent, right before Clark takes off. He pauses, his boots still close enough to the floor to scrape against it.

“Are you okay?” Clark asks.

“You wouldn’t…lie…about fractures. Would you.”
Bruce’s eyes are closed when Clark rapidly glances over, but Clark has spent half their friendship reading expression on the lower half of Bruce’s face alone.

Even if his heart rate hadn’t picked up again, he thinks he’d be able to identify the dread there. It must be consuming for Bruce to outright ask.

“No. I promise,” Clark says gently, flying the quarter inch off the ground he needs to wrap Bruce in an hug instead. “This should keep you a bit more stable even at super speed. Ready?”

There’s a small nod.

Clark takes off, covering hallway and tunnel and city so quickly they begin to blur even for him. He keeps the speed just under the level at which most humans complain of feeling miserably sick.

They’re all the way to the medbay in the cave, Bruce stretched out on a bed with a trauma blanket and no one the wiser, when Clark sees Dev and Alfred covered in blood not their own and thinks, Oh, dammit. Tim.

“What the hell?” Bruce is mumbling, trying and failing to sit up. “What the hell. Tim?”

“Is Dr. Thompkins on her way?” Dev asks, snapping without turning from the mess of gut in front of him. “Lie down, Wayne.”

“She’s enroute,” Alfred answers. “A moment, Master Bruce. Glad to see you in one piece, sir.”

“I should have taken you upstairs,” Clark says, pressing a hand against Bruce’s shoulder.

“Don’t you dare,” Bruce answers, his voice and shoulder shaking. “Clark. What…when…”

Clark, at the least, hauls the bed away, to the other side of the platform. Bruce’s eyes don’t leave the table, until they do, and the look he turns on Clark isn’t furious. It’s desperate.

“Dick called me,” Clark says, putting a hand up to halt any questions. “I knew Tim was hurt by Hush and that’s it.”

“Fuck,” Bruce breathes out, dragging a hand over his eyes. “I need to…I have to…”

“You aren’t going anywhere,” Clark says sternly. “I told Dick I’d find you but I’ll babysit, too, if you make me. You can barely finish a sentence. You aren’t chasing anyone.”

“Chase?” Bruce mutters past his wrist. He pulls the hand away from his face. This, or superspeed, or both, has jostled him into more alertness. “Clark. I’m not leaving. But if you don’t move me back over there I’m going to get up and walk, if it kills me.”

“I don’t think—” Clark begins, looking over at the tight knot of activity around Tim’s torso. There’s a rustle of fabric and he turns back to see Bruce already swinging his legs stiffly toward the side of the bed. “Woah, woah, woah. Okay. Stay put, dammit. I’ll push you back over.”

Bruce collapses back against the narrow mattress with an annoyed and pained exhale.

“You aren’t going anywhere,” Clark says sternly. “I told Dick I’d find you but I’ll babysit, too, if you make me. You can barely finish a sentence. You aren’t chasing anyone.”

To his credit and Clark’s relief, this keeps Bruce on the bed. Bruce reaches an arm over his head,
cringing visibly at the movement, and tangles his hand in Tim’s hair and leaves it there. Tim, intubation tubing taped in place, doesn’t respond.

Clark sits back, waiting to see if he’s needed again, and even though it would be easy to hear whatever Bruce is murmuring to Tim’s unconscious body across the small gap, he doesn’t listen.

He tunes it out, like static.

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Suction, clamp, examine, staple, suction, clamp.

The routine of planning his next five moves, and holding in his head what he’ll do if something goes wrong in any of a dozen different ways, makes it easier to obey the mantra that rises every time he has to pause to make a quick decision:

*Don’t think, don’t think, don’t think.*

Dev’s thinking, of course. But there’s thinking and then there’s *thinking.*

The metal tools in his hand draw monofilament suture through resectioned bowel. He’s hunting for lacerations on the organs, clipping and tying off and burning as he goes. A quick glance at the monitors only drives him to work more intently. He has to go fast but he also can’t afford to miss anything.

For a long stretch, there’s nothing but him and the work in front of him and the hot exhalations of his own breath on the inside of his mask.

He doesn’t stop to tell Kent he’s glad Wayne was moved back over within peripheral view. It’s one less thing taking up space in his head if he can just glance over and see him still there, staying right where he was bloody put, and not wandering off. Dev really can’t, or oughtn’t, spare the attention right this moment.

A dip on the monitor does pull words from him, though.

“Superman, turn the heat down, if you would.”

Capes are capes. With the insignia on his chest, Kent is Superman and Dev doesn’t even have to sort out what to call him. The temperature could stand to be a few degrees lower. It’s safer for blood flow, for contamination risk, to reduce perspiration. It does pit Dev more starkly against hypothermia in Timothy but—

*Don’t think.*

When Dr. Thompkins arrives, they can split tasks. For now, Alfie is passing tools when he calls for them, and the surgery is quick and steady. That is, until Dev distantly registers that Wayne has stopped talking quietly to Tim; the hand that was carding through hair in the corner of his vision has stilled. He’s likely asleep, but it’s a risk being pulled away from the job in front of him.

“Superman? You’ve not forgotten the anesthesia work, have you?”

“I’m a quick review,” he says.

“Those and Agarwal’s ‘Practical Guide to Surgical Instruments,’ if you would. Top shelf.”

“Got it.”
There’s a faint breeze and Alfie hands him the stapling tool. “Is something the matter, Kiran?”

“A moment,” Dev asks, prodding as he peers through the microscope lens. “I’ll have you step out and look over Wayne, if Dr. Thompkins isn’t here yet. I’ve thirty minutes or so before we’ll have to stop and keep Timothy sedated and warm him up a bit before going back in, if this isn’t done.”

“Alright,” Kent says from right behind them. “I’m back. Now what?”

“Scrub in,” Dev says. “You’re taking over for Alfie. That monitor, this tray. I’m sodding sorry I have to ask.”

“Desperate times, desperate measures,” Kent says, without any trace of panic that would make Dev change his mind on the spot. “Ready to go.”

Alfie steps back.

Dev glances over as Kent takes a place next to him, and when Alfie is talking softly to Wayne to get him to respond, Dev’s eyes fall on Timothy’s face.

_Don’t think._

He goes back to the mess in front of him, the mess that isn’t as bad as it could be. Whatever armor Timothy was wearing slowed the bullet, deployed the flechettes early. They, with shards of the broken plating, pierced and tore the skin beneath in a dozen places but most of them didn’t go any deeper than the dermal layer. It’ll be a mess of sutures over skin black with bruising, but Dev could have wept with relief when he saw that only two or three pieces went all the way in.

Two or three is still a lot tearing holes through things that shouldn’t have holes in those places, but it’s the difference between a stressful emergency surgery and a pointless one.

The closer he gets to being certain he’s found everything that needs repair, the closer he is to an adrenaline drop-off. He forces himself to make the most of the twenty minutes or so he has left before he’d feel compelled to close things up and wait until Timothy has stabilized, determined to make that the point where Timothy can start recovering instead of just waiting for more surgery.

Not dead. Not dying. Still close, still so _very_ close to danger, but not within certainty of it.

_Don’t think._

He finds one more small tear and hopes it’s the last of them.

Suction, clamp, examine, staple, suction, clamp.


_Bloody hell, Timothy._

And just like that, just as Dr. Thompkins steps off the elevator, they might be in the clear.

Chapter End Notes

I hope the slight break in format didn't bother anyone! Thank you guys for hanging in
during those rough cliffhangers!
“Don’t like you,” is the first thing out of Cassandra Wayne’s mouth when Leslie Thompkins opens the clinic door. She’s tapping her foot impatiently, arms tightly crossed, and her face is screwed up into a pout that would be endearing on a younger child.

Cassandra Wayne just looks like the spoiled young woman Leslie has heard about via old and powerful acquaintances, or the media. The stories she doesn’t dismiss as grossly untrue are still full of consistent themes: Bruce never tells her no, she drives like a demon, she shows up to galas late and ignores people, she wears whatever she wants, she often goes barefoot, her table manners are minimal at best.

Cassandra had been a wisp of a girl years ago, when Leslie was on better terms with the family. She’dghosted in and out of the clinic on Stephanie Brown’s heels, rarely in one place for more than a few seconds, and other than the remarkable empathy she seemed then to have for injured or ill victims, Leslie hadn’t really known her well enough to match her to any distinctive qualities of character. Things are slightly improved between herself and Bruce, but still generally estranged— especially from the middle children— and for one of the first times in her life, Leslie can’t tell where the society act begins and ends for a Wayne.

She returns the angry little greeting with a forced smile and a brisk nod. “Well, then. Where are you parked?”

Cassandra is still glaring at her when she jerks her head, her bobbed hair flipping out to the side. She points with her chin to a little death trap of a car.

Leslie has been trying to think better of Bruce, she honestly has— and missing the young man he used to be has helped. But climbing into the passenger seat of a car that feels too tiny even to her small frame makes her wonder if perhaps the rumors don’t have a ring of truth to them: maybe he has been spoiling the youngest ones.

The drive to the Manor confirms at least one story. She does drive like a demon, racing yellow lights and gunning the engine over bridges and whipping tightly around turns on the winding Bristol roads. Cassandra doesn’t speak and Leslie doesn’t try to strike up conversation. She’s caught between hanging on for dear life and wondering how serious the situation is to call her away from the clinic midday.

It isn’t until they’re pulling into the garage that Leslie realizes Cassandra is crying under the huge sunglasses she threw onto her face before revving the engine. Leslie isn’t one for false comfort but she does put a hand on the girl’s arm, and to her surprise it isn’t immediately shrugged off.

“I know sorry isn’t good enough,” Leslie begins hesitantly, because she’s proud of very many things in her life but what she did when Stephanie Brown was on her table is absolutely not one of them. She made one decision in a harried moment of panic and desperation and she will go to her grave convinced it was the wrong one. Apologizing for it has become something of a personal theme.

“It’s not,” Cassandra says, sniffling. “But we give second chances.”

She says it like it costs her effort to offer it.

“I will do everything I can to help,” Leslie promises, because she won’t give empty platitudes but
she can give this.

“Go,” Cassandra says, pointing toward the door into the house.

“Why don’t you walk me down?” Leslie suggests, and Cassandra shakes her head.

“Too much. It’s…too much.”

She doesn’t elaborate and Leslie decides she doesn’t have time to wait. Maybe she should, but Alfred called her for an emergency and she’s gotta get moving.


Cassandra looks up suddenly, throws the sunglasses on the dash, and says, “Clark is here.”

After that, she’s ahead of Leslie all the way through the Manor and past the clock and down the elevator. It’s been years since Leslie was here, and the nostalgia comes with a sour taste.

The Cave is imposing, with its vast ceiling and stagmaletites like pillars in the dim distance, lit by the soft back glow of safety lamps. The medical unit she’s given the rare follow-up visit in, after emergency care in her own clinic, has mushroomed. Everything is larger—the computer monitors, the workout area, the equipment shelving, the file cabinets—and the medical unit has not been exempt from that growth.

In the middle of it, there is a scene that takes her a moment to comprehend. Dr. Devabhaktuni is working on Tim Drake-Wayne on a silver operating table, with Superman in suit working alongside him. Alfred is shaking a chemically activated ice pack and pressing it to Bruce’s back; Bruce is lying on a wheeled gurney head to head with Tim.

For a moment, the image is confused and then it sorts itself out. She understands Tim and Bruce aren’t actually connected, merely near each other, and she steps forward to help. Cassandra has vanished and Leslie wants to look for her, but there are more urgent matters. Perhaps that’s why she got out of the way.

“What am I doing?” she asks briskly, scrubbing her hands and arms in the sink. There’s a dispenser of antibacterial solution and she uses it liberally.

“Wayne,” Dr. Devabhaktuni says. “I think I’m nearly—shite, shite, and bloody hell. Clamp.” His attention is no longer on her at all, not even in part, as he rapidly takes a tool from Superman’s hand.

Leslie snaps gloves on and goes straight to Bruce, who is awake but just barely. Alfred is still holding the ice pack in place and he greets her with a brief hello.

“What’ve we got?” she asks, pulling a penlight with a worn button out of her pocket.

“Concussion,” Superman answers, without taking his eyes off the tray of tools he’s standing beside. “And a blow to the spine. It didn’t look broken. He said he puked nine or ten times, but he also managed to make it down two floors and a lot of hallways. Sorry, Alfred. Didn’t exactly get to update you yet.”

“Alfie, do we’ve any of that muscle glue? From the…the…” Dr. Devabhaktuni trails off and Alfred is handing her the ice pack.

“We do,” he replies. “I’ll fetch it.”
“Bruce,” Leslie says, bending at the waist to peer into his eyes. One isn’t reacting to the penlight the way she’d like, and he winces at the brief, bright spear from it.

“Dr. Thompkins,” he rumbles, so at least he’s alert enough to identify people correctly. There’s a hard edge in his voice, but not nearly what she expects. That’s progress, she supposes. It shouldn’t surprise her as much as it does.

It was Bruce, after all, who had shown up on her doorstep two years ago, his hands in the pockets of a trench coat it was too warm to justify. “We need to talk,” was all he’d said as greeting, and she wonders now just how much Cassandra really is like him. After years of her trying to bridge that gap for the both of them, it had required him taking that step to meet her halfway and he’d taken it. She’d never taken over primary medical care again, but the clinic was always busy and even if it hurt she could accept that things had changed.

Being part of their lives again, even a little, was all she had wanted by that point. Maybe she’s getting old, to be so sentimental and unpractical, but all she wants now is to not be thoroughly severed from the man she helped raise during some seasons of their intersecting lives. They had mattered to one another at some point; she’d taken care of him and his children; Alfred had been one of her few non-professional friends.

Two years of tentatively rebuilding that, she thinks, is better than nothing. It is certainly more than she’d hoped for at one point in the last dark half decade.

She presses on Bruce’s temples and then drops her hand to take his pulse. It’s steady, which is another good sign.

“What happened?” she asks, noting the unusual attire and the jumble of wool blankets and red—cape?—he’s wrapped in on the bed.

“Tommy Elliot happened,” he says hoarsely.

“Hm. Where on your head?” She’s prepared to check for swelling and temperature but doesn’t want her hands roaming aimlessly over his skull if he can point her directly there.

“Back,” he mumbles, “over the surgery scar.”

Leslie sucks in a breath through her teeth and presses gentle but firm fingers there. Tommy Elliot apparently did not cut corners when it came to inflicting damage. “Hurt?” she asks, studying his expression to gauge response.

“Hn,” he says, which could mean anything.

She strides around the gurney, taking the set aside ice pack with her, and tugs with two fingers on the blankets bunched around his neck. After a second, they give way and she does a quick visual examination of his back. The hematoma is already deep and ugly. She tucks the ice pack there and smooths the blankets out against him again. She has to go the long way around the end of the bed because his arm is stretched out, his hand in Tim’s hair again.

“I need to scan that and see how extensive the damage is. I can’t believe you walked anywhere, much less stood up.” She tuts at him and then surveys the folded, collapsed army of medical devices back against a partition wall.

“Had to,” he says, blinking slowly. “Arkham.”

“I should set up an IV first, for some fluids and the contrast dye,” Leslie says, patting his arm. He
flinches away from the contact as if burned and she chooses to make herself ignore it.

“Fine,” he agrees, despite his reaction. “But I’m staying right here.”

“Do you want some painkillers? I’ll see what’s there,” she offers, softening her voice in sympathy. “You can’t possibly be comfortable.”

“No,” he says.

Leslie is stranded. She’s watching a ship sink from a distant shore and she doesn’t quite know how it happened, but she left her medical authority at the door and she doesn’t like it at all. In an earlier time, she would have just told him. Now, she can’t even muster the direct commands that usually fly out of her mouth without effort.

Their personal relationship might be undergoing repair but their doctor-patient one is currently a disaster.

“The bloody hell you will,” Dr. Devabhaktuni says from the surgery table. “And I’m sorry, I’ve been distracted, did you say he hit you over your craniotomy scar?”

“Hn,” Bruce replies to that.

Leslie can’t help but remember that these two specific things— spine and skull— are the other doctor’s specialty. Gunshot wounds, on the other hand, are something of one of hers.

But she’s struggling without the certainty of her place in the room, as a doctor or a friend.

There’s the sucking of a suction hose and then Dr. Devabhaktuni looks up and the determination in his eyes, just under the blatant weariness, is a bit like reassurance.

“Dr. Thompkins, if you would scrub in and look over this. We’ve maybe ten minutes before I’m concerned about body temperature and I don’t want to miss anything.”

“No,” Wayne orders, but Dr. Devabhaktuni pointedly ignores him, so Leslie goes to clean her hands and arms again and put on new gloves.

She’s stepping back into her shoes as a doctor, instead of caught in the weird limbo. She’d dismiss it as a tasteless action of pity, except she does have experience in exactly what he’s asking her to do and surgeons don’t hand operations over out of pity. There must be honest deference there or it wouldn’t be happening.

“I’ve repaired lateral and transverse lacerations along the length of the bowels, the stomach, and the left kidney. I’ve repaired a significant abdominal muscle laceration with glue, but the rest is suture or staple.” Dr. Devabhaktuni updates her as she takes his place beside the tools. Superman is still standing there, looking utterly incongruous in his cape-less suit and medical mask. “Superman will assist and supervise the effects of anesthesia.”

“Huh,” is all Leslie says, peering sharply at him. “Alright.”

Alfred is prepping something further over in the medical unit and she remembers when they worked side by side over Bruce, in those awful and brutal days after Jason Todd died. She’d work then thinking of the autopsy report, anger and sympathy at war within her.

“It needs re-examined and closed,” Dr. Devabhaktuni says. “And there are minor dermal lacerations that will need sutured or glued. Just...”
For the first time since he started speaking, he falters for a moment. She risks glancing away from the open abdomen to check and make sure he’s not about to do something stupid like vomit, because he might be a professional but that choked noise he made was concerning.

He doesn’t look ill, though, just tired. “Make bloody certain I didn’t miss anything, yeah?”

“Of course,” she says, nodding.

“Right, then,” he turns to Bruce. “What’ve I bloody told you about hurling yourself down staircases.”

There’s a dry, reluctant huff of a laugh. It isn’t relief or real amusement, but it’s a small break in tension and she knows Bruce isn’t going to interfere again while everyone is there keeping an eye on her.

She wonders if this is what probation feels like.

And then she doesn’t wonder, because she’s working.

Leslie is aware, because she’s trained herself to pay attention to her surroundings even in surgery, of things happening around her. There’s medical equipment being wheeled into place near Bruce, the low murmur of voices discussing or deciding things. A stern warning, a brief and heated argument in muted tones, a soft explanation.

After an hour, she’s putting the finishing bandages over the last of the superficial sutures. The longer ones, their ends rising like a ragged line of barbed wire over Tim’s skin scrubbed mustard yellow with antiseptic gel, were finished off fifteen minutes ago. Superman has been pulling him slowly out of anesthesia since, and if it’s not the most surreal surgical experience she’s ever had it’s definitely up there.

“Hold him on that dosage,” Leslie orders, watching Tim’s vitals on the monitor while disposing of her bloodied gloves. “Okay. A bit more, and I’ll get a meperidine bag. Tim doesn’t handle morphine well, if I remember correctly.”

“Still true,” Dr. Devabhaktuni confirms from several feet away. “And an antibiotic to head off anything his spleen isn’t there to catch.”

Tim groans.

“Hello, young man,” Leslie says, measuring responsiveness as she checks his vitals again. They’ll need to extubate as soon as he’s stable enough. “Don’t try to move.”

He won’t remember this later, but him waking a little now is important. Knowing how much some can or will respond is an indicator of how they are handling the anesthesia; it’s a little nerve-wracking here because she’s never met a cape in Gotham that didn’t immediately try to throw themselves off the table when waking up.

Tim is, unfortunately, no exception.

He’s too drugged to get more than a half inch but the intent is clearly there, until Bruce’s hand reaches back out and cups Tim’s pale cheek.

“Tim,” is all he says, stern like an order, and Tim quiets.

Leslie sets up the IV drips and gives Superman a grateful nod. “I think we’re done, here,” she says,
meaning *you can be done* because she intends to stick around and keep an eye on things until she’s asked to leave or needs to go back to the clinic.

Superman peels off the mask and pitches it. “I’ve got to take care of few things. I’ll be back in an hour or so to see how everyone is doing. Call if you need me sooner.”

Bruce thrusts an arm out from the side of the bed, the cape dangling in folds from his fist. Superman wordlessly takes it and attaches it at the shoulders again, patting Bruce’s arm before he takes off.

“I’ll clean up,” Dr. Devabhaktuni says, whisking away the tray of bloodied instruments and bagged bullet and armor fragments. “Alfie, I hate to be a bother, but…”

“Tea,” Alfred says briskly. “I think it’s rather in order. We’ve a long afternoon ahead of us. Dr. Thompkins?”

“Please,” Leslie says, with a brief smile. “Thank you, Alfred.”

“Alfie, when’s Dames due back?” Dr. Devabhaktuni pauses at the sink and turns the water off with an elbow to hear the answer. Alfred slows near the elevator.

“Three. I’ll arrange for Master Richard to retrieve him and deliver news.”

“Don’t let him down here. Don’t let any of them down.” Dr. Devabhaktuni’s gaze flicks over to Leslie for a moment and whatever he reads there seems to confirm something for him. “We need to keep the Cave as sterile as bloody possible. I’ll let them down when we’re certain he’s stable.”

“Very well. Anything else?”

“Cass.” Bruce says roughly, an arm over his eyes. “Can we dim lights or should I go upstairs?”

“I thought I saw her,” Dr. Devabhaktuni leans out around the counter to search.

Leslie looks around, too, not expecting to see anything. “She came down with me.”

“Cass,” Bruce says again, a bit louder. “Now, Cassandra.”

There’s fury all over the woman’s face when she peels herself out of the shadows and slinks toward the elevator. Forget daggers for eyes; her whole body looks like a knife, ready to cut the next person who steps the wrong way.

“Cass, love. Turn down the lights for your da, and turn up the heat a bit,” Dr. Devabhaktuni says, in the sort of fond tone Leslie wouldn’t dream of speaking to a human weapon in. “You’ve been here the whole sodding time, you might as well say hullo.”

The elevator doors shut behind Alfred, without Cassandra on it.

When she turns, her entire body language has changed to something less dangerous but profoundly unreadable to Leslie. She’s chewing on the strings of her hoodie while she turns down the lights and adjusts temperature at a panel on the wall, then she slips toward them. A child with that attitude might drag her feet, but Cassandra steps like she’s on a ballet stage before a solo-- light and soundless and slow. Leslie remembers, vaguely, that she *does* ballet. It’s when Leslie thinks about the last time she went to a ballet, with Martha Wayne and a young Bruce in tow, to watch the principal mourn her way through the role of Nikiya in *La Bayadère*, that it clicks.
Cassandra isn’t angry, she’s afraid.

She’s afraid in the same way Bruce was afraid when he was young, with walls and defenses and curling in with a spiny shell against the world. Perhaps he still is that way. Leslie isn’t sure, and not knowing stirs an ache of regret in her heart. There are things she could have done better.

Leslie hasn’t made time for the ballet or anything like it in years. She hasn’t made time for a lot of things, other than pouring herself into the daily tasks at the clinic, and she feels at the moment like the world’s biggest hypocrite.

‘Do you make time for them to be children?’ she’d demanded of Bruce, once.

Maybe he understood then, from experience, that there were some parts of childhood he couldn’t give back to them. She’d retreated, licking her own wounds of loss, when trying to pull him back out with their old puzzles and games and teasing had failed all those years ago. She wasn’t sure what to do with a child who wasn’t a child anymore, how to help him when the wound wasn’t in his skin or his bones, and their moments of connection had been more and more rare as he grew.

Then he had needed her again, as Batman, in a way she could understand and respond to, and she’d met that need until the day she betrayed it.

There’s a lump in her throat as she watches him, injured and in pain, still stroke a son’s hair and sign one-handed to a wide-eyed daughter kneeling next to the bed. She knows just enough ASL from picking it up at the clinic to read the basic signs across the space.

“You’re hurt, Tim’s hurt,” Cassandra signs over and over, her expression stormy. “I hate it.”

“I’m okay,” he’s signing back, over and over, his face open and earnest. She doesn’t usually see that much emotion on his face but he must make an exception for sign. “Tim will be okay.”

“Please don’t be hurt,” Cassandra whispers, breaking her verbal silence. “You’re lying and I don’t know why.”

For a moment, Bruce’s face, still attuned to the expressiveness of sign language, goes as plainly stunned as if someone slapped him. It vanishes quickly, while Leslie’s watching, into something deliberately calm. It’s an impressive feat considering how much the concussion must be hurting him, unless Dr. Devabhaktuni did talk him into fairly strong pain meds.

“I’m okay, Cass,” he says. “For right now. I’m okay. Don’t worry about me. Can you help Dick, today? He’ll need somebody to keep him safe. Will you?”

Cassandra sniffs and nods, resting her forehead on the edge of the bed. He puts his hand on her neck while she takes one deep breath and then another.

“Don’t get up. Not for days,” she says sternly, when she finally stands. “I’ll kick your ass, Bruce Fucking Wayne.”

“Cassandra,” he says, trying to sound stern. Leslie doesn’t think he’s doing a very good job but she’ll cut him some slack.

“Mean it,” she says, a fierce little scowl bunching her lips. “Get Clark to help if I need it.”

“You wouldn’t need it,” Bruce says, sounding resigned.

“Be safe,” Bruce corrects. “You and Dick. Stop Damian if you have to. Don’t break anything.”

“Sleep, Baba,” Cassandra says. She bends gracefully, like every movement is a considered art, and kisses the side of his brow. “Make Tim rest. He’s like you.”

“You all are,” Bruce grumbles.

Leslie tears away and busies herself looking over the monitors again, checking Tim’s intubation placement, feeling like an intruder for simply standing there and observing. Dr. Devabhaktuni is still sanitizing instruments and cataloguing recovered fragments spread out over the counter. She joins him after checking Tim. The glow of the monitors is bright even with the overhead lights turned down.

“Are you alright?” she asks, intuition driving the question more than her comfort with inquiring.

Dr. Devabhaktuni’s shrug is tight and far from something that telegraphs as okay, but he doesn’t answer directly. “Thank you, for finishing the surgery. I’d be a lot bloody further from alright if I were here second-guessing myself all afternoon.”

“You’re welcome. Thank you for trusting me.”

He gives her an odd look at that, and then returns to the notes he’s filling out with black marker on each fragment bag.

“How’s Bruce?” she asks. “Aside from the concussion.”

“Two, actually,” Dr. Devabhaktuni answers. “Cerebral and spinal. Not a single fracture, which is a sodding miracle. I suppose we’ve Dent to thank for that.”

“Harvey Dent?” Leslie exclaims. “What’s he got to…”

Something in Dr. Devabhaktuni’s posture tells her she’s not going to get any more answers out of him, so she drops it, and looks back at Bruce.

She could have been better, in so many ways, so many times. She doesn’t regret the good she has done. She doesn’t dismiss it. She’s saved and changed lives, she knows that.

You’re all like me.

Maybe, Leslie thinks, she is, just a little bit, too. More than she wanted to admit. Willing to make uncomfortable sacrifices, regret and ponder at them later, become more resolute about others. She knows the same must be true for him.

We give second chances.

It took an emergency to get her into the Cave but now she wonders how often she’s avoided the Manor even after there was a standing invitation again. How often that was true, even before, when it was full of painful memories others managed to live around. The guilt she hates admitting has been chewing her alive like corrosive poison, even after she’s been told that a second chance here is hers to take.

She accepts a cup of tea from Alfred, helps Dr. Devabhaktuni extubate Tim, and then takes a chair to sit with both of them and watch Tim breathe, and breathe, and breathe on his own. Bruce sleeps restlessly near them, drifting in and out of sleep only to talk briefly to Alfred when he does wake, until Alfred moves a chair closer to talk quietly to him when Bruce doesn’t slip back into slumber.
Eventually, she needs to return to the clinic. They have things under control here and there are people who need her. That’s another thing she knows they have in common, despite her anger at a world that requires such things. For now, she sits and plays the role of doctor and friend alike, when Dr. Devabhaktuni’s adrenaline drop-off is so severe he sits forward to put his head in shaking hands, his tea set aside.

She doesn’t know him well enough to offer much comfort beyond just company, but it’s a start, and the fact that Bruce isn’t giving off the aura of a thundercloud whenever his gaze falls in her direction is confirmation that this is okay.

*We give second chances.*

Leslie thinks it’s time to give one to herself.
The slate tiles on the roof are slick with damp air but that didn’t stop Damian Wayne from climbing out the window to sit with his arms wrapped around his legs. He glowers at the distant city across the river, as the lights in rectangular windows stand out in the descending dark.

The only reason he isn’t out there, right now, hunting Hush himself is because he’s flanked on the roof by Stephanie and Richard. He came out here to be alone and they didn’t trust him to not slide right over the gutter and swing himself down the side of the house brick by brick. He can’t exactly say they were incorrect in their judgment, and while he’s been ready for a fight ever since Richard picked him up from school, he isn’t in the mood to fight them.

He had known the moment he stepped out of the building, tube of blueprints from a school project in hand, that something was wrong. Richard was sitting in the parking lot, leaning against the hood of his car, with his arms crossed and a distant look on his face as he stared at the tarmac. As soon as he had noticed Damian, he’d shaken it off, but not for a falsely reassuring smile. It had been replaced by a serious, grim visage and he’d ignored Damian’s questions to wave him into the car first.

It seems that, in the handful of hours Damian wasted at school, his world went to utter hell.

Putting together what happened is like trying to assemble a puzzle while some of the pieces are locked up downstairs in the Cave. Father is injured, too injured to be upstairs yet. Tim is in critical condition after emergency surgery because Hush somehow managed to escape Arkham and break into their home.

Damian shivers with repulsion and rage.

Richard allowed him to stay in the study as long as he wanted, combing through the evidence of the broken window, the broken desk drawer, the broken bottle of yogurt.

Broken, broken, broken. All of it. His entire day, his week, his…

Damian swallows.

Tim will be fine. Everyone keeps saying Tim will be fine, but he isn’t, not right now. Tim, who insisted Damian wear the armor that trapped sweat in itchy ways all day at school.

‘Just humor me, please, Damian. Say I’m paranoid, say it’s still fear toxin. I don’t really care. Just put the stupid thing on.’

He’d spent all day resenting the armor and Tim alike.

“We should put his head on a pike,” Damian hisses. “Put it on the front gate. Tt.”
“You’ve been watching that show too much,” Richard says tightly. “And this is why you aren’t going out tonight.”

Damian doesn’t want to have this argument right now. Not for the third time. Not when Cassandra is sitting on the slope of roof above them, perched there like a falcon ready to swoop down on him if he tries to leave. She’d told him Father gave her permission to do anything short of breaking a bone, and she’d disobey him on that if she had to. Damian doubts that she received any such permission but he doesn’t doubt the intent. Father would certainly try to bench him after this, if he were upstairs.

“You shouldn’t go out either,” he says to Richard, his mouth sour like he’s chewing unripe persimmon, 柿子 on his tongue. It’s stinging, leaving his lips numb with the cruelty spilling out of him. “You’re ‘emotionally compromised.’ You’ll kill him if he says the wrong thing and stirs your temper.”

“That’s fair, Damian,” Richard says, weary instead of enraged. “But I think I can handle it.”

“Tt,” Damian says again, with less venom this time. The shame of trying to wound Richard dampens his ire and a moment later he adds, quietly, “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“It’s okay,” Richard says, putting an arm around Damian’s shoulders and giving him a squeeze. “It’s a bad day.”

“No fucking shit,” Stephanie snaps, before exhaling and burying her face in her hands. “Sorry. I’m sorry, too. I probably shouldn’t go out tonight either.”

“But you will,” Damian says, scowling at the unfairness.

“So this is where everybody’s hiding.” The deep timbre of Jason’s voice rolls out of the window ahead of him, before he clambers out and skids down the slate to sit next to Stephanie. “I wondered where you all went. Al says Dad is coming upstairs.”

“I have to speak to him.” Damian’s on his feet and climbing back toward the window when Richard grabs the hem of his pants leg with a few fingers.

“Sit, Little D. Give him some time.”

Damian throws himself back down with a frustrated growl. He’s glad they had a lot of the loose slate repaired or replaced last summer. At least he trusts those to not betray him.

“Cass. How was he? Really?” Stephanie calls up to the other section of roof. “They really let Dr. Thompkins operate on him?”

“She finished. Dev worked first. It was…bad. Getting better. Don’t wanna talk about it.”

There’s a deep silence after that. Damian knows prying words out of Cass when she doesn’t want to talk is a fairly pointless endeavor. But Tim must be alright if Father is coming up. He wouldn’t leave him otherwise, unless he was somehow drugged and forced.

A moment later, there’s a soft buzz and Stephanie tugs her phone out of her pocket. “Hey. Dev’s moving Tim upstairs already. He wants the room sanitized and Alfred’s busy.”

Very quickly, with motion so sudden that it startles Damian, Richard stands and crouches in front of him. He keeps his balance on his toes, despite the slope downward behind him, and looks intently into Damian’s eyes. The constant current of fury inside him spreads out thin, like rapids
spilling into a wide lake, under Richard’s scrutiny.

That’s a Batman look.

That’s Damian’s Batman looking at him, just as much his Batman as Father is now and was when he was a young child. He wonders if Mother told Father that he used to drag the stolen cape and cowl around their quarters, the heavy material clutched in his hands. He hadn’t even known what he was doing, why she allowed it for so long, until once when he was ill and flipping through a collection of comics Tim gave Cassandra for reading practice.

‘Why does he carry this blanket everywhere?’ he’d asked Stephanie, who was nearby. He was prepared for one of those rare times she’d join him in mocking something.

‘That’s Linus’ blankie, Damian,’ she had said, with a wistful frown. ‘It’s, uh, a security item. It makes him feel safe. Little kids carry them.’

He’d tutted at her but hadn’t told her what he really thought: ‘I had one of those.’ A security item.

The first time he’d met Father, the oil-rich smell of hydrophobic-coated Kevlar twill weave had sent a wave of nostalgia over him so intense in its sense of harbored safety that he’d been extra bitter as a reflex. He quickly learned to associate it not just with the cape and cowl alone, but with Father, and then with Richard, and then Father again.

It’s a Batman smell. It is security.

Tommy Elliot would not have beaten Father so easily if he’d been Batman, and Damian suddenly understands Tim’s premonitive panic in urging him to wear the armor under his clothing. They aren’t as safe outside of their capes, not in Gotham. It’s an illusion to think they are.

Richard is still looking at him. Stephanie is standing, one ankle crossed over the other as she types something on her phone. The roof is wet slate shingle but it feels like one of the safest places in the world for them, for those who are and have been birds. One of Jason’s hands wraps firmly around Stephanie’s ankle while she’s staring at her screen, and she absently lifts the other foot to press against his face. He doesn’t pull away from either point.

“Damian,” Richard finally says.

“Richard.” Damian frowns.

“I’m going to make you a deal. B’s out of commission so I’m in charge.”

“You wish, Dickwad,” Jason mutters around Stephanie’s barefoot. “Blonde Bit, your foot reeks.”

“Not now, Jason,” Richard snaps, and Jason’s scowl suddenly matches Damian’s. Richard continues, undeterred. “I’m going to send you to help clean up at Arkham tonight. You have to stay with Cass.”

“Baba said I go with you,” Cassandra interrupts.

Richard rolls his eyes and presses a hand to his brow. “Okay. Fine. Stephanie?”

“I don’t need a babysitter,” Damian bites off, though he immediately regrets doing anything that might make Richard reconsider. It would be nice to not get in trouble over going out, later.

“I…” Stephanie hesitates. “Jay? You going out?”

Richard swivels his attention up to Jason, and Damian, bewildered, follows his line of sight. They don’t seem to notice him when he looks from Jason, back to Richard, and then to Jason; Richard’s frown is quizzical and Jason’s lips are pale as he gives a tiny, tight shake of his head. Richard, satisfied by something there, returns his attention to Damian.

“I want to find Hush, but…” Stephanie says, her phone lowered. She looks at Damian. “You saw the evidence pictures of Willow Efaw.”

Damian wasn’t supposed to look at those. He had anyway. He nods.

“Nobody else needs to die like that. Damian and I will investigate Arkham. And I’m not babysitting. You pull one stupid move that makes you a liability instead of a partner and I’ll kick your ass home so fucking hard you’ll have to go all the way to the Kent Farm to cry.”

He’s not used to Stephanie Brown being this…furious. Not toward him. Not like this. Tim has complained about Stephanie’s temper and stubbornness but Damian rarely sees it, beyond her sheer (and respectable, he grudgingly admits) discipline.

Partner is better than charge, regardless. “Fine. Yes.”

“Okay, other end of the deal,” Richard says, pulling his attention back. “I’m going to go inside. I want to talk to Bruce first, and alone. If he has a problem with it, you’re going anyway, but you will not argue with him. You let me handle it.”

“Thataboy.”

Richard goes inside through the window and Jason stands, limbers up the roofing to the higher section, and begins talking to Cass. Damian’s glinty gaze falls on the city again, now glowing with evening light. Stephanie nudges his side with her foot.

“Come on, clean up crew. Let’s clean Tim’s room first.”

“I will help only because I’m certain you’ll fail to do it properly,” Damian mutters. He isn’t sure he means it, but it sounds like something he should say. Stephanie is usually decent at rolling with his jabs, much better than Tim used to be, but she glares at him now.

“Damian. I’m really not in the mood.”

He follows her with a sulking grimace, his shoulders slouched. Tim’s door is unlocked and Stephanie leads the way in and then exhales.

“You brother is a fucking slob,” she says, with a frustrated exhale. “Ugh.”

The room isn’t one Tim lives in full time, but it looks like it anyway. Pennyworth refuses to engage in the battle of sorting through any of their personal mess, lest he dispose of something important. This means Tim’s room is a migrating mass of books, papers, wires, shoes, devices, and coffee mugs. It ends up on the bed when Pennyworth vacuums; Tim moves it to the desk and dresser when the linens are changed; it is scattered like the flung debris of a ruined planet on all other days.

“He’s busy,” Damian says, thinking of the morning when they were both sprinting to find
Damian’s charcoal pencils and make it to his school on time. Stephanie is opening the closet door and she stops to turn and look at him, her eyebrows raised in shock. Then she looks down at the carpet while pulling her hair back into a ponytail.

“I’m sorry, Damian,” she says quietly. “I know you care about them, too.”

“I’ll get boxes,” Damian says. “His closet is hopeless.”

There are collapsed banker’s boxes in the dry storage behind the laundry room, because Father is obsessive about filing his work papers every weekend. They’re often filched for various projects, so Pennyworth keeps the stock healthy. While he’s in the laundry room, he collapses one of the boxes and puts a line of cleaners in a neat row on one side. The other side is taken up by a sealed package of sterilized bed linens.

When Damian had first come to Gotham, the future he saw for himself as Batman involved a lot more ordering people around and a lot less cleaning. Grunt work, Jason calls it. ‘Domestic tasks’ is how Pennyworth refers to all such chores. ‘ _Being part of a family_ ’ is what Richard had said, the first time he forced Damian to scrub down a counter. He would have balked entirely if Richard hadn’t been in the same room mopping the floor.

Now, he doesn’t even need to ask anyone for directions. Beyond mere room cleaning, they all know how to sanitize a bedroom to medical care standards, and if Damian has any inclination to shun the work, he remembers that others— Tim included— have done this for him. Unlike the year he arrived in Gotham, that means something to him now.

There’s something satisfying in pulling his own weight, in even going beyond that to carry weight for others. He doesn’t know when, precisely, he stopped seeing such actions as a sign of the shameful weakness in others, but it has carried him across a ravine to where he now sees service as honorable.

He wonders, sometimes, if Mother would be ashamed of him and who he is now. It’s an aching kind of loneliness to know she wouldn’t understand this, life with Father and in Gotham and the man he wants to become. It’s pointless to imagine all the ways she might ignore or criticize his decisions, so he doesn’t waste his time, but there’s a pining in his bones for someone she will never be. He has no illusions that she will somehow leap the divide between what they were trained to be and who he is. He knows he has gone somewhere she will not ever follow, but leaving her behind stirs sorrow in him all the same.

Damian climbs the stairs with the boxes in his arms, collapsed ones in a stack beneath the full one. He pauses outside Tim’s door to watch Father shuffle into his own room, leaning on Richard for support. A moment later there’s a cry of pain and a hasty, “Sorry, B, I’m sorry. Just a bit further.”

If Father answers, he doesn’t hear it. He winces and goes into Tim’s room.

Stephanie has sorted things into approximate piles, or so he assumes from a quick glance. She’s shoving an armful of clothing into the walk-in closet when he sets the boxes down on the bed, and Damian quickly assembles two more boxes to hold the various piles.

He always thinks of Mother more often when Father is injured. It’s possibly a troublesome leftover from the days when he wasn’t sure of his place. He no longer worries that he’ll be sent back to her, or to the League, but it’s habit to begin to wonder about her again. Damian shakes his head to clear it, and he makes himself think instead of Tim, alive downstairs.

Then, he thinks of the blood in the study rug, and he thinks about the jumble of computer cables in
“We can, ugh, stack them….in here,” Stephanie says, emerging from the closet with slightly reddened cheeks. She rifles through the cleaners Damian brought. “I cleared a place and Tim owes me, like, a car or something. What do you want? Surface cleaning or remaking the bed?”

Tim, if his condition is as poor as they have been led to believe, will be in a wheeled bed for at least the night, possibly longer. Stripping this one just reduces exposure to whatever is clinging on the sheets and gives anyone staying with him a place to sleep that isn’t a chair or the floor. Damian glances at Stephanie and her arms.

“What?” she says, frowning.

“You’re short,” Damian says, as if he hasn’t been gloating over the three inches he has over her and Tim and Cassandra now. It isn’t until this moment, thinking about stretching fitted sheets over the corners of a mattress, that it hits him that his height actually has advantages beyond his superior attitude.

“You’re a nerd,” Stephanie returns, with an exasperated shrug. “Let’s hurry it up. Bed or spray cleaners?”

“Bed,” Damian says, reaching for the package in her hands. “He’s going to be alright.”

“And how the fuck do you plan to make that happen, Mr. Lord of Nature?” Stephanie is angry, still, slamming dresser drawers shut before sweeping clutter from the top of the furniture into a box. Her shoulders slump when she’s standing with the box in her arms. “I’m…I’m sorry, Damian. I shouldn’t keep tearing your head off.”

“Father wouldn’t have left him if he wasn’t going to be alright,” Damian says stiffly, turning his back to her while he tugs off the old blankets and sheets. “I think you’d know that if you were thinking clearly. Are you alright to go to Arkham?”

“Kid.” Stephanie lets out a breath between her teeth. “You really know how to push somebody’s buttons.”

Damian pulls a sheet down over a mattress corner. “I didn’t mean to. I was merely asking if it would be—”

A box thumps in the closet and Damian snaps his mouth shut. A moment later, Stephanie comes out and grabs his wrists, just as he’s shaking out the top sheet, and he freezes and drops it. Her hands aren’t harsh, but gentle, and it pulls all his attention to her face with a magnetic drag, to see what she’s doing.

“I’m sorry I’m being a bitch,” she says, eyebrows furrowed as she looks up at him. She pulls him into a quick hug and then spins him around by his shoulders. Resisting her would be easy but Damian is too startled and trusts her too much to fight. She pushes him forward. “I’ll finish this. I need to just get it out of my system and be ready to work. Go check on your dad or see if Dev needs help. Okay? Please? For me?”

“Okay,” he echoes, casting a quick glance over his shoulder. His voice is harder and more suspicious when he adds, “You won’t try to leave without me, will you?”

“No,” Stephanie says. “We go together.”

The hallway is filled with harsh whispers when Damian steps out of Tim’s room. He doesn’t even
have to pause to hide, because Richard and Jason continue arguing without acknowledging his presence.

“—the hell are you thinking, asking him right now?” Jason demands.

Richard doesn’t appear chastised in the least. “You know as well as I do that he’d want me to ask. Not that he remembered anything else anyway.”

“Yeah, he’d want you to ask, but he’s also fucking stupid sometimes, if you hadn’t noticed.” Jason’s hand is on the knob of Father’s door. “Could you just wait like, thirty minutes or maybe solve some stuff on your own?”

“How am I supposed to solve anything without gathering information?” Richard asks, his ire swirling with incredulity. “Jay, he’d want me to ask if he was dying. I don’t like it any more than you do.”

“I hate this family sometimes. I hate every last one of you,” Jason mutters, his free hand pressed over his eyes. He makes a motion like he’s going to pound his fist against the door but catches his hand just in time, letting it fall against the wood with a soft thunk instead. “Because I know he would.”

“We’ll be okay. He’ll be okay,” Richard says, and Jason nods, while glaring at the floor. Damian slips underneath the glare and the two of them, and twists the doorknob to let himself into the room despite Richard’s snatching attempts to grab his arm as he goes by. He shuts the door in their faces and finds himself immersed in darkness.

“Jay?” Father murmurs from the vicinity of the bed.


“Leave the lights off.” The command is a soft grumble. “Is Tim upstairs?”

“No, yet,” Damian says, taking this response as permission to creep further into the room. He doesn’t need much light to know his way around. Father hasn’t moved the furniture, or had it moved, in all the years Damian has lived at the Manor. He stops at the bedside table and stands there, arms hanging stupidly at his sides until he curls them up across his chest. When they’re crossed there, he knows he looks defensive, but it’s not like Father is looking anyway.

“Hnn,” is all Father says to that news.

“How… I mean, are… is it… bad?” Damian finds himself fiddling with his hoodie drawstring as he watches Father’s form in the dark.

“I’ll be fine,” Father says, just the barest edge of warmth in his voice. Damian feels a coil of ashamed guilt tightening in his stomach. It shouldn’t be Father’s place to console him when he isn’t even the one injured. Then again, events like this always remind him of ways Mother and Father are alike and not alike. They both retreat to lick their wounds, but Mother strikes like a cobra if she’s approached, and Father’s bite is toothless if he even bites at all. It’s the nipping of an older dog, patiently teaching a younger pup the boundary lines. With Mother, sometimes, Damian had worried that if she was hurt he would be devoured by it; wounded, too, as punishment for embarrassing her if he ventured near.

Damian sinks to his knees next to the bed and rests his chin on the duvet cover over the bed. He watches the rise and fall of his Father’s chest in silhouette. He matches to it the rise and fall of his own chest, pacing his breathing into something less angry, less afraid. He wonders what he can do,
when there isn’t much left to do, to comfort or heal.

“I won’t go out alone,” Damian says, after considering it.

It is, apparently, the right thing to say.

“Thank you,” Father says, sounding like he means it. His voice is turning mumbly, with exhaustion or pain. “I want you to do one more thing.”

“Yes,” Damian agrees, immediately, grateful for any charge or direction that won’t be self-direction he’s grounded for later.

“Find Selina. Make sure she’s alright.”

“I will.” Damian unfurls his limbs as he stands, ready to go. He doesn’t question Father’s concern — he’s read the files, he knows about the time Hush stole Selina Kyle’s heart from her chest and didn’t care if she lived or died. There’s a twitch inside his stomach that makes him ball his fists, trying to decide if thinking about that makes him better understand Richard’s desire to keep him away from Hush, or if it just makes him furious that they think he can’t handle Hush better than the Catwoman. She was even caught off guard, according to the report, and he’d be in full armor and on the offense.

Armor.

“أحبك أبي,” Damian says quietly. It’s like balancing his toes along a tree branch on the Manor grounds, testing how far out it will hold him. Father might pretend not to hear, or he might tease him for being so uncharacteristic.

“أحبك يا داميان,” Father replies, just as low. The branch holds.

Warmth blooms across him. His fingers run along the edges of the armor Tim insisted he wear under his clothing, and he decides he understands Richard. He understands Richard wanting to keep him away from Hush and his decision to send him out as Robin anyway. Hush, if he is good at anything, it is finding and exploiting their unguarded moments. Damian would be nervous about leaving Father and Tim so compromised, but perhaps that was what the look between Jason and Richard meant earlier. They, too, considered this possibility and have fortified that gap.

He leaves the room to find Jason and Richard still talking in the hallway, this time comparing details from separate angles of the case.

“He wants me to find Selina,” Damian says, before Richard can scold him for going in. He didn’t technically break their agreement — Richard did speak to Father first — but he doesn’t want to take his chances.

“Okay. I can do that before Cass and I—”

“Dick,” Jason says sharply. “Did you hear the pipsqueak? He said Dad told him to find Selina.”

Damian tenses at the nickname and for the argument this will turn into, but Richard runs a hand through his hair and mutters, “I know, I know.”

“You don’t have to do everything, Dick. Let him handle it. If it gets bad, I’ll suit up and come out.”

“I don’t want you to have to do that.” Richard sighs.
“It’ll be one last hurrah,” Jason says.

Damian is done letting them talk over his head. It hardly counts as over his head for Richard anymore anyway.

“Father told me to do it and I will. Neither of you need to interfere. If I require backup for finding one of Father’s allies, then I will ask for it or bench myself.” Damian doesn’t wince under Richard’s hard stare. “Stephanie and I will find her together. If you’re going to trust me, Richard, then trust me.”

“You’ll ask for help?” Richard says, a brow raised. He looks older tonight than he usually does, those tight lines around his eyes that were there on the nights he had cases he wouldn’t let Damian help with when he was Batman.

“I won’t need help,” Damian spits back. “Stephanie will be with me anyway. And yes, I’ll ask if we need it. But we won’t. I…now isn’t the time for me to cause trouble. I know that.”

Some of the lines around Richard’s eyes smooth out and he gives Damian a sudden, bright smile. It’s the flicker of real pride, not anything forced for appearances, and he nods. He claps a hand to Damian’s back. “Okay, okay. I trust you.”

“D?” Stephanie pokes her head out Tim’s doorway. “No, not you, you. Other D. Little D. What’d Dev say?”

“I didn’t…” Damian turns to face her, to tell her he hadn’t gotten that far, when he catches sight of the elevator doors at the far end of the hall opening. Once, he’d spent so much time in large houses and hotels when not at desert compounds, that he didn’t know it was unusual for a house to have an elevator at all, much less two. He rarely uses it, but he never forgets it’s there.

Dev and Dr. Thompkins push the wheeled gurney, and two stands of medical equipment, past all of them in the hall. They fell silent at the doors’ opening and Damian’s attention flickers around from face to face as Tim goes by. It’s not until the doctors are turning the bed, angling it through his bedroom door, that Damian allows himself to actually look at Tim himself.

The already pale skin is ashy gray and he’s sleeping unnaturally still and flat on his back, entirely unlike Tim who sleeps on his stomach and sprawls wherever he can. When he falls asleep on the couch, Damian is always bewildered by how he manages to take up so much space.

When he’s disappeared into the room, Dev walks back out and surveys all of them.

“Go on, Dickie,” Jason says, his voice weirdly calm. “We’ll take turns.”

Damian doesn’t miss the open relief and gratitude on Richard’s face, so he doesn’t challenge the decision. Stephanie doesn’t either, though she’s gathering and re-gathering her hair into a ponytail again and he knows it’s a nervous habit.

If Tim needs Damian to talk, if that will help him recover more quickly, then Damian will talk to him. Selina can wait, Arkham can wait, Gotham can wait. He already knows what he will say, and he sits down with his back against the wall until he can go in, stand next to his brother, and say it
whether or not Tim can truly hear him:

Thank you for being paranoid.

Chapter End Notes

Damian and Bruce’s dialogue in Arabic is just:
“I love you, Dad.”
and
“I love you, Damian.”
The Clocktower

Chapter Notes

thanks to everyone who listened to me whine about writing being hard, and thank you to chimaerakitten for preview reading.

Oracle, as a rule, tends to work at night. It’s partly that she’s always been a bit of a night owl, partly that the capes she manages are usually restricted to night work.

She isn’t restricted, however, so when certain things show up on the police scanner and then minutes later in a text from Dick, the rule is broken. She abandons the rest of her late breakfast to log on, trusting coffee to be enough fuel for a while.

Hush is out.

Dick’s message was terse, bare details, which means he’s pissed and upset and stressed. Tim is hurt, Bruce is missing, no idea how bad either of those things are yet.

She gets updates while she sets filters on her search algorithms running quietly in the background, combing the city for facial matches on security cameras and any banking activity connected to Bruce Wayne or Tommy Elliot.

The messages come in short bursts, data dropped into the equation.

Bruce is alive, condition unclear.

Tim’s been shot in the gut, condition unclear.

The Cave has been physically locked down and whoever is inside isn’t bothering with updates at the moment, which is not reassuring. So, Babs pulls up the Cave camera feeds and biometric data on the wired-in medical equipment.

Then, from across the noisy city and the chilly Sprang and the winding roads of Bristol suburbia, Babs is the one giving the people waiting in the house above the cave the updates.

Her abdomen, where it retains sensation, twinges in sympathy when she sees the pre-op ultrasound images of Tim’s gut. Maybe in an earlier time, it would have come with selfish jealousy that his spine was unmarred beneath that ruin; maybe she’ll work through that later. For now, she’s just relieved.

She didn’t deserve what she got.

Tim doesn’t deserve to have to share it.

Scans of Bruce’s spine and skull show up not long after, while she watches Dev and Alfred and Dr. Thompkins work. She’s never been more grateful that the burned bridges between the Waynes and Dr. Thompkins have undergone some repairs.

Then, it turns into a waiting game.
The doctors are waiting for Tim to stabilize, she’s waiting for Hush to show up somewhere. The waiting turns into evening and while Bruce leaves the cave on unsteady feet, followed not long after by Tim, evening falls and Hush is vanished.

When Nightwing’s comm clicks on, he opens with, “Please tell me you have a lead. Anything.”

“No, Boy Wonder,” she says, meaning it. “He’s not hitting any of his old haunts, or new ones.”

She is sorry, and that’s why she sounds angry. She’s frustrated and she should probably eat something soon because her food from earlier is still sitting abandoned and they’re likely in for a long night. There isn’t much to do at that moment, not anything that she can’t leave for a few minutes anyway, so after Nightwing growls and mutters something about checking abandoned hospitals and floors cordoned off for construction-- Hush’s usual MO-- she checks the minifridge.

Babs is halfway through a container of red curry and rice when the door alarm for the downstairs rear entrance to the elevator pings. She frowns at the security camera, leaning in at the hooded figure-- she’s a little too tall to be Cass, her heels a little too high to be Stephanie’s. Maybe it’s the incongruity of her, specifically, waiting to be buzzed in instead of just making a game of outwitting the security on the windows, but it takes Babs longer than it should to recognize Selina Kyle.

“Come in,” Babs says over the intercom, unlocking the door with a button. The light beside the security pad downstairs flashes green and Selina tugs the door open. The intercom speaker switches to the interior one in the foyer. “Elevator’s unlocked, too.”

She shoves a few more bites of curry into her mouth and tries to swallow fast, but she’s still chewing when Selina lets herself into the main control room from the hall.

“Tch.” Babs says, not bothering to cushion her words. They aren’t exactly friends, but they aren’t exactly enemies, either-- and she knows Selina just well enough to know that Selina is, in this way, a little bit like her: she hates being handled with kid gloves.

“How is he?” Selina asks, ignoring the question.

That’s when Babs twits to really look at her, just as Selina pushes the hood off her hair. Her mouth is pulled into a tight little curve, her arms crossed.

“How much do you know?” Babs asks, figuring she might as well not give redundant information.

“Almost nothing,” Selina snaps back. “I was out of cell range all day and I was at my apartment for less than five minutes before I hear that Hush is out and the littlest bird shows up to tell me to be safe, that his ‘Father’ is hurt. Then he vanished right out the window, the little shit. Do they all practice that move?”

Babs doesn’t need to have Cassandra’s ability to read body language to see the chaos in Selina’s fury and fear. She gestures to the free chair tucked in the corner of the desk and watches Selina’s shoulders hunch up in trepidation. Selina shakes her head, a quick and flicking motion.

“Bruce is alive. Concussed, but he’ll be fine. Did Damian mention Tim?”

“No?” Selina’s head tips at an angle, a you’ve got to be kidding me quirk of her brow.

It takes a moment but Babs calms the surge of irritation while pressing fingertips to her forehead. She’ll take Damian to task later, maybe, about relevant information, but for now she’s just going to let it go. He’s fifteen. He’s having a bad day. They’re all having bad days, but she remembers...
fifteen in a sort of hazy way that frankly terrifies her in retrospect about how much she thought she knew then, and how little she actually did.

“Hush broke into the Manor and shot Tim. He pulled through surgery but he’s going to be out of commission for a while. We don’t know where Tommy disappeared to, so if you’ve got any ideas…”

Selina takes the free chair.

“Shit,” is all she says.

Babs checks on the dozen queries she has running before glancing over at Selina, who has a hand pressed flat against her chest while she stares into the middle distance.

“You alright?” Babs asks, tone blunt.

Selina nods and drops her hand. “Well. What can I do?”

Babs isn’t one to ask for help, but they’ve already delegated everything into neat teams and sending Selina back out to tag along with one of them sounds…feels…cruel. She thinks that if Selina really wanted to be out there helping, or looking on her own, she’d just do it without asking.

“The Manor could use an extra pair of eyes,” Babs says, deciding quickly. “I don’t think he’s going to make a return trip, but Bruce and Tim are both in no shape to fight. Alfred and Dev are there, but they’re a bit preoccupied with medical care, and Jason’s the only one who stayed home.”

“I meant out, Barbara,” Selina says icily, her green eyes even brighter in the glow of the monitor. “I’m not a nursemaid.”

It takes a couple seconds for Babs to wrangle her frustration into some semblance of control and she’s saved by Nightwing’s comm clicking on to announce, “St. Stephan’s is empty. No sign of him.”

“Check the 17th street clinic,” Selina says, sounding distracted, while Babs studies the map. “It was closed for health violations last month.”

“You get that, ‘wing?” Babs asks.

There’s a grim, “Yep,” in reply.

Her frustration at stubbornness has been delayed enough that when she looks at Selina again, it’s not hard to drop it all together and let empathy take its place. Selina’s eyes are closed, her hand to her chest again, and Babs presses her lips together while thinking.

Finally, she goes with outright honesty. It hurts and it sucks, but Babs knows all too well what that helplessness feels like and what a lie it is. It’s the kind of lie that is so very close to the truth, so grounded in previous experience and suffering, that it feeds with abandon on even strong minds.

“You know, the first couple of times Joker got out….after,” Babs says, slowly, “If I wasn’t locked in here, I’d spend the night at my dad’s. Maybe it was stupid to go back to the place where it happened, but Dad is…well, he’s Dad. I couldn’t sleep anywhere else.”

“What are you saying,” Selina asks flatly, not moving. “You want me to run to my daddy?”

“The Manor,” Babs says. “I don’t think you have to pretend to have it together right now. And
nobody would blame you if you needed to go. Just let me know where you’re headed.”

“This is fucking stupid,” Selina hisses, drawing a breath in through her teeth. “It’s not like he’s going to catch me off my guard this time.”

“Are you okay?” Babs’ frown deepens, the question displacing any other train of thought.

Color has drained from Selina’s face and her finger tips are trembling, her nails tinged blue. Her lips would be too, Bab’s thinks, if they weren’t masked by lipstick. Whatever Selina was going to say dies on her tongue and instead, she gasps for breath. Babs throws up a few alerts on the programs she has running, so the computer will more or less scream at her if something needs her attention, and she turns her chair to face Selina.

Babs isn’t a nursemaid, either, but Babs also isn’t a heartless machine. She remembers those hours every single time the Joker escaped again, when she had to struggle not to panic and hide. The full body response, like being dropped in ice water, that her brain couldn’t curtail is the sort of sensation that she can recall in an instant.

Maybe she’s not as empathetic as Cassandra or as open about it as Dick, but she cares. She wouldn’t do any of this if she didn’t.

“Selina?”

The waxen lavender tinge is creeping up the other woman’s hands and across her face and Babs presses fingers against Selina’s neck to verify her grim suspicion. Selina doesn’t flinch away.

The pulse isn’t racing like a panic attack, it’s slow and thready and there’s an irregular sharp staccato thrown in every several seconds.

“I’m going to be sick,” Selina says, but she doesn’t move other than a rigid tension in her jaw. Babs has an empty cup from the desk in her hand when Selina’s hand flutters in the air and she mumbles, “Never mind. I’m okay.”

“You’re kind of not okay,” Babs says with some alarm. “Has that happened before?”

Color is slowly returning to Selina’s cheeks but too slowly, and not enough.

“I want to leave the country,” Selina says, in a strained and muted tone. “But I think Bruce would have a heart attack.”

“I think you might have a heart attack,” Babs says fiercely. “If you didn’t just now. If I tell you to go to the Manor, will you ignore me?”

Selina’s only answer is a small shake of her head.

Babs hunts the screens she’s pulled up from all the security feeds and opens a channel to the cave, where he’s scrubbing an operating table.

“Dev, I’ve got a situation. Want me to send it your way or find someone else?”

“What kind?” his head snaps up, his gaze directly at the camera mounted above the computer monitor.

“Selina.”

“It’s just arrhythmia,” Selina says tightly. “There’s no reason to—”
“I’m here all night,” Dev says. “And maybe it’ll shut Wayne up. He won’t stop asking and I can’t get him out of Timothy’s room.”

“Alright, alright,” Selina says, sounding faintly resigned. “Dealing with Bruce’s stupidity I can do. I’ll be there soon.”

“Are you going to be okay traveling by yourself?” Babs asks, closing the comm line. “I can have someone come get you.”

The look Selina shoots her is full of acid, but it neutralizes into a weary frown. “No, I’ll be fine. I’ve got a car uptown under another name that I can take.”

“Take Dick’s,” Babs says, digging in a bowl on the desk for a familiar keychain. “He left it in the parking garage behind us yesterday.”

She thinks Selina is going to refuse but after a long stillness, Selina reaches out and takes the offered key, tucking it against her palm. Her fingers tremble until she tightens her grip on the keyfob.

“Thank you,” she says very quietly, looking down at her own hands before standing. The words sound freely given but her posture is all tension and embarrassment. Her mouth is puckered with what looks like regret— maybe for coming to Babs.

Babs doesn’t take it personally.

“Let me know how they’re doing,” Babs says. “Really.”

“I will,” Selina says, not meeting Babs’ face. She pulls the hood back up over her hair, shadowing her eyes, and leaves without another word.

“17th Street clinic is empty,” Nightwing reports several minutes later, cutting into the heavy silence of the room. “Zilch. Nada. Not even any recent activity. Where next?”

“Uh,” Babs shakes her head to clear it and focuses on the city map in front of her. “There’s a drug trial lab on 14th that closed a few months ago. Try there.”

“Got it,” Nightwing says. He’s not joking around and Babs is briefly, intensely glad that Cass is with him. They’ll balance each other out and check each other’s tempers, should they actually find Hush soon.

“This is Batgirl,” Stephanie’s voice taps into the comm line. “Robin and I are at Arkham doing a sweep, and hoo-fucking-boy did we find something in the blocked off wing.”

“Hush?” Babs frowns, wishing it could be that easy— Tommy taking himself right back.

“There is a body,” Robin states without inflection. “The employee badge lists him as Oliver Stenger, actuary, Security and Risk Management. There are also supplies for bullet manufacturing.”

“What?” Babs jabs a few keys and after some quick typing she’s in Arkham’s network and the cameras for that wing are all disabled, because of course they are, in a maximum security mental institution. She wants to throw a keyboard it’s so stupid she missed that, that she didn’t even notice they’ve been down.

“All the equipment plus at least two bullets in Mr. Stenger himself,” Batgirl says. “Chest and head.
Hush wasn’t taking any chances. Guess we know where Hush got the ammo.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Babs says, a queasy flop in her stomach. “Hush had those bullets when he…”

“Red Robin was wearing experimental armor,” Robin says thinly. “Beneath his civilian attire.”

“Oh,” Babs says, not knowing if she should be relieved or furious. She bites her lip on a startled laugh and puts a hand to her forehead. “Okay. Good. That’s good. Well. Scan any evidence and I’ll call GCPD. They should be nearby.”

“Got it,” Batgirl says. “We’ll be out in twenty. Unless Nightwing needs help, I’m going back to the Cave.”

“I will assist–”

“You’re going to come back with me,” Batgirl says sharply, cutting Robin off. “Oracle?”

“I think that’s for the best. Nightwing and Black Bat have it under control.”

There’s a hushed tt and then silence. Somehow, the lack of argument is more worrying than a fight, and Babs has no idea if it’s because Damian will actually listen to Stephanie or if he’s that upset about Tim and his dad or if he’s already plotting out how he’s going to slip away from all of them and go after Hush himself.

Oracle throws the headset on the desk and presses her fingers against her temples. This is the worst part of what she does, by far-- feeling so stuck when people won’t cooperate. On an intellectual level, she knows that if a Robin could give Batman or Nightwing or any of them the slip, that her being out there wouldn’t change much. Nevertheless, it’s hard to accept that when her work with allies relies so much on their compliance. She can help track Hush from right where she is, and cover ground much more quickly-- she’s already saved Nightwing hours of work tonight. Days, even. But this…especially when Bruce is out, when Nightwing is stressed, the last thing they need is…

No more self-pity. She picks the headset up and unmutes the line.

“Sorry. Did I miss anything? Needed to grab something.”

It’s a horrible lie, but she doesn’t care enough about maintaining it to make it a good one.

“Nope,” Batgirl says. “Just cataloguing. You’ve got incoming data sets. Robin is collecting physical samples.”

Keep ‘im busy. That’s what she needs to do. She trusts Damian in most crisis situations now, after not being able to do so for a long time, but she remembers Dick at fifteen….and Jason, and Tim. For all her dad’s complaints about her emotional phase as a teen girl, Babs personally thinks that boys are worse. Add in an injured father and brother and…

“I’m switching lines. Ping me if you need me,” Babs says. She feels less scattered now that she has intention, and a plan.

The cell line isn’t picked up immediately, but he answers before it goes to voicemail.

“Hello. Alfred Pennyworth speaking.”

“Hey, Al, it’s Barbara,” Babs says, unable to keep a small smile out of her voice. “How are you
“Miss Gordon,” he answers. “As well as anyone might. What can I do for you?”

“You’re probably holding up better than all of us, Al,” Babs says. “Is Dr. Thompkins still there?”

“I was preparing to return her to the clinic. Is there a problem?”

“If she can wait an hour, I’ve got a kid with a learner’s permit that needs some practice time and something to do. Do you think she’d mind?” Babs reviews the incoming photographic evidence while she’s keeping her mind mostly on the conversation.

“I doubt she would,” Alfred says, and Babs imagines that she can hear the relief in his voice. “I will certainly ask and ring you again if it is at all an issue. I cannot imagine that it would be, on a night like this one.”

“Thanks, Al. I’ll see you soon?”

Babs returns his farewell and hangs up, then joins the main comm line again. “Robin. You’ve got a transport job after this, Dr. T from the Cave to Gotham. I’m out of coffee, so you can make a stop for me, next. I have some cataloguing for this file against Hush you can help me with after that.”

“If it’s your coffee, I don’t understand why you wouldn’t simply prefer caffeine pills,” he shoots back. Babs is used to Robins giving her a hard time, and it settles her spirit a little to know he’s going to listen.

She oversees the rest of the information Batgirl sends her way, gives Nightwing a few other places to check even as she’s losing hope they’ll find Hush tonight, and by the time midnight rolls around she’s compiling a list of warehouses with potential room for medical equipment while Robin copies bullet schematics they’d found.

“It isn’t…” he pauses, scowling at the paper in his hand while she sips the fresh coffee. “I know it cannot be about….vengeance.”

“No, kiddo,” she agrees, a twist of regret at that idea in her own gut.

“I wish that it could be,” he says, slipping the papers into a green folder. “Not always, but I wish it right now.”

It ends on a down note, but it sounds to her like a question. There’s something he’s asking without asking, and she’s spent enough time tonight worried about Dick to hear it.

“I know,” she says. She thinks it would backfire to add that she’s glad he’s let her and Stephanie keep him working on indirectly related jobs. “Me, too.”

He glances over at her, at that admission. She can see so much of Bruce in him, but also Dick, somehow. Maybe it’s the way he raises an eyebrow, or cocks his head. Maybe it’s his long fingers holding the folder. He looks down and straightens a few papers before he replies with a small scoff.


Babs puts her own work on pause. She watches him move, limbs tight with tension, while he sorts a pile of papers that were already sorted; it now makes sense to her why he didn’t argue with her, or with Stephanie, about complying. He’s headstrong and skilled, but if he’s doubting or afraid of
himself…

Babs forgets sometimes what utter whiplash the teenage years were. She spends so much time so sure of herself when she’s right about things now, and bitterly rolling with the times that she’s wrong as an adult, while watching a series of teenagers be horrifically self-confident and determined, that it’s easy to forget how consuming that introspection and doubt can be when they do crop up at that age.

“No, Little D. It’s not. You’re worried. That’s human. It doesn’t make you evil.”

“I shouldn’t worry. Everyone says they’ll be fine. I know they’ll recover.”

“I think worry is a little more complicated than that, don’t you?” Babs asks. He snaps the folder shut and doesn’t answer. “And wanting someone who caused suffering to suffer is a pretty normal response. You just don’t have that luxury, with what we do.”

“Jason said something like that recently,” Damian says quietly.

“Then it’s not just me,” Babs says. “Is that why you didn’t mention Tim to Selina? You didn’t think anyone should be worried now?”

“Why would she care to know?” Damian says, with a sour twist of his mouth. “It was irrelevant. She cares about Father, not Tim.”

“I…you know what. I’ll leave that can of worms for later. I think we’re done. Why don’t you go home and check on your dad?”

“You can do that from here,” Damian says, but he’s motionless, like he’s considering it. “And I only have my permit.”

“I think you can handle driving yourself home,” Babs says, making herself sound casual. He was pushing boundaries and she knows she’s letting him, and she hopes it won’t come back to bite her later. “And wouldn’t you feel better if you checked on him and Tim?”

“Yes,” he says crisply.

“Then, go for it. And I’ll message you if Dick needs help. Alright?”

Damian nods and stands. He drops the folder on the desk and brushes his hands off on his jacket. “Very well.”

Babs watches him go, and then turns back to the monitor. There are still places to check, things to overlook, and this one thing slotted into place doesn’t solve everything. It makes her stress level slip down a notch, though, to have this managed, so she can manage other things. It doesn’t even feel overwhelming, to have things she needs to do. It makes her feel better to know she’s making a difference and helping.

“Nightwing, I’ve got a place in Bristol to check out next,” she activates the comm line. “A closed veterinary clinic, west of the Manor. I have no ground visuals.”

“Got it,” he says.

And they do.
The night seems to stretch on and on in a way that a normal night shift never does. In the diffusive panic that has permeated the hours after surgery, Dev has checked his mobile no less than three times to make sure he’s not misremembered his actual hospital schedule.

His mind is so shattered he’s sure he’s forgetting something.

Alfie’s left tea and a bowl of chilled quinoa salad—likely the next day’s original lunch menu—in the kitchen with a note that he finds when he climbs the stairs from the cave. Alfie’s upstairs with Jason and Wayne and Timothy, until after Dev eats. It’s not until he sees the food that he is aware of how sodding hungry he is, though if he’d thought of it a second before he would have said he wasn’t at all.

He spears crisp cucumber and tomato on the fork, chews only half-tasting the tang of vinegar and the salt of broth. The bowl is in the dishwasher when he hears steps in the hall, the clicking tap of sharp heels.

“Miss Kyle?” he guesses, drying his hands.

“You really have to stop calling me that,” Selina Kyle says, stepping into the room. “Really, Dev. Call me Lina if you have to.”

“Can’t. Leena’s my sister’s name. I’d get bloody confused.” He shrugs and hooks the towel over the oven door handle. “I’d rather gotten the sense that you liked the professional distance.”

“How are they?” Selina asks, tipping her head as if to point upstairs.

“Well enough that we’ve got a moment to listen to your heart,” Dev says resolutely. “Gordon doesn’t ring me over bloody nothing, whatever you’re about to say.”

Selina Kyle inhales through her nose and gives him a hard look, pressing her mouth shut after it was, indeed, parted to speak. It’s several seconds before she tries again. “It isn’t urgent.”

“I’ll tell Wayne, then,” Dev offers. He knows it might be fighting dirty but he’s beyond caring today. He’s well ready to fight as dirty as he needs. “Or, you could top off the whole sodding day by dropping dead from sudden cardiac arrest in front of him.”

She looks at him like he’s something gross, like a bag of rubbish splitting and spilling slimy, rotted food all over the garden path. It’s an expression so thoroughly disgusted that he worries he might have overshot his attempt at persuasion.

Dev’s read her medical records. Not all of them, but those files, and a selected pull of potentially relevant others that Wayne provided him with over a year ago. She and Wayne had a run in with an explosion, together, and Dev had treated her for smoke inhalation while otherwise blind to medical
He hadn’t needed to treat her again, but the possibility of a repeat was enough for Wayne to make sure a copy of her files had shown up in the medical unit downstairs. Dev had ended up going to him directly to demand to know if the thing was some sort of joke, or recording error.

The blue tinge around her mouth agrees with Wayne that it was not.

“You’ve another doctor, then, that you’ll see?” he asks, his tone still harsher than he means. “Dr. Thompkins hasn’t gone yet.”

“No,” Selina Kyle says. The disgust slowly fades and she sighs. “I don’t see anyone.”

“What?” Dev hears himself snap. He’d meant the question as a slight prod, to get her to accept some sort of check on the spot. He resists the urge to grab her by the elbow and force her into a chair, he’s so alarmed. “You don’t see anyone? Does Wayne know that?”

“If I have a problem, I’ll find someone,” Selina says coldly.

“He removed your sodding heart,” Dev exclaims. “I’d say that’s rather the definition of a problem.”

“You really don’t have to remind me,” Selina says, her arms crossed.

“Don’t I?” Dev is aware he’s bordering on shouting, but the shock has loosened his tongue. “I’d like to think I wouldn’t need to, but I think I ought. Having your heart taken out and put back in isn’t a bloody normal experience, in case you didn’t know, and it warrants follow-ups. Tell me you’ve sodding seen someone since.”

“I don’t think that it’s any of your business.” Selina says, a chilled warning in her tone. It would be more off-putting if she wasn’t also visibly trembling, her hands pale. One of her hands flies up to her chest and her eyes pinch shut and any semblance of a glacial resistance melts away.

“Shite,” Dev says, half to himself, flooded with remorse. He grabs a chair from the kitchen table and then does, after all, guide her to sit down. He’s crouching and checking her pulse, berating himself for shouting at a woman who’s already got enough reasons to feel panicked, when he adds, “I’m bloody sorry.”

The heartbeat under his fingers is erratic, but slow. He’s still bent over when Selina opens her eyes and catches his gaze. There’s trepidation in her expression.

“I’m being an idiot, aren’t I?” she asks, the words a little hoarse.

“If it’s any consolation, I’m bloody used to it, in this house,” Dev says, not bothering to keep the lingering frustration out of his voice. “But if you’re asking my professional opinion, you’ve been absolutely mental about this, then.”

“That’s your…professional opinion?” Selina asks. She winces. “I shouldn’t have come tonight.”

Dev stops counting heartbeats against the ticking of the clock and lets his hand fall down by his side. “Collapsing alone in a flat would be so much better, yeah. When Wayne is acting bloody idiotic, I shout at him. I’ve not singled you out because I don’t like you.”

“You have too much going on. And you’re right, I should see somebody.” Selina says, her voice low. It seems like it takes effort to speak loudly. “I can go to a hospital. It’s not like I’ve got
“And leave yourself out in the open?” Dev asks, raising an eyebrow. “Come on, then. I know you’re not that daft. Do I look like I’m overworked, standing around drinking a cuppa? There’s an ECG downstairs, and we’ve some amiodarone. I think it’s likely stress-induced arrhythmia, and aside from medication the best way to prevent it from worsening is to remove stress.”

Selina’s response to that is a dry, bitter laugh. “Alright. Come tell me when Tommy’s dead.”

Dev leans against the counter, deciding that the trip downstairs can wait a few moments unless she seems close to passing out. Not rushing her, or the demand for blood flow to limbs, is the better option.

“What do you suggest?” she asks, the cold edge returning to her voice.

“Where will you feel safe?” Dev asks bluntly. “I’ve a guess that it’s why you came here and not hopped on a plane to Rio de Janeiro.”

“Buenos Aires,” Selina corrects, her eyes closed again. “It would have been Buenos Aires.”

“I’d advise against flight,” Dev says. “And I’ll admit my professional advice is bloody compromised right now. If you leave, I’ve a man with two concussions upstairs that I’ll have to drug into oblivion and deal with the wrath of later just to keep him from losing his mind from worry.”

“Bruce knows I can–”

“With cardiac issues and a man who likes using you as a pawn on the loose, I don’t think he will. He’s already got a son that barely survived today. I don’t think he’s quite in the right place for rational decisions.”

“Shit,” Selina exhales. “How is Tim?”

“Alive,” Dev says tersely, trying not to think about the handful of hours in the early afternoon. He can’t afford introspection and self-doubt right now; Thompkins followed up and that will have to be solace enough. He feels the marble countertop against his hip and lets it anchor him. “He’s torn to shreds inside but he’ll pull through.”

“Fucking Hush,” Selina spits out, bending forward to put her face in her hands. She does it, somehow, without looking like she’s sagging— there’s an intentional and smooth curve of her back. Then she straightens and rubs lightly at her chest, right beneath the collar of her shirt. “This is fucking ridiculous. We don’t even know that he’ll come after anyone else, much less me. It’s pathetic.”

Dev crosses his arms and drags the toe of his trainer against the tile floor. He catches himself halfway through the second figure eight, can feel Alfie’s raised eyebrow in the back of his mind.

“I don’t…” he swallows, and glances at the ceiling. His life honestly will get more difficult if she leaves and she doesn’t deserve the fear and isolation, besides. She’s watching him carefully when he does return his gaze to her direction. “This house is a safe sort of place, yeah? It bloody feels it. You aren’t the only one who comes here for that. It’s not pathetic to need it.”

“Tommy broke in. Here,” Selina says flatly.

“You think he’ll manage it again, soon? When we’re all on our guard? He’s not killed Wayne or
“It shouldn’t feel safe,” Selina frowns.

“But it does,” Dev retorts, knowing from her posture she feels the same way. “Will you let me listen a bit to your heart and give you some medication? Then we can go up.”

“Yeah,” Selina says, standing slowly. “I hate feeling like this. Let’s get it over with.”

They’re on the lift when Dev offers his arm to lean on, and she shakes her head. A second later, she leans anyway.

“Tell me if you’re going to pass out, yeah?” Dev says. “It’s worse when I don’t get a warning.”

“Do they do that to you often?” Selina asks wryly.

“It’s bloody mental how often,” Dev says, as the lift doors slide open. The Cave is unusually quiet, unusually empty. They step out together and Dev pauses to grab wiring from a drawer before turning back to Selina, sitting on the edge of one of the gurneys. At some point, Alfie must have stripped them and put new sheets on them, because they’re neatly arranged and no longer flecked with blood or sweat.

Selina is quiet while he hooks the ECG up, ignoring the sternotomy scar tissue on her chest that’s stark cherry blossom pink against her tanned skin. Dev knows without scanning it that her sternum will have the hairline scar of a healed fracture, from where it was severed with a serrated saw. Cardiac surgery isn’t gentle when it’s necessary, and Dev has doubts that Tommy Elliot tried to be anything close to kind.

There is a moment, when the machine is beeping quietly and measuring electrical outputs, measuring possibly damaged tissue, that Dev has a surge of uncharacteristic but thorough hatred for another human. It seeps in like the day’s fog: silent, persistent, clouding.

What Tommy Elliot did to Selina Kyle, to Timothy, to Wayne, to others before them, is the ethical and moral and emotional opposite of the oath Dev lives by. The malice Dev has toward him in those seconds is so complete, so wholly comprising his thoughts and feelings, that distance is the only thing keeping him from plunging a scalpel into Tommy Elliot’s neck himself. In a flash of vivid imagination, he can see exactly how he’d do it; where he’d cut and how the blood would look on his hands and the pumping end of the sliced jugular.

He’s gone utterly still at the counter and it sours in his mind, replaced with a sense of repulsion, and he shakes it off like mentally wringing the blood off his fingers. It isn’t worth it, to even pretend he’s the sort of man that could live with himself after something like that. Perhaps, possibly, in a frantic moment of defense he would go that far, but not like this, not planned and plotted. It’s not even a thing Wayne or Timothy would thank him for doing.

Selina, he’s not as certain.

He studies the readout on the ECG.

“Well, am I going to live?” she asks, arching an eyebrow. “You got awfully quiet. It’s not bad news, is it?”

She has the hint of a forced smile, the cautious mask of someone preparing to be nonchalant about something horrific. He’s delivered news of malignant tumors to people with that mask, watched as their crafted response falls away into weeping in his office. Those are the people he leaves alone
for a moment, lets them reassemble their personas in his air conditioned office with the Wonder Woman throw pillows Timothy and Stephanie bought for his couch.

He’d been preparing to take them home, get them out of the sober environment his office needed to be, when a patient had reached out a hand and traced the twin Ws and looked up with a spark of hope in her face. False hope is something Dev is often reluctant to give anyone; fighting hope, however, is something he’s seen work beyond medical charting.

“You know why arrhythmia is associated with stress?” Dev asks, turning off the machine. He hands her an alcohol pad. “Go ahead and take those electrodes off, then. It’s a neurological issue. The right hemisphere of the brain works faster when stressed, but the commands for the heart don’t have a centralized location like most functions. The hemispheres are out of sync and the cardiac muscles get discordant signals.”

“Do you give a medical lecture to everyone you treat, or do I just look particularly stupid?”

Dev’s body stiffens and his hands fumble with the paper readout he’s folding. He’s used to talking while he works with the Wayne family, in a way he doesn’t to most patients; Wayne either knows already or wants to know, and the kids are the same way or stay calmer if he’s chatting. “I don’t think you’re…usually Wayne…”

“Dev,” Selina says. “Calm the fuck down. I’m giving you a hard time.”

“Bloody hell,” he mutters, spinning on the stool to face her. She’s amused, and looks it, and he scowls before relaxing. “It wasn’t a heart attack. Arrhythmia means pain, fatigue, shortness of breath. If it gets worse, you should say something, but I’ll give you an antiarrhythmic to help even it out. You really ought to see someone, in case you need long term medication management.”

“I’ll look into it,” she says, and he’d insist again except she doesn’t sound like she’s joking anymore.

“I’d offer,” he adds, and pauses. This is the sort of thing that would be worth diving into the research for. “No, I will offer. If you need someone you don’t have to look for, I can or I can find you a referral. My fee is simple.”

“Do you charge Bruce?” she asks, back to teasing.

“That is a complicated story,” he says. “And nearly got me sacked. But no, all I want is your help convincing Wayne to rest. Ever since he managed six bloody steps without falling over, he thinks he’s an hour or two away from being able to just get up.”

“I think I can afford that,” Selina says. “This is also a ruse to convince me to take it easy, isn’t it?”

“Do I look like a man capable of duplicitous action?” Dev asks, rummaging behind boxes of sealed bottles for the medication he needs.

“Hmm, not especially, but that very illegal pharmacy you’ve got in the cabinet says otherwise.” Selina accepts the blister packets of pills and the water bottle he hands her.

“I don’t think you understand the legal power I have as a physician,” Dev retorts. “I’m why this is the only part of the Cave that isn’t partially illegal.”

The comm buzzes from the monitor and their heads snap up in unison.

“Dev? You down there?” Jason’s voice carries over the speaker. “My dad says he’s nauseated.”
“I’ll be up in a moment, then. Keep him back from Timothy.” Dev looks at Selina after the comm goes silent. “Do you feel up to the trip upstairs or should I come back down and check on you soon?”

“I can make it,” Selina says, slipping off the table.

He doesn’t challenge her.

They ride the lift back up, Dev’s hand around a packet of painkillers in his pocket, and he goes slow enough to match her pace, but she doesn’t go very slowly. He doesn’t knock on the door to Timothy’s room. Jason is with Wayne, alone, so Dev surmises they must have just missed Dr. Thompkins leaving or preparing to leave.

Wayne is sitting in a chair with his head tipped back, shallow breath whistling through his teeth. He’s motionless and pale and does look like he’s on the verge of being sick; Jason is talking quietly to him, and lights up a little when he sees Selina.

“Hey, Selina’s here.”

“Hnn,” is all Wayne says in acknowledgment. He does crack one eye open to look, but it immediately snaps it shut again and the movement is followed by a soft groan.

“Holy shit, Bruce,” Selina says, her attention flickering from Wayne to Timothy and then back. She crouches down next to the chair and brushes Wayne’s hair off his forehead; Dev goes to check over Timothy. He can hear Jason and Selina talking quietly in the background but he doesn’t try too hard to make out what they’re saying.

Once he’s quite certain that Timothy hasn’t spiked any fevers or developed early signs of infection around the various sutures, he interrupts them.

“Wayne, I need to look at you before I send you back to bed.”

“I’m staying right here,” Wayne says, a surprisingly coherent statement compared to how he looks. “I can sleep in the chair.”

“Bruce,” Selina says firmly. “You’re going to bed. Jason can stay with Tim, since I’m here to keep an eye on you.”

“And you can keep an eye on her in return,” Dev says, ignoring the death glare she shoots his way. Wayne’s eyes do open at that, and he gives Selina a once over before asking. He’s still looking at her when he speaks.

“What happened?”

“It’s nothing–” Selina starts.

“Stress-induced cardiac arrhythmia,” Dev says. “So we’ll give you both a comm and if something gets bloody worse, one of you can hit a button.”

“This is a fucking nightmare,” Jason mutters into his hands. “Oh my god, this is a total disaster. Where did Al go? One of us should be in there in case you both pass out at the same time.”

“I’ll sit with Timothy for a bit,” Dev says. “And I’ll check on them soon.”

Dev can see it in Wayne’s face, how torn he is. He tears the painkiller packet open. “Do you think
“you can keep these down? You’re due for another dose and it ought to take the edge off. I promise I won’t leave Timothy.”

He doesn’t know if Wayne will keep fighting them, their combined efforts, until he reaches a hand for the pills. “Fine,” he mutters, sounding displeased. “I will rest to make sure Selina does.”

“Dad,” Jason says suddenly, leaning forward. “Do you remember that Knights game? The one where I was thirteen? Perano caught that fly everyone thought would be a homer, and the Knights got three outs almost before anyone could blink. It was art in motion. I watch that clip again sometimes. I swear I spent a month convinced Clark had helped them somehow, because of that stupid bet you had.”

“He did help them,” Wayne grumbles. “Still won’t admit it.”

“It was fricking beautiful, and he didn’t,” Jason retorts. “It was everybody in the right place at the right time, doing exactly what they were supposed to do. They were like an oiled machine.”

“Jay, my head hurts.”

Dev thinks ‘hurts’ is probably a massive understatement, but he doesn’t correct him.

Jason puts a hand on Wayne’s shoulder. “The right place and time for you, right now, is rest. In bed. Not waiting for someone to fall asleep so you can sneak off and puke in a dumpster on your way to find Tommy, or collapse in here where Tim’s trying to heal. I can feel you trying to convince yourself to get up.”

“Hnn,” Wayne says, and Dev decides enough is enough. He’d threaten outright sedation if it weren’t for the concussion, but there are other things he could use. Selina beats him to it.

“Bruce,” she says, a hand on his arm. “Tim’s just like you. He’s going to try to follow you if he wakes up and finds out you went out in bad shape. It doesn’t matter how far he’ll get, it matters that he’d try. I know I already want to. Let’s be smart, and rest. Don’t let Tommy win this one by sending us all running in different directions.”

“I already said fine,” he mumbles irritably. “Fine. Are you alright?”

“Don’t worry about me,” Selina says. “I’m just mad at Hush.”

“You ought to worry about her, just not now,” Dev jumps in again, and Selina shoots him another glare.

Dev looks over at Timothy, just in time to see his eyes flutter open.

“Timothy,” he says, there in an instant. He hears shuffling movement behind him but he’s focused on gauging Timothy’s responsiveness. It’s not the first time he’s woken up since they found him on the study floor-- a memory Dev has a sudden flash of now-- but he’s been progressively more lucid each time since then.

“Dev,” Timothy croaks. “Where’s…is Bruce…”

“Right here, Tim,” Bruce says, his voice firm even if it’s soft and strained.


“How do you feel, Timothy?” Dev asks, to measure how well medication is working and how
awake he really is.

“Can I opt out,” Timothy mutters. “Of…this. Where is the escape key.”


“Bruce,” Timothy says. “Did you…is…getting shot…how.”

He’s already falling back asleep, so Dev turns and makes a decision.

“Jason. Do you know if Steph changed the bedding?”

“Pretty sure,” Jason says.

“We ought to have done this from the start. Would you tell Alfie we need more ice packs? Wayne, get in the bed before you make me embarrass myself trying to wrestle you there. Selina, bed or chair, is really up to you. We can fetch a cot if you like. This room has temporary status as a hospital ward, so I’m not running about to keep watch over all of you.”

He knows Wayne well enough to see his relief at this, at no longer having to choose between the two situations. Dev has a pang of self-reproach for putting him in that position at all.

“Ready?” Jason says, an arm around Wayne’s shoulders. “Up on three. And don’t tell me you don’t need the help.”

“I don’t,” Wayne grumbles anyway, but the shade his face turns when he stands belies this.

Fifteen minutes later, Dev is sitting on the floor outside the room with his back against the wall, listening for sounds of alarm and staring at the plush carpet with an aimless focus.

A tea cup materializes in front of him and he follows the arm holding it out all the way up to Alfie’s face, looking old and tired.

“You ought to sleep,” Dev says, taking the tea. He has no idea what time it is, but he knows it’s late. Or early. He can hear Alfie shouting for him, hours ago.

“Mm,” Alfie replies. “And you ought to use a chair, and not sit on the floor like a child.”

“Sod off,” Dev says, rubbing his face. He sips the tea and flexes his tense hands around the warm cup. “I’m a grown man.”

“I know,” Alfie says, sounding serious. He sighs. “I know.”

“They’ll be alright,” Dev offers, looking up again. He climbs to his feet, balancing the cup. “I wouldn’t lie to you. Check in on them a moment and we’ll go sit somewhere, then. You’ve had a bloody awful day, too, you know. Stop telling yourself you ought to be fine because they feel worse.”

There’s a discerning glint in Alfie’s eye, something keenly sharp but not cutting. It smooths some of the age out of his face, even while it creases lines in the corners of his mouth. “You’re too shrewd by half, Kiran.”

“Now the exhaustion’s gone to your head,” Dev says. The tea—a smooth oolong—swirls in his mouth and wakes him up, makes him feel alert again. He doesn’t know if that’s a good or bad thing right now. “Have you eaten anything? I know you’ve been about taking care of everyone else, including me, and thanks for dinner if I haven’t said it yet.”
“I could say the same of you,” Alfie says, a little peevishly. “I’ve not eaten. I suppose I ought. I’ve cleaned the study…”

He stops, letting the sentence fade away unfinished, and Dev swallows and tries not to think of kneeling on the blood-soaked rugs. His trousers from earlier, the knees drenched and stiff with drying blood, are in a rubbish bin in the Cave. Blood, as a rule, doesn’t bother him, but in this case it’s not the blood so much as where the blood should have been instead.

“That’s settled, then,” Dev says gently, when Alfie faces Timothy’s door without opening it, his hand on the knob. “I’ll find chairs like a proper adult and you can do a crossword puzzle while I forget all the English I’ve ever known, so I’m of no help.”

“Thank you, Kiran,” Alfie says, and Dev doesn’t think he’s talking about the chairs or the company or the self-deprecation concerning crossword puzzles. “If you hadn’t been in the house today…”

“You’d have managed. And I was. So let’s not look at the other ways it could have gone,” Dev says, and it is a bit pleading because the leap from *Timothy’s fine to Timothy very nearly wasn’t at all* is a very short one right now.

“Quite right,” Alfie says, looking up with a small and resolute smile. “A wind down hour, Kiran, and then we both sleep. Morning will come as early as she ever does.”

“Tell her to bloody fuck off,” Dev grumbles, finishing the tea.

It wouldn’t really be a day without one of Alfie’s thoroughly displeased scolding frowns, and something about the absolute normalcy of it depressurizes the dense tension in Dev’s rib cage. He laughs, and feels a little bit of the day’s horror slip away from them.

Alfie flicks his ear but he looks less troubled, too.

Chapter End Notes

**comic book medicine! :-D**

also, for anyone interested in medical details:
https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4662914/
The dishwasher clicks shut when Jason pushes it closed, and the machine hums after he pushes the normal cycle button. He dries his hands on a nearby white and blue striped towel and is hanging it on a hook when Alfred walks into the kitchen.

“Oh,” he says, looking around. His eyes widen for only a moment, then that gaze turns sharp on Jason.

“I don’t know how to tell you this, Al, but you helped raise a bunch of slobs,” Jason says, with a grin. “They all got themselves post-patrol breakfast and left a disaster.”

“Hm,” Alfred says, raising an eyebrow just slightly.

Jason shrugs and holds his hands up. “Alright, fine. I’m not that much of a hero. They all put the dishes in the drawer but didn’t rinse ’em enough. I just spot cleaned.”

“Nevertheless,” Alfred says, getting close enough to Jason to gently pat his shoulder, “thank you very much, my boy.”

Jason is not a fan of how much older Alfred has been looking the past few days since Tim was shot and Bruce was attacked, so it’s reassuring to see some of that smoothed now with rest and the two on the mend.

“I finished off the leftover chicken cacciatore,” Jason says, leaning on a counter now. Alfred’s making coffee, which means Bruce is probably up and asking, since Jason knows for a fact everyone else in the house is asleep or won’t drink it (or in Tim’s case, wants to and isn’t allowed, despite his grumbling and negotiating).

“For breakfast?” Alfred asks, sounding vaguely scandalized. “I never should have agreed to this… scavengers menu plan. The erosion of order is the downfall of—”

“—civilization, I know, I know,” Jason finishes, with a cocky grin at the warning glare he gets for interrupting. “Hey. We’re fed and alive. Did you sleep well?”

“As well as can be expected in this house,” Alfred says ruefully. “Despite your assurances, I think it best we return to a regular schedule as soon as possible. I trust you’ll leave me to do the looking after, then.”

“Dad was not kidding when he said you were worse than him about being sent to bed,” Jason says, dodging the quick swat from a kitchen towel. Alfred’s posture never changed and his hands moved so quickly Jason almost didn’t see the snap against his leg coming. He side-steps along the counter, laughing, and adding, “Not that you were sent! God. All I said last night was that you looked tired.”
“‘Exhausted’ was the word you used, you’ll remember,” Alfred says. “You engineered the moment to gain the most possible attention from your father and Kiran.”

Jason had, actually, and now he feels a touch of chagrin. “I did, and I’m not sorry. But I’m sorry if I embarrassed you.”

That point he actually means, and he falls silent while watching Alfred’s back. There’s the rise and tipping of a coffee scoop full of beans.

“It’s nothing,” Alfred says, with a forced lightness that makes Jason’s stomach clench in genuine regret—or guilt, maybe. Then Alfred turns, and his face is as reserved as ever but somehow warm and kind. Jason doesn’t know exactly how he can tell, only that he can. “I ought to thank you though, and I will. My vanity is a small price to pay for a good night’s rest, and being the beneficiary of your kindness.”

Jason’s chest swells so much with relief and pride that he can’t think of any other way out than brushing it off. He opens his mouth to do just that—a flashy joke, a show of attitude, a smart remark—and ends up ducking his head with a red flush rising on his cheeks.

Fortunately, or maybe intentionally, Alfred has gone back to starting the coffee and isn’t paying attention. Jason decides on a whim to have the discussion he’s been putting off for days. It’s mostly that they’ve been so busy he hasn’t had a chance to talk to Alfred alone, not really.

“So,” Jason says, crossing his arms. He leans against the counter again. “I, uh. I’m…”

He doesn’t know why it’s so hard to talk.

It’s like talking to Bruce all over again. He should have told Alfred before, instead of in this mess where he should be helping. It’s been all hands on deck except he’s not been a set of those hands. He swallows, considers dismissing it as nothing and seeing if Alfred lets him leave the kitchen without digging, and then steels himself a final time.

“I’m quitting,” he says, staring at kitchen tile. He hastens to add, “Red Hood. Masks. I’m, uh, I’m retiring, I guess you could call it instead.”

“This is why you’ve not gone out with the others?” Alfred asks, while putting thick slices of bread into the toaster. He presses them down and turns to face Jason, eyes searching Jason’s face as if hunting for something particular there.

“Yeah,” Jason says, letting himself be examined. He nods. “Yeah, I’m…I’m done. I have other stuff I want to do and it’s just, it’s time. I feel so shitty about the timing, but if I keep making excuses I know I’ll drag it out and I don’t—”

He stops because Alfred’s put a hand up for pause. The older man’s eyes are closed, but he doesn’t look ill or upset.

“A moment, if you will, please,” Alfred says. “I’d like a moment to enjoy this brief dalliance with wisdom. They are so rare in this house.”

A weight flies off of Jason’s back and he smiles.

“Take all the time you want,” he says. “I’m not gonna lie, I’m looking forward to being the favorite for a while. It’s been too long since someone upstaged Cass. Dad said I might even get a cake out of the deal, and if so, I want to put in a request for carrot.”
Alfred’s eyes fly open at that and his frown is thoughtful, appraising, and then he shakes his head. “Oh, no, Master Jason. This calls for more than cake.”

Before Jason can protest or joke, Alfred has pulled a slim phone from an inner pocket of his jacket and is holding up a finger for silence. Jason can hear the faint ringing and then the murmur of an answer, but not the actual words.


The call is ended and the phone returned to the pocket before Jason can convince his jaw to stop hanging.

“Did you…”

“We have reservations at La Rose Bleue for Thursday at eight. I hope the suit you had fitted for the Museum Fundraiser is still unbloodied and not torn?”

“…call me your grandson?” Jason finishes, blinking. “And geez louise, Al, how often does he do that to you? To suits?”

“Too often,” Alfred says shortly. “And he isn’t the only one. I think you’ve all managed it at least once.”

“Well, my suit is fine,” Jason says. “But, are you sure? It’s like…I mean, we could go somewhere less…that.”

“Utter nonsense,” Alfred says, turning to pluck the browned bread out of the toaster. The fridge pushes a wave of chilled air across the room when he opens it to retrieve a glass jar of elderberry jam. “Though I may have come to see much value in what this family does, this is certainly an occasion worth celebrating properly. What plans do you have in mind, for your now-abundance of free time, with retirement and the end of school, if I may ask?”

Jason watches the dark purple jam scrape across the bread under the silver butter knife in Alfred’s hand, and he shoves his hands in his pockets. The ceiling here is smooth, inset with lights but paneled with some non-rusting ceiling plate designed to resist moisture and heat. He studies the white scalloped designs.

“Well,” he says. “I have some job options. Gotham schools, mostly. But mainly I’ve been thinking—well, I missed some calls.”

“Calls?” Alfred echoes, when Jason’s pause stretches out.

“When Ivy and Scarecrow got out,” Jason specifies. He opens the fridge and pulls out the carton of eggs to go with the pan Alfred set on the stove. “I forgot my phone at my place. I missed some calls from a case worker looking for respite housing for like, half a dozen kids.”

“I see,” Alfred says neutrally.

“I couldn’t stop thinking about it,” Jason says, finding it easier to let the words pour out of him now that he’s started. It feels urgent to make sure Alfred understands, even if he doesn’t approve. “I want to make sure I don’t miss those calls next time. I want to work in the schools, I loved student teaching, but more than that I want to make sure I’m catching the kids that don’t have anyone else. I know what that’s like, to be out there all alone and not trust the system.”
Jason’s voice wavers without his permission, catching him off guard, and he goes back to looking at the ceiling tiles while blinking away tears. When he drops his chin, he finds Alfred half-turned with a spatula in his hand, watching him.

“I know,” he says gently.

Jason scrubs his eyes with the heels of his calloused hands. He takes a deep breath.

“I want to be the person that proves them wrong. I want to give those kids somewhere safe, even if it’s just for a few nights. Maybe even younger kids, and keep them from feeling like they ever have to run to begin with. I know I’ll be on my own and I know I probably have no idea what I’m doing but I have to try, Al. I have to try something that isn’t me just destroying shit all the time. I’m so fucking tired of living like that, and I don’t know how to turn it off—I can’t be like Dad, and balance the violence and the detective work. Maybe I could have once, but I’m not that kid anymore.”

Alfred doesn’t criticize the swearing, not even with a warning look or raised eyebrow. The only sound in the room is the sizzle of eggs frying in the pan.

The place where he mistepped is entirely unclear to Jason. Whatever reaction he was anticipating, this isn’t it— he realizes now that out of all of them, he expected that Alfred would be the easy sell. His shoulders hunch forward. Maybe it’s the timing.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have…there’s a lot going on right now. This could have waited until—”

“You’re wrong. You are so very much like him,” Alfred says softly, stopping Jason mid-sentence.

“What?” Jason’s heart skips a beat.

“When Master Bruce brought Master Richard home, that is what he said: ‘I know what it’s like.’ You and he have such compassionate, selfless spirits.”

Alfred twists the knob to turn the burner off, and the gas flame extinguishes beneath the pan. He slides the eggs to the plate with the toast and moves to pour a cup of coffee. Jason is mute while Alfred arranges it all on a tray and then leaves it on the counter.

“Not everyone would revisit their darkest moments to help others,” Alfred says, patting Jason’s cheek. “You are an honorable man, Master Jason. You ring me the instant you require any kind of assistance. Understood?”


“Of course,” Alfred consents, returning the brief embrace. Jason pulls back the same moment Alfred does, and Jason sniffs, trying to pull himself together.

“All this disaster has turned you soft,” Jason teases, to lighten the room.

“I’ve found that in such situations, one often thinks of things they ought to say and frequently put off. The sentiment is long overdue,” Alfred says, picking up the tray. He seems determined to not let Jason blow it off with a joke. “Would you mind taking this up to your father? I must go find your sister, wherever she’s gotten herself to.”

“I was going up anyway,” Jason agrees, taking the tray. “Good luck with Cass. Try the roof.”
“It is always the damned roof,” Alfred mutters. “If not downstairs.”

Jason leaves the kitchen, laughing, with the tray in hand and climbs the stairs. He checks Bruce’s room first and finds Selina asleep there; he slips out as quietly as he can, retreating while she’s still a lump under blankets across the room.

Tim’s room is the next most likely place. Bruce has spent most of his time there the past three days, asleep or awake. It stirs a discordant mix of emotions in Jason, a kind of fondness mixed with irritation and his own memories of a hazy period after Zsasz’ attack where he’d drift in and out of consciousness to find Bruce almost always there.

His arms twinge in phantom pain. The surgical scar from the tendon repair is the most recent of those wounds, but they’re all long-healed. It’s hard to believe it’s been almost three years, and at the same time, it feels like a lifetime ago—the other side of college, the other side of a time when the people Bruce surrounded himself with stopped feeling like adjacent colleagues and began feeling like Jason’s own family.

He nudges the door open with his foot and finds the room a low-volume hive of people. Bruce has glasses perched on the end of his nose and he’s examining the innards of some electronic device—assessment, Jason thinks, and not repair. There’s only a small screwdriver perched on Bruce’s knee.

Conner Kent is in a chair in the corner, by one of the big windows. He has a laptop open, noise-cancelling headphones cocked sideways on his head covering one ear and leaving the other free. His worn bag, covered with iron on patches, leans against the legs of the chair.

Just from spending time with him whenever Conner came back home to the Kent farm while Jason was staying there, Jason can guess he’s editing music.

“—usually something I draw any attention to, if I can at all sodding help it,” Dev is saying in a loud whisper to Bruce, from where he’s swapping IV bags, “but my birthday’s coming up, and I am formally requesting that the ballroom be converted into an actual hospital ward. Rows of beds, centralized equipment, the bloody works.”

“For your birthday,” Bruce repeats dryly.

“I’m well ready to sacrifice for the greater good,” Dev says.

Jason puts the tray down on the desk near Bruce.

“Do you plan on fielding many more emergencies of this scale,” Bruce asks, with that flat inflection he likes to use.

“Oh, bloody hell, could I plan them? It’d be a sodding lot more convenient.”

That gets a huff of a laugh out of Bruce, who sets the device and casing and screwdriver all on the desk in a neat line and takes the coffee. He’s still moving stiffly, and slowly, and Jason knows an attempt to go downstairs on his own the other day turned into a night of puking meds and dinner alike. It’s been getting harder to find anything that works to mitigate pain without knocking him out completely, and Bruce has been just as reluctant as ever—maybe more—to use anything that strong.

“Eat, you ass,” Jason says, nudging the tray closer. “Alfred made that for you.”

“Alfred makes all my food,” Bruce says, unimpressed.
“You know, most people would be embarrassed to admit something like that,” Jason says.

“Hnn,” is all Bruce says.

Across the room, Conner looks up from his laptop screen with an acidic, sharp grin. For someone who is the spitting image of Clark, Conner always manages to look so very unlike him. He has a brash, sardonic nature that spills over into his mannerisms and expressions, a thing that Jason understands used to be recklessness. Age has honed it into a razor-sharp sense of humor and action — Jason gets along fairly well with him, but spending too much time with him makes Jason uneasy, like he’s flirting with a kind of seductive danger it would be all too easy to spur on in Conner and himself.

When he started getting to know Conner better, it confused him that he was so close to cool, rational Tim. It only took a few weeks to see that it’s because of Tim’s level head. They temper each other, mirror each other, where someone who matched Conner would ignite combustible, toxic energy. Jason’s okay with Superboy on their side, would trust him in a fight, but he’s otherwise okay to leave the closer friendship to Tim, and Cass when she’s in the mood.

“I’ve got rounds at hospital,” Dev says, scribbling something in black ink on the hanging IV bag. He snaps the cap on the marker. “Ring if there’s a problem.”

“Cheerio,” says Jason, in a mocking accent.

“Sod off,” Dev replies with equal cheer.

Jason claims one of Tim’s ridiculous bean bag chairs. They’re sloppy, suede things that are more comfortable than they should be and more expensive than Jason wants to think about. For a short while, he just closes his eyes and listens to the drip of Tim’s meds and fluids, the occasional click of Conner’s keyboard, the stillness of the house.

Three days and no sign of Hush means that Dick finally collapsed in his old room to sleep until dark, so frustrated he was snapping at everyone and then ignoring them completely until he vanished behind the door. Jason had gone through an exercise in colossal self control to keep himself from mentioning how much a pissed off Dick reminded him of a certain Batman.

He had managed to stop himself because he’s pretty sure Dick is mad at him and wouldn’t have hesitated to throw that into any retort. Jason hopes he’s matured enough to not throw rocks at wasp’s nests when it involves people he actually cares about.

Stephanie tapped out right along with Dick. Jason isn’t sure that either of them had slept more than a few hours a night the past few days, but that’s par for the course for all of them aside from those actively injured. She’s somewhere in the Manor, possibly Cass’ room. He wonders if she remembers that graduation is in two days and if he should remind her or not.

As one of the only adults awake that morning, Jason made the executive decision to send Damian to the Kent farm when Damian insisted on school. The younger boy hadn’t demanded or ordered; he’d come downstairs in his uniform, with his school bag, and sat stiffly at the table until Jason asked him what he was doing.

Jason doesn’t think Damian cares about school as much as he had just wanted to get out of the house. Conner Kent had made quick work of a trip to the farm, and Jason is pretty sure they argued about a video game the entire way.

He’s pulled out of his light doze by a rustle of sheets and Tim’s raspy voice.
“Kon. Can you please go get me something that isn’t jello or broth. I don’t care if it’s a milkshake or Arizona watermelon tea.”

“Dude,” Conner says, the deep timbre full of amusement, “your dad’s like, right there.”

“Fudge,” Tim says, fierce and quiet. His voice goes up an octave in pitch when he raises it. “Bruce?”

“No, Tim. No milkshakes. Sorry, kiddo.” Bruce does sound sorry, that raw edge he always has when any of them are hurt. Jason’s learned it takes days to go away, one of the few ways Bruce now is unchanged from the Bruce he knew at thirteen.

“Tea?” Tim says hopefully. “I’m sick of ice chips and the taste of jello. I hate broth.”

“Wow, you are a whiner,” Jason drawls from the beanbag chair. “I didn’t believe it until just now.”

He really didn’t. Tim has gone the past few days in what is, Jason knows from some experience, tremendous amounts of pain, most of it without complaint or even sound at all.

“I’ll ask Dev about tea and coffee tonight,” Bruce promises.

“He’s a sadist,” Tim complains. “He’s lording his control of my caffeine consumption over me.”

“Because you’ve got a problem,” Conner says, with a chuckle that’s not more than a coughing rumble in his chest. “Bro, I will get you whatever you want the second you are allowed to have it. I swear.”

“Fine,” Tim hisses, shifting on the bed. “I’m just going back to sleep then.”

A movement across the room catches Jason’s attention and he finds Conner frowning at Tim with undisguised concern, a definite change from minutes before. Tension rolls into tight coils inside Jason’s shoulders and he sits a little straighter on the slouchy chair.

“Bruce,” Tim says, thin as tissue paper. Jason can see him licking his lips. “What, uh…the thing…from Jakarta. You told me. Is it, does it work…for…”

Before Jason can pull himself out of the beanbag chair, Bruce is on his feet. Slow for Bruce isn’t slow for most people, and he’s by Tim’s side just as Jason is shaking the pins and needles out of his ankle.

Conner’s jaw is set so tight Jason can see it from here, and he expects him to leave, but he merely pulls the headphones over both ears while Bruce sits cross legged by Tim’s bed, his spine ramrod straight.

The toast and eggs have grown completely cold by the time Bruce pulls himself back to his feet with a small groan and shuffles back to the chair he’d left behind.

“What do you need?” Jason asks, hand at the lever to adjust the recline. “Ice? Meds?”

Bruce shakes his head. Tim is asleep again, and Conner adjusts the headphones to free one ear. Jason thinks it must be psychological or performative, since there’s no way they actually block noise for Conner.

“Don’t let me keep you stuck here all day,” Bruce says to Jason, when Jason offers a folded blanket from the desk surface.
“Stuck?” Jason scoffs. “With you? How do you know I’m not just hiding from Dickie?”

“Do you have a reason to hide from Dick?” Bruce asks.

“He’s, uh, a bit pissed at me,” Jason says, sinking back into the beanbag chair.

“Hnn,” Bruce says. “You haven’t told him.”

“I didn’t go out, and he doesn’t know why.”

“Did you want to go out?” Bruce asks, one of those leading questions. He does that sometimes, guides someone to realize something while gathering information himself. There’s nothing here that Jason needs to be led to realize, though. He already knows.

“Dad,” Jason says, sitting forward on the chair, elbows on his knees. “If I go after Tommy Elliot and catch him, I would put a bullet in his skull with his own gun.”

The small wrinkles at the corners of Bruce’s eyes deepen and his lips thin into a line. It’s almost thoughtful, but Jason thinks he can read upset there. There’s something distressed in it, and Jason is confused. He had been braced for anger and was ready to field it. This isn’t Bruce being angry.

“Has it been that hard for you?” Bruce asks, rough with concern.

“No,” Jason says firmly, choosing to ignore the way Conner stills across the room. “I’m just telling you, it wouldn’t be hard if I found Tommy. It would just happen that way. Staying here is me choosing not to do that.”

“Hn,” Bruce says, clearly torn. The blanket Jason gave him is only halfway unfolded, and Jason stands and takes it back and shakes it out and returns it. Bruce murmurs something that might be a syllable of thanks, and then puts a hand on Jason’s wrist. “The choice is what matters.”

“I know that,” Jason says, his chest tight anyway. He isn’t sure what to do with himself now that the anger he was braced for isn’t there. “You taught me that.”

“You might not believe this, but sometimes I’m not sure any of you listen to me,” Bruce says.

“Mm, we don’t,” Jason says. “Alfred’s just got fricking good blackmail material on all of us to make us pretend.”

“Jay. Have I told you you’re a brat.”

Jason grins when Bruce laughs, and then winces. The volatile energy in the air disperses, as if carried away by a strong, warm wind.

“Don’t make me laugh,” Bruce warns, reaching behind him for the device he’d set aside earlier.

“You could sleep,” Jason offers, while Bruce pokes at some tiny wires with the tip of the screwdriver. “You didn’t sleep much last night.”

“I’m fine,” Bruce says, distracted in an intentional way. He isn’t talking about it and doesn’t want to. Jason feels like he’s skirted enough topics that are argument material today that he’s going to leave this one alone.

A buzzing sound hums against the desk and Jason reaches back to grab Bruce’s phone before
Bruce can stretch that far.

“It’s Babs,” Jason says, answering while Bruce has his hand held out. He twists to keep the phone away. “Hiya, Ginger. I’m screening Dad’s calls to keep him from work. What’s up?”

“Jason, put him on right now,” Babs says, utterly serious.

Jason gives Bruce the phone. He’s close enough that he can hear most of what Babs is saying, anyway.

“I can’t get in touch with Dick,” Babs tells Bruce. “Tommy Elliot just used your passport as ID at a resort called The Essex in Burlington,Vermont. He’s either sloppy because he got a good lead or he’s flaunting it and about to run your name into the mud. He could be into Canada by the time we get there, if he doesn’t just assault someone publicly to get you arrested in the confusion. Who do you want me to send? Jason might need to wake up Dick.”

There’s a faint whoosh of curtain and Jason looks up.

Conner Kent is gone, his laptop and headphones left behind on the chair.

“Superboy went after him,” Bruce tells Babs.

“Shit,” Babs says. “Will he be okay? I mean, I don’t particularly care if he incinerates him right now, but I’m an outlier. And don’t you dare tell me I don’t mean that. I can tell myself that later, thanks.”

Bruce sighs, a short and brief sound of frustration. “Kon will keep his head. He knows how important it is.”

“I’ve got an incoming call,” Babs says. “Call you back.”

She hangs up and Bruce stares at the phone, then at Tim, breathing evenly in the bed. Jason is on his feet, pacing and restless with energy.

Jason links his arms behind his head. “You’re sure Conner won’t—”

“He won’t.”

“Even if Tim is—”

“He won’t,” Bruce says.

“But because Tim—”

“He won’t,” Bruce says, with hard flint in the consonants. “Conner might not work as hard as Clark to hide how dangerous he is, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t follow a code. Do you honestly think I’d let him in the house if I doubted that?”

“You let me in the house,” Jason snaps.

“That’s different,” Bruce says, standing. He claps a hand on Jason’s shoulder while passing him, and then goes to stare out the open window. He doesn’t close it.

Jason isn’t sure how it’s different but he doesn’t press it right now. His hands knot into fists while he waits.
“Should I go wake up Dick?” he asks.

The phone buzzes and Bruce answers it before the first ring finishes.

“Barbara?”

He’s too far away this time for Jason to hear her. Jason paces some more, and after a minute Bruce hangs up the phone.

Bruce turns from the window, moving stiffly and slowly still, and nods.

“Wake Dick. He’ll want to know. Conner found him and is taking him to Belle Reve. Barbara is calling in a favor Waller owes her.”

“Why the hell does Waller owe Babs a favor?” Jason demands.

“I don’t know and I don’t really want to,” Bruce says. Jason thinks he’s lying or will change his mind later, but he also doesn’t care right now if that means Tommy is locked up and far away. Bruce tucks the phone in the pocket of his sweats. “I’m going to tell Selina.”

“I’ll stay with Tim,” Jason decides. “Dick can wait.”

Bruce nods but doesn’t leave the room. He’s staring at Tim again. The fabric of Bruce’s tee wrinkles under Jason’s hand when he grips Bruce’s shoulder.

“Dad? You okay?”

“I should have stopped him,” Bruce says, voice hollow. “In Arkham. This was my mess to clean up.”

“It was our mess,” Jason corrects. “That’s why we’re here. To take care of things together. He hurt you, too, if you didn’t notice, not just Tim. Tommy Elliot made that choice. If you won’t take credit when we make the right choices, don’t take credit for other people’s bad ones.”

“How’d you get so smart.” Bruce finally pulls his gaze away from Tim’s pale form, and looks thoughtfully at Jason.

“College,” Jason says. “Maybe if any of your other slacker kids had bothered to fucking go…”

Bruce cracks just the hint of a smile, and ruffles Jason’s hair, scrubbing his fingers there with enough force to make Jason duck.

“Graduation is Saturday,” Jason says. “If you don’t come I’m streaking on the stage.”

“I thought I told you not to make me laugh,” Bruce says, grimacing after a rough noise escapes his throat. “Of course I’m coming.”

“It’s over,” Jason adds, when Bruce is by the door. “He’s in custody, bullet production shut down. It’s over.”

“Hnn,” Bruce says, like he wants to disagree. He doesn’t, though, and when he’s gone, Jason goes to the side of the bed and sits on the chair there.

The Ballroom

Chapter Notes

I'm baaaaaaaaack. Long chapter as a gift for your patience, for which I also thank you profusely.

The quiet argument pauses when Stephanie pushes the door open and staggers in, straps digging into her shoulders and fingers. She drops the half dozen plastic bags onto the middle of the floor and slides the two totes onto the rug with them.

“…he did not play it himself,” Tim says, groggily, picking up where they’d left off.

“I’m telling you, he fucking did,” Conner says with a coarse laugh and a gesture of helplessness. “Want do you need as proof?”

“What are you doing?” Tim asks Stephanie, turning his head. He’s lying on the bed, propped at a gradual angle, and he can’t quite see the pile on the floor.

“We’re having a decorating party and keeping you company,” Stephanie says, pulling her hair up into a ponytail. The last thing she needs is glitter in her hair.

“We?” Tim echoes.

“Decorating?” Conner asks, suspiciously.

“Graduation caps,” Jason says, coming in behind Stephanie with one cap in each hand.

“Why do I need company?” Tim asks, his voice raspy. “I’ve got Kon.”

“The fact that you think Conner is good company is exactly why you need us,” Stephanie says sweetly, ignoring Conner childishly sticking his tongue out at her. “Besides, are you really telling me you’d rather not have all of us around?”

She meets Tim’s eyes then, her own gaze more piercing than she intended-- sharpened by exhaustion-- and takes in the bruises splayed under his eyes like inverted sun rays. They’re stark against his ashen skin and there’s a soft relief in the ways the creases around them smooth out. Apparently, her words hit home as more than the half-joke she’d meant for them to be. It almost annoys her, how well she can read him, how well she knows him even now after all these years.

Stephanie’s stomach feels tight and sour at the thought that she’d nearly lost him. She knows she’d survive, because that’s what she does. That’s what they all do. But this moment passing between them, whatever it is, feels so important and precious. He seems so important and precious, with his stupid messy hair that’s always too long and the crows feet burrowed near his eyes that make him look a decade older than he is. Whatever they were to each other at one point doesn’t matter much now, to what they are now. It’s sort of a cliche, and she knows it and that also annoys her a little, but he’s less an ex-boyfriend and more like a best friend and a brother rolled into one.

“No, it’s fine,” Tim says faintly, weirdly limp against the bed. He’s usually so tense, even curled up, that the laxness of recovery is a bizarre look on him. She picks her way through the pile of bags
on impulse to stop by the side of the bed and kiss his cheek.

“Get better faster, nerdface,” she says. “I mean it.”

“Trying,” he says, with a thin smile. Then, he drops his voice to even lower. “Can we talk to you later? Alone?”

Stephanie’s brow draws into a suspicious knot.

“About what?”

“I’m gonna go find Damian and Cass to join the party,” Jason says. “Maybe find snacks.”

He retreats, and Stephanie is pretty sure he’s just good at reading a room.

There are few things Stephanie hates more than knowing she’s about to hear bad news, especially when she knows it’s coming but not what it is yet. Everything has been so shitty recently that her response now is a kind of numbness, because what’s one more thing piled on to weeks of murder victims and worry about masked business and stress about money and indecision about grad school?

Conner Kent does not get up to leave.

“What?” Stephanie says again, her voice harder this time.

Tim licks his lips, which are chapped, and glances at Conner. Conner shrugs at him and nods. Tim looks back to Stephanie, who has taken a step back and crossed her arms.

“Timothy. What the hell is going on.”

“I’m going to be out of commission for a few months,” Tim says, his brief laugh a dry, sardonic sound. “Kon and I were talking. We want you to take my spot with the Teen Titans, at least over the summer.”

“What?” Stephanie’s arms unfurl from their tightly bound spot across her stomach. “Tim, are you…are you serious?”

“Yes,” Tim says crisply. “Kon’s already transitioning out. I was going to. We were supposed to spend the summer training the next wave of Titans. He and Cassie need someone, someone from Gotham, who knows how we do things, to help train. And to strategize missions.”

Stephanie can’t shake the suspicion. She’s trying, but it’s lingering. This seems…too easy.

“What about Damian?”

“Damian should join them. He might if you’re there. But he’s next wave, and he’s not leadership material yet. He wants to be, but he’s still trying to prove himself all the time.”

“I mean, we all did that,” Conner interjects, with a small gesture of surrender. “But because Superdick was breathing down my neck. We didn’t need to with each other.”

“And Damian will,” Stephanie says.

“Damian will. To anyone older or younger or even the same age. You know how he is. He might follow if the right people are leading, if you’re leading. It’s just the summer and then you’d be on the reserve roster.”
“I…I can’t,” Stephanie says, helplessly. She wants this. More than anything, she wants to be Batgirl as part of the Teen Titans even if she’s missed the teen cut-off by a few years. But grad school. “I have to work, Tim. I have to get like, three jobs if I can even think about managing grad school.”

Conner has stretched out sideways on the overstuffed chair he was sitting on, his head hanging back. “Are you stupid?”

Stephanie resists the urge to throw something at him.

“I mean, B would pay for it.”

“I can’t just expect Bruce to—”

“He bought my apartment. And my car,” Conner says. “Said it was basic package reimbursement for cape work. Gave Kara the same deal. And Bart.”

“There are a couple others,” Tim says. “It’s not just you, Steph. It wouldn’t be pity money. Training and mission work with the Teen Titans isn’t something we could get just anyone to do. You’re more valuable as a resource there than working a couple part time jobs. And I trust you.”

Stephanie is not going to cry in front of Tim and Conner Kent. She won’t. But her face burns all the same, and she swallows hard around the lump in her throat. Tim might have forgotten, with the years they’ve had to build a rapport and work together, but Stephanie hasn’t: at one point, he didn’t trust her to handle this kind of work. Cocky, too mature for his own good fourteen year old Tim had very few qualms about telling her exactly that, even while he was clearly smitten.

She was smitten in return, by the dangerous masked boy who could be sweet when he wasn’t trying too hard, even while he was trying to make her go home.

“I haven’t even picked a grad school,” she says. “I mean, yeah, yes. Okay. I’ll do it.”

“Good,” Tim says, and if she’d thought he was relaxed before she was wrong— or she missed him tensing up, because the way he slumps against the pillows is pronounced. “I’ll talk to Bruce.”

“No,” Stephanie says, a little sharply. “No, you aren’t going to go beg daddy for money for me. If I have to ask him, I’ll ask.”

“Okay,” Tim says evenly.

“Sorry, I’m…” Stephanie pauses and takes a breath, her hands pressed against her cheeks.

Adjusting, she wants to say. A week ago, the idea of asking Bruce to pay for anything seemed ridiculous. Even when Jason had encouraged her, it was something she filed away as a consideration for a last resort. This, though, changes this. Maybe she can work out some sort of loan plan, or just…

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have snapped. I’ll take care of it,” she says, quietly. “Thank you, Tim. Really.”

“No thanks for me?” Conner asks, his icy grin flashing perfect white teeth at her. His head is hanging upside down over the armrest of the chair, giving his expression a stupidly silly air.

“You’ve gotta do something useful to get thanks, dumbass,” Stephanie retorts.

“Yeah, you guys are going to work together just fine,” Tim mumbles, closing his eyes.
Stephanie sits down and begins pulling things out of the bags, her mind not seeing the glue and markers and cardstock and crinkly poms as she lines them up on the floor. All she can see in her head is a bright summer where she works alongside Cassie Sandsmark and the rest of Tim’s team. It doesn’t even matter if she’ll have to prove herself, that she’s not just a second tier replacement—she’s used to that.

And having Tim’s words in her soul? They’ve long worked past the point where Stephanie needs his approval, even past the point where she’s known for a while that she has it anyway. She didn’t realize until he was saying it, however, how much it would mean to be given his spot on his team.

*Someone from Gotham, someone who knows how we do things.*

She isn’t second choice. She isn’t even just a warm body to fill a roster.

They trust her to *train* Titans, to pick up the work where Tim left off. She won’t even be fighting Kon on it, because this is clearly a mutual decision for the two of them.

There’s a tiny thread of pulling irritation, stinging as it tugs in her chest, at the discovery that she values Conner’s approval and trust so much. She’s helpless to dissuade the warmth it gives her though, because for all the stupid things she knows he and Tim have done, for all the brash and deliberate ways he’s made himself *not Clark*, he’s still a Super.

He’s powerful and there aren’t many people he could stop him from action or force him to do anything. And he wants to work with Stephanie. Stephanie Brown, partially self-trained, a girl who could have ended up an addict in and out of Blackgate.

It’s her own smile that feels stupidly silly on her face while she tears open a package of paint pens.

“I’m back with food and extra hands,” Jason announces, shoving the door open. He has two bags of chips in one hand and his other on Damian’s neck like he’s directing a sullen puppy. “I call dibs on Damian.”

“You cannot call ‘dibs’ on a person,” Damian retorts, his arms crossed as he stands stiffly in the doorway refusing to go further. Jason lets him go to move forward into the room and drop the chips near Stephanie’s arranged lines of supplies.

“You’re doing my lettering, brat,” Jason says, dropping to the floor to pick up a graduation cap. “It’s going to look fucking awesome.”

“Tt,” Damian says, but he peels himself from the threshold of the door to snatch the cap from Jason’s hands. “Fine.”

“What’s going on in here?” Dick asks, ducking his head into the room and peering around. “Tim. You throwing a party without me?”

“The party is being forced upon me,” Tim replies, wheezing as he sits up a little. Stephanie starts to get up, but Conner beats her to the bedside where he adjusts the angle of the bed. “You’re welcome to crash it.”

Cass sits close to Stephanie, their legs a mere inch apart, while Dick picks through the organized mess to press a kiss to Tim’s head. Tim leans into it and sighs, and Dick holds his head hugged to his chest for a moment. Stephanie only looks away when she realizes she’s staring.

“What do you think?” she asks Cass, gesturing to the field of markers.
There’s a slight shrug and a mumble, and she frowns, nudging Cass’ knee with her own.

“You okay?” she asks, voice pitched low.


It is Conner who meets Stephanie’s gaze, catches her eye with the echo of her own worried frown, and she’s not sure she’ll ever get used to that sensation, of sharing meaningful looks with him. She doesn’t claim to understand the bizarre relationship he apparently maintains with Cass, only that it seems erratic and vague to her. Venting her concern to Tim once only got her a murmured hand-wave response about missing childhoods, and she would have pressed except there wasn’t anything exactly…bad about it that she could put her finger on, and digging made her feel too much like Bruce: paranoid, ignoring social boundaries, unwilling to just ask someone directly. She trusts Cass, so she made herself trust Cass, and her own ability to watch for upset.

She never saw signs of that in her, whenever she spent time with Conner.

She does see something now, and she isn’t sure what.

“What are we doing?” Dick asks, tearing open a bag of chips.

“You’ve got eyes,” Jason retorts, tearing away from whatever he was whispering to Damian. The younger boy has a wicked smirk twisting his mouth and Stephanie isn’t sure she wants to know.

While Stephanie considers her cap and the cardstock pile in front of her, Cass scoots closer until they’re pressed against each other. One of Cass’ slender fingers stretches out, presses on a single yellow square, and drags it closer.

“I’m not doing a…do you have any idea how much Bruce would kill me if I put that on my cap?” Stephanie exclaims.

Cass shakes her head, with a little smirk far too identical to Damian’s considering they aren’t biological siblings. She reaches over Stephanie and grabs a pencil and traces the outline of the bat symbol on the paper and then gestures impatiently for the scissors near Dick’s elbow. He tosses them to her and she catches them out of the air.

“Funny to him,” Cass says, with that quiet certainty she has sometimes.

“I had a plan,” Stephanie protests. “A meaningful quote and shit.”

“No,” Cass says. “You didn’t know which color.”

Stephanie knows it’s pointless to lie to a family of detectives but sometimes it’s hard not to try. She sighs.

Cass takes the symbol and stretches her foot out, and picks up a roll of tape with her toes. She tears a piece and curls it up, sticks it to the back of the stiff yellow paper, and presses it to Stephanie’s hoodie.

“Now we work.”

Stephanie laughs, and it catches her off-guard how quickly it almost turns into a sob. She really needs to go run ten miles or something before the rollercoaster of the past week completely derails. She hugs Cass and through the hug, she can feel the other woman’s tense muscles. Maybe she’ll take Cass with her, on a run.
“So,” Jason says, his voice sounding loud and uncertain in the companionable silence that’s filled the room. “I have an announcement.”

“You’re an idiot,” Damian says without looking up. “No need. We already knew.”

Stephanie is watching Jason and the masked fear in his face and she knows before he says it what he’ll say.

“You’re running away to space,” Tim ventures, hoarse and teasing.

“You’ve met someone,” Dick adds.

“Will you shut up,” Jason snaps. “I’m retiring.”

There’s a dead quiet that follows and then Tim and Damian are saying, “What,” while glaring at each other, and Cass freezes beside Stephanie, and it’s Dick whose voice cuts through everything else.

“The fuck you are.”

Jason’s lips are pressed together and a few years ago, Stephanie would have seen that pre-explosive look and thought anger. Now she sees hurt and fear. She watched him wear that same expression staring up at the apartment he’d shared with Catherine Todd, when he took those walks that carried him by the windows over and over again. The glass is cracked now, and plastered with the white blank backs of a child’s stickers. She doubts they were his work, so, a later tenant.

“Why?” Tim asks, sitting up so much he groans. He doesn’t lie back down, despite Conner’s hand on his shoulder.

“Coward,” Damian hisses, the marker stilled in his hands.

“Damian,” Stephanie snaps.

“I’m fostering,” Jason says before an argument can break out. His eyes are on Dick alone, despite Stephanie trying to shoot him reassuring glances for support. “I have to pick, one or the other. I can’t do both. I don’t want to do both. Bruce already knows.”

Dick sits with his face in his hands, and there’s a low, long exhale.

“Okay,” he says. “I’m…I’m sorry. Okay. You know this leaves us without…”

“Dick,” Stephanie says incredulously, angry now. “Come on.”

He drops his head to snake his hands around the back of his neck, like he’s keeping himself in a safety hold. Despite her anger, Stephanie feels bad for him-- it’s clear that he’s struggling, immensely, for some reason. She would have thought one of his precious younger brothers being out of the constant line of fire would have been a relief.


“None of your fucking business,” Jason growls. “It was my decision.”

“Well,” Stephanie says, too loudly. The attention of the room, even Dick, snaps to her just like she knew it would. “I have good news. I’m filling in for Tim with the Teen Titans for the summer. It’s kind of a big deal to me, so if anyone says anything mean they’re losing teeth.”
Jason shoots her a grateful look. Damian is holding the graduation cap so tightly Stephanie thinks the brim might bend under his hands. It’s then, that second, that she realizes that perhaps her attempt at deflection could have used a little more planning. Damian probably expected the role would go to him.

“So, we have two patrol routes to recover,” Damian snaps. “That’s fine. I could do both of them by myself anyway. It’s not like we’ve ever really needed you.”

That one stings.

It stings so much Stephanie presses her lips together and looks down at the marker in her hand, reminding herself that he’s just a jealous little boy. That’s all. Just a jealous, angry, hurt little–


There’s a blur and a slap and Damian yells, when the roll of tape smacks him in the cheek. Cass is already on her feet, glaring at him, and it must have only been that it was Cass throwing it that Damian didn’t see it coming. Anyone else, he would have blocked. He lunges up and it’s Dick who snags him around the waist, Jason’s hand on his ankle. Cass snarls angrily and storms out of the room, slamming the door behind her, so the walls rattle with the force.

Damian is howling at Dick and Jason alike, kicking at the hand on his leg until Jason lets go. Dick does not, his arms curled around the stomach of the boy who is almost as tall as he is, his arm like unyielding iron, and he’s whispering something into Damian’s ear that Stephanie can’t make out. Damian stills and Dick releases him, only for Damian to reel a step or two away like he’s escaping.

“Come on,” Dick says to him, following up whatever he’d whispered. “Downstairs. It’s okay. You’re okay.”

“I fucking know that, Richard,” Damian heaves, his eyes narrowed. “You…you…”

Stephanie is glad she didn’t yell at him right away, because she knows him well enough to see that he’s on the verge of crying, while he curls his shoulders in and crosses his arms.

It’s Jason who stands up and pulls him into a hug, and somehow, he keeps his head while Damian leans into him. He says something, but it’s in Arabic or something similar, and Stephanie doesn’t quite hear it well enough to muster a translation on the spot.

“Go beat some sandbags with Dickie,” Jason says next. “I’m not leaving, okay? I’m not going anywhere. I told you I’d have your back, and I still do.”

Stephanie flushes red, and looks down at the carpet, realizing it wasn’t about the Titans at all, somehow. It was about his brother.

“We good?” Jason asks Dick, a hard edge in his voice as he pushes Damian toward him. Damian lets himself be pushed, though he jerks his shoulder away in muted protest of being guided.

Dick stares at him and then nods, a tired slouch creeping up his spine. “We’re good. Your call.”

“Good,” Jason says. “We can talk later.”

Stephanie sets the graduation cap down on the floor after Dick and Damian go. Jason settles down on the carpet again with a huff and Stephanie looks to the spot Cass vacated.

“Good party, everyone,” Tim says dryly. “Cheered me up a lot, thanks.”
“Oh, shut up, Tim,” Stephanie growls, climbing to her feet. “I’m going to find Cass.”

She can hear the boys arguing still behind her when she goes down the hall, their voices rising and falling until there’s a wheeze and Conner’s voice saying, “Get the fuck back in bed, Tim.”

She keeps going, tears stinging her eyes.

This was supposed to be good news. Good news. Stephanie’s rage is pressed into hot, blazing spots on her cheeks, because Jason doing something healthy for him and Stephanie getting to lead a team are things that should just be good. She walks so fast through the halls that she nearly bumps into Bruce coming out of his room, and she has to step back and duck her head to hide the tear tracks.

“Stephanie,” he says, with some mild alarm.

“Have you seen Cass,” she mumbles, not looking up.

“She’s on the roof,” he says. “She went through my window. Do you have any idea why?”

“No,” Stephanie says, stepping around him. “I’m using your window, too, thanks.”

She goes right through the room with the disheveled covers and Selina humming in the bathroom behind the closed door and slides out the window to grab the lip of the carved molding on the side. She hauls herself up hand over hand until she has to swing out for the ironwork around the gutter, and flip up onto the slate.

“Cass?” she says.

The roof, its tiered expanses a whole landscape of places to sit and brood or hide, is empty. It takes her a few minutes of tracking and hunting to lean over the roof on the other side of the house and see the ballroom curtains billowing through the open window. There’s music wafting out with them, just the faint strains of something classical.

By the time she’s down on the ground, climbing through the ballroom window, she’s no longer crying. She’s white-hot hurt when she finds Cass sitting on the ground in front of a speaker, curled up with her hands cupped around her ears. Stephanie yanks the cord from the back of the stereo and the music cuts off, drenching the room in silence.

“What the hell?” Stephanie shouts. “You are my best friend, how the fuck are you upset about this? You know how important this is to me. You have to know.”

“No! Look at me. Tell me why you can’t be happy for me. I’m trying, Cass, I’m trying all the time, and I know I’ll never be as good as you, but I want this and Tim just gave it to me and I wanted…I thought you’d be…fuck, what is wrong with you right now?”

Cass lifts her face to scream. “Shut up, shut up, shut up!” Her hands clap over her ears, palms flat this time, and the last word is punctuated by a shrill shriek. It’s then, when she’s got her mouth open and her eyes squeezed shut at the mesh of the speaker, that Stephanie’s anger trips to a stop.

It’s Cass’ red-rimmed eyes that stop her. Stephanie’s wiping away her own tear tracks, but Cass’ cheeks are shining they’re so wet.

“Cass,” Stephanie says, gently.
“You’re leaving me,” Cass sobs. “You didn’t even…you didn’t talk to me. You’re just going and you want me to be happy that you’ll be gone. Everything is changing. Everybody’s moving to new spaces and I’m stuck, I’m not changing, I’m just me. Baba is hurt and everyone looks the other way and now you’re leaving. What do I do?”

“Oh,” Stephanie says, lowering herself to the ground beside Cass. She wraps her arms around the shaking shoulders and Cass buries her face again. “Is…is this about school?”

“It’s about everything,” Cass says. “Nobody is happy. I just want things to be good. They were good.”

Stephanie buries a kiss in Cass’ hair and squeezes her tightly. “Cassie, I’m sorry. I didn’t even notice you were so…”

“Earthquake,” Cass supplies.

“Earthquake,” Stephanie agrees. “Can you try, though? To be happy for me?”

“I am,” Cass says miserably. “I’m not happy for me. I know that’s wrong. I’m not stupid. I’m trying, too. I left so it wouldn’t hurt you.”

“I know you aren’t,” Stephanie says, exhaling. “We have got to get you to stop taking your emotional cues from your dad.”

“He’s hurt,” Cass says.

“Yeah, he’s going to be fine.”

“No,” Cass says sternly, her gaze whipping up to Stephanie’s face. “He’s hurt. Like before, when you didn’t listen. He’s…he’s not okay. I don’t know how to help him.”

Stephanie stops. She stops breathing, stops moving, stops thinking. For a moment, all she can feel is that nauseating pit swallowing her whole when Tim called her a few years ago and couldn’t stop crying on the other end of the phone, like he’d forgotten how to cry until she answered. She remembers thinking then, with a detached horror, Oh, so Cass was right, and now she looks at her. The fierce brown eyes are daring her to make the same mistake again, but there’s desperation in the twist of Cass’s mouth.

“Okay,” Stephanie says carefully. “Okay, I have to talk to him anyway. We’ll see how that goes and we’ll, uh, we’ll talk to someone else. Alfred, or Selina, or Dev, or Dick, or somebody.”

Cass nods miserably, dropping her head, and Stephanie stands and holds out a hand.

“Cassandra Wayne, listen to me,” she says, and Cass shrugs. “Look at me. I want you to see that I mean it.”

The head of bobbed black hair tilts sideways on Cass’ knees, so she can look at Stephanie out of the corner of her field of vision. “Fine,” she mutters.

“We are going to deal with this shit, and then we are going to have the best week. Do you understand? We’ll do whatever and then we’re going to zeta to San Fran so many times it won’t even feel like leaving the house, so you know how close I am when you need me. Okay? It is good. We’ll make it good. Deal?”

“I’ll let Alfred know we’re stealing the kitchen,” Stephanie says, grabbing Cass’ hand and twirling her. Cass breaks into a tiny grin while spinning, and then launches into a full pirouette. “Show off,” Stephanie says, throwing up a middle finger.

Cass throws it back, while still pirouetting.

Stephanie goes into the hall and lets her head thud on the wallpaper.

Bruce. She’s got to find Bruce.

Two birds, one stone is an apt description of what she wants out of a conversation she very much does not want to have, but it seems so specifically morbid that it makes her shudder to even think it while she walks.

The walk carries her past the kitchen, where Alfred is working at the counter.

“Alfred,” she says. “Help me. You’re my only ho.”

“Oh, dear,” he says mildly.

“I need Bruce and then I need to make brownies with Cass,” Stephanie says, leaning on the doorjamb.

Alfred is kneading dough, white dusting up the bare arms below rolled shirtsleeves. His apron is specked with flour. “He is, I believe, in his study. If you do not find my presence intolerable, we can work around each other, or the kitchen can be yours alone in an hour’s time.”


“Ah. My greatest aspiration in life. It is fortunate that I’ve succeeded, I suppose, though what I’ll do after such an early peak is beyond me. A new goal is in order, perhaps.”

“Maybe try competitive sledding,” Stephanie suggests, with a grin. “I’ve heard it’s fun. I’ll be back in a bit.”

Bruce is in his study, but on the couch instead of behind the desk like she expected. He looks up when she enters, a brow raised.

“Cass?” he asks.

“She’s, well, okay. Ish,” Stephanie says. “She could probably use a hug, like a Bruce-shaped one, soon.”

“Thank you for the intel,” he says, his brow drawn into two slanting lines.

“I need to talk to you,” she says, sitting on the coffee table and burying her hands into her hoodie pockets. “It’s…about money.”

The word is bitter on her tongue and she feels a rush of sour, toe-curling shame. Throwing herself headlong, without thinking too hard, the way she has to leap off skyscrapers, seemed the best way to go until she was in the free fall.

“I have money,” he says, and Stephanie chokes on air, some of the tension fleeing at the deadpan joke.

This isn’t a free fall. It’s a timed descent with a grapple line in her hand, because this is Bruce, and
if she makes herself look hard enough, the only way she’s felt not part of the household in the past few years has been her own doubt leaching into things. It stains the welcome, the bed that is hers for college weekends, the way she has a spot on the laundry schedule when she gets too busy with casework.

“Tim asked me to lead the Teen Titans over the summer in his place, and I think I can stay at the tower, but it means not working full time, which was…well, kind of my plan for affording school in the next two or three years. I was accepted at Pitt and Michigan but I really don’t have that kind of money so I haven’t even been able to decide.”

Stephanie pulls her legs up and rests her feet on the couch, so she’s almost facing him, her feet alongside his knees. He doesn’t say anything at first, and she has the terrified thought that this was actually a mistake and what he’s going to do is tell her that she’s not ready, and then go chew Tim out for making decisions while high on painkillers.

It’s the jolt before the grapple line catches, but it catches after all.

“Stephanie,” he says, soft and steady, in that way that makes her a little bitter Arthur never once sounded like that. “Sweetheart, look at me.”

She had just said the same words to Cass, and now it’s her turn to have a hard time obeying. The graying hair at his temples is almost like looking at his eyes, but she forces herself to keep creeping toward a direct gaze, dragging herself bit by bit. He looks old and tired and somehow also a kind of reassuring that makes her glad she cried earlier so it’s easier not to now.

“What,” she says, flatly.

“You can afford wherever you want to go,” he says. “You don’t have anything to worry about.”

“Tim said it was the reimbursement plan,” Stephanie says to her lap, when she looks down. “I didn’t want to ask.”

“It’s not the reimbursement plan,” Bruce says. “That’s not what I’m offering here. Do you understand that? You could tell me you never wanted to work in a mask again, and this would not change. Is that clear?”

“Yes,” Stephanie says, and crying earlier did not, after all, help. Her hoodie cuff is worn and damp against her skin. “Got it, Boss. On one condition.”

“What is that,” he says, a little stiffly.

“Cass is worried about you,” she says bluntly. “I want you to talk to someone. I don’t care who.”

“Cass is…” he trails off, his face stricken. It vanishes into blankness, a breath later. He nods. “Alright. I will…talk to someone.”

“So, she’s not wrong,” Stephanie says, and it’s impossible to keep the alarm out of her voice. She’s trained and it’s still impossible.

“It’s different,” Bruce says, standing. He’s moving slowly, still rigid with pain, and his fingers are ghostly pale on the couch when he braces himself. He cups her face with his palm and leaves it there until Stephanie’s breathing is under control. “Cass is right and wrong.”

“Talking to either of you is like talking to a bad Google translate,” Stephanie complains, her hands balled into fists in her hoodie’s kangaroo pocket. “It’s confusing as hell sometimes. Just say the
thing in a normal way.”

“I will talk to someone,” he says, dropping his hand to her shoulder and squeezing before he pulls it away. “It’s different this time. It’ll be okay.”

“Are you coming to graduation?” Stephanie asks, her throat thick and cottony. “For Jason.”

“Yes,” Bruce says. “But not just for Jason.”

“Okay,” she says. The little part of her that wanted things to be good stretches up, like a plant reaching for sunshine while the clouds are clearing. “Thank you.”
The wall is slick beneath his palm, sweat against the papered surface. Tim’s eyes are closed when he stops for a second, just to catch his breath, and the trembling runs from his shoulders to his fingers. He stops longer this time than the last time, five feet back, and exhales through his teeth.

“Timothy!” Dev’s voice from behind him, sudden and sharp, makes him jerk like a puppet on a yanked string.

His hand slips and there’s a missing heartbeat before he catches himself with a groan.

“What in the sodding hell,” Dev mutters, closer now.

His arm slips around Tim and steadies him, upright. Tim doesn’t let himself lean yet.

“I…need…”

“To stay in the bloody bed,” Dev snaps. His arm across Tim’s back tenses and for a moment Tim thinks he’s about to be swept up off his feet and carried back to bed, and Tim goes rigid.

“No,” Tim says, the bite in the word dulled by the slight whine in his breathing. “I need to talk to Damian.”

“Bloody hell, Timothy,” Dev says, and Tim doesn’t have to look over to know Dev’s tucked his chin and closed his eyes while thinking. For a moment, neither of them move. “You could have asked him to come ‘round your room.”

Tim shakes his head. “No. I gotta…it’s….he won’t answer my texts.”

He doesn’t realize there are tears on his face until he blinks and his eyelashes feel wet and heavy.


“Bed,” Tim says honestly. “God, I want to be in bed. Bruce’s bed, actually, but I’d displace Selina.”

“No need,” Dev says. “She left this morning.”

“What,” Tim says, and it’s barely a hiss, and this is the thing that makes him stumble a step forward. “Why? No, Dev, she’s gotta, she needs to…it was good that she was here, I thought he was gonna…”

“Whoa, whoa, mate.” Dev’s hand cups his elbow and keeps him upright when he starts to fall.

Tim lets his shoulder slouch against the wall and then, with some effort, he twists so his back is propped up. The thin shirt he’s wearing doesn’t do much to hide the incision bandages on his stomach, and his fingers ghost the squared edges while he pants for breath.

There’s a deep crease of worry in Dev’s brow, as he stands in front of Tim with one arm outstretched just in case. Then, his wrist is on Tim’s forehead and Tim blinks at him.

“You’re not fevered,” Dev says. “So. If you wouldn’t quite mind, how about you bloody tell me what’s got you so sodding worked up?”
“Nothing,” Tim says, with a long exhale. He’d hoped, suspected, been certain, that it was finally the perfect storm and Bruce would confide in someone— Selina seemed like a good fit, if she was just around at the right time. But if Tim knows anything, it’s how to keep a secret.

“Timothy,” Dev says, in that kind and concerned tone. It’s the voice he uses when Tim needs gentle prodding into perspective or self-care, and Tim has heard it enough times to know it’s scarcely effective. “What’s wrong? Something sodding set you off, just now.”

Tim knows that he can lie, and he can lie well. He also knows that a large part of being good at keeping secrets is misdirection, or even better, nobody knowing to ask. Jack and Janet were good at not asking.

He swallows and can’t look at Dev’s face, even though he knows he should if he’s going to be anything close to effective.

“It’s nothing, I just panicked, it was weird. I don’t know why.”

There’s a long silence where he’s braced against the wall so he doesn’t topple over, and he’s staring at Dev’s shoes. His head is swimming and he really does want to lie down.

In the end, it’s Dev not offering an out or pushing more that gets Tim to look up at him, into the disbelieving and concerned face of a friend.

“I’m sorry,” he says, his throat dry. “You’re right. But I can’t tell you why, it’s not…it isn’t mine to tell. If it was an emergency, I swear, I’d say something, I would, but it’s not that kind of…”

“Alright, then,” Dev says, accepting. “Bed then. Wayne’s. You need a lift?”

The relief is so great that Tim feels like it brings a second wind. He shakes his head.

“Just an arm, maybe,” he says. “If I get dizzy.”

“No ifs,” Dev says firmly. “You have the arm now, or you’re bloody listening to me whinge about how nobody as short as you should weigh so much, after all.”

Tim’s grin is just a flicker of gratitude before he’s focused again, one shuffling step after another. It shouldn’t make his face bead with sweat, but it does— the first steps after a gut wound are hell, then there are about ten where there’s a false sense of security, and then a sharp downturn into roiling stomach and fiery throbbing.

Tim hit the last stage before he’d even left his own room. He leans more and more on Dev going down the hall to Bruce’s. When he gets to the bed and sits cautiously, slowly, on the edge, he doesn’t complain about Dev lifting his legs for him and swinging him the rest of the way onto the pillows and pile of blankets.

“One arsehole brother, coming right up,” Dev promises, patting Tim’s shoulder. “Lie flat. I’ve got to make certain you’re not bleeding through first, you wanker. You did take some meds, since you took the IV line out?”

Tim shakes his head. “No. Thought I could…make it.”

“Sod it all, Timothy,” Dev mutters and he leaves the bedside. He comes back a moment later, pills rattling in a cup. “Here. Wayne had some in the cupboard.”

Tim swallows them dry and watches Dev while he rummages in Bruce’s bedside table drawer and
pulls gloves out of a small box. His expression barely changes while the incisions are checked and deemed satisfactory, and the bandages pressed back into place.

“How are you?” Tim asks, when the silence feels too heavy, and sticky like surgical tape. He wants to rip it off and scrub at it until people talk to him like normal again, like they almost did a few days ago during the graduation cap fiasco.

He watched Jason and Steph graduate from his laptop, a live stream of the ceremony hosted on GU’s website. Conner had watched with him, nearly bored out of his mind— Tim could tell— but loyal. It was only Conner promising to stay that had let Tim convince Alfred he really could go with everyone else.

A week before, he’d teased Stephanie that it would be hours of cliche speeches and that he’d probably fall asleep, and then, all he’d wanted while watching with Conner was to just be there with them anyway.

“Timothy,” Dev says, glancing up from the last bandage. “I’m alright.”

“No,” Tim says, meeting his gaze. “Really.”

Dev tugs the shirt back down and peels off the gloves and sits on the edge of the bed, so his back is to Tim. There’s another long pause, and Tim hates it, because silence with Dev is almost always companionable or it just isn’t there— they can keep up a steady back and forth even when they aren’t really saying anything at all. Tim likes it, he likes the noise, the chatter even during video games.

Then, Dev twists so he’s partly facing him and his hand hesitates above Tim’s head before settling over his hair and brushing it back, then cupping Tim’s cheek.

“You’ve bloody strict orders to never come that close to dying under my hand, ever again,” Dev says, intense and steady. “Understood, mate?”

Tim’s instinct to joke falters and he opens his mouth just to close it again, his throat tight.

“Oh,” he says. “I don’t feel so dumb about telling you the pain meds might not be cutting it. I know I said I was okay, but I don’t think I’m really ready for a lower dosage.”

“I know,” Dev says. “Was letting you get there on your own, because you’re sodding brilliant and I knew you would.”

“So. You’re okay, though, right?” Tim asks, Dev’s hand still warm on his face. He leans into it a little. “Like. This wasn’t a last straw or anything, right, because I was worried maybe it would—”

“Shut up,” Dev says roughly, and he presses a kiss to Tim’s brow and then stands and tosses the gloves in the trash. “You’re not ridding yourself of me that easily, Timothy Wayne. Bloody hell, you can’t think me squeamish still, after all this time.”

“Good,” Tim says, warmth flooding his chest. “We still need you. Bruce needs you.”

“What you need is to stay in bed until I bloody say so,” Dev says sternly.

Sadist, Tim teases, his grin real even if thinned by pain.

“Mate, I’m about a papercut away from swaddling you in bubble wrap and locking you in a tower. I’ve not begun to be sadist about this.”
“If this is you on board with Alfred’s hints about me needing a haircut,” Tim says, and Dev interrupts him to tug a bit of hair.

“Bed,” Dev says. “Stay put. Give it a day or two, and then you can be up as long as it’s not marathons down corridors right off. I’ll find Dames.”

The meds kick in enough that Tim drifts off to sleep not long after Dev leaves, and doesn’t wake until the door clicks open and a silhouette is shoved forward. Damian snarls at someone behind him and there’s a laughing, “You sodding wanker, no biting.”

“I wasn’t trying,” Damian snaps, his voice shrill with irritation, and Tim is definitely fully awake now.

“Hmm,” comes the reply and the door shuts.

“What,” Damian says a minute later, to the room. He reaches over and flicks the overhead lights on, and his scowl is so fierce and pointed Tim suspects the lights were only because he thought they’d bother Tim.

“I need to talk to you,” Tim says.

“So now you send someone to collect me? Like I’m some errant dog?”

“Actually,” Tim says, hauling himself up on fatigued arms to lean against the headboard. “I got up to look for you and got yelled at for it.”

That gets Damian’s attention, a flicker of concern through the anger.

“That was idiotic,” he says. He crosses his arms, fingers picking at the seam of his shirt on his side. It’s a buried fidgeting, one he thinks he’s hiding.

“You wouldn’t answer my texts,” Tim says.

Damian’s glare is baleful. “What the fuck is so important that you couldn’t wait a week.”

“You,” Tim says plainly, and Damian steps back as if Tim shoved him in the chest. It’s a tiny step, not much give, and the fury falls away from Damian’s expression into the brief openness of surprise. “Come sit down.”

“No,” Damian says warily. “What’s going on. What are you not telling me?”

“Would you feel better if I called you names? Come sit down, buttbreath.” Tim pats the edge of the massive bed.

Damian exhales and rolls his eyes, looking for a moment like an ordinary, normal teenager. He doesn’t drag his feet though— his steps are careful and graceful and precise.

“What, Timothy,” he says, standing beside the bed.

“I’m sorry,” Tim says.

“You ought to be,” Damian snaps. “Anyone with a fraction of a functioning brain would have known that wasn’t Father. You walked right into the situation with your guard down. The footage clearly shows that…that…”

“Of course you watched the security feed,” Tim says, sore stomach clenching. “Of course you did,
you little self-punishing shit.”

“Are you done insulting me?”

“It depends,” Tim hisses. “Are you done insulting me for being shot?”

Damian blanches and turns abruptly to leave.

Tim catches his wrist, his fingers ghost white against the warm brown of Damian’s skin, and Damian could easily pull away but he doesn’t.

“Wait,” Tim says, belatedly. “I’m sorry, I mean I’m sorry for everything. There’s been a lot going on and I know Dick has been busy and Bruce has been distracted. I’m sorry, because I’m not sure you’re okay and I don’t think anyone has been checking.”

His answer is a prolonged silence, and then a very faint sniffle.

“You can be mad at me,” Tim says, almost pleading. Damian furious with him, he can handle, he’s used to that. Damian avoiding him is a different kind of dislike and it makes Tim nervous. “You can be mad that I was stupid and walked right into the room with Hush, you can be mad I gave my Teen Titans spot to Stephanie and not you, you can even be mad at me for Jason quitting—I’m sure you can find a reason that makes sense in your head—just don’t…don’t…don’t think you’re alone. Don’t run off to do something dumb.”

“Why does everyone think I’m going to run off,” Damian asks, in a small and wounded voice.

“Because we’ve all done it,” Tim says. “Downside of having older siblings, I guess.”

“Tt,” Damian says softly. “I’m not.”

“So, you’re smarter than the rest of us, good job,” Tim says.

“I’ve been skipping school,” Damian says, slowly sitting on the edge of the bed. “I…I didn’t want to ask Father to sign me out, so close to the end of the year. It’s…easier for everyone if I’m not here.”

“That isn’t—”

“The day that it happened, nobody even came to get me early. I was just in classes and I had no idea until Richard picked me up,” Damian continues, as if Tim hadn’t spoken. Damian is tracing his finger along the curved threading on Bruce’s comforter. “They don’t trust me. It’s convenient if I’m busy elsewhere. I thought maybe…I had proven myself enough that…but when we went out that night, after you were…hurt…they babysat me. Richard, and Stephanie, and Father, and Gordon…they all gave me tasks as if I were some flighty animal that required distraction.”

“Damian,” Tim says gently.

“I was afraid I was getting too old for Robin,” Damian says miserably. “They’ve stopped acting like I’m a child. What I didn’t anticipate was that they still wouldn’t trust me. I thought that would come with age. Ironic, then, that I act like a child— skipping classes and hiding. Perhaps they are not mistaken. I am not certain they were wrong— I don’t trust myself, either.”

In all the time Damian has been talking, he hasn’t once looked at Tim, and Tim is sure it’s the longest he’s ever heard Damian talk to him about some internal struggle.
Tim puts a tentative hand on the narrow ridge of Damian’s spine, rigid beneath his tee, and Damian turns then to study his face, at the touch.

“Am I still that bad?” he asks, mouth pressed into a line after the words are in the air. His hand on the comforter balls into a fist, and he holds Tim’s gaze while he adds, “I can ask you, because you have never hesitated to tell me your honest opinion.”

“You want my honest opinion?” Tim asks.

Damian hesitates, and gives a curt nod. His hand balled in the blanket at his side doesn’t relax.

“I don’t think you’re bad, Damian,” Tim says. “I think that feeling like you can’t trust yourself is you feeling overwhelmed. It sucks when you’re old enough to see how much is outside your control. You are good, and if the others don’t trust you right now it’s because they feel the same way. You don’t think it terrifies Bruce knowing how much he can’t control? It’s not you they don’t trust, it’s everything else. That’s why I made you wear that fucking armor, it wasn’t because I thought you were stupid.”

“I know,” Damian says, his back to Tim again.

“And you know what else I think?”

“Go ahead. It’s not like you’ve ever been reluctant before.”

“I bite my tongue for you all the time, you twerp,” Tim says, somewhere between real ire and fondness. “You have zero idea how much of my self-control is involved in our functioning relationship. But that’s the other thing— I’m not the only one. You think two years ago you would have stuck to task if you knew it was work people were keeping you busy with? You would have given them the slip the first time they looked the other way. They do trust you to keep yourself in line, and you didn’t betray that. If it feels shitty still, it’s because this entire thing is shitty. Hate to break it to you, but that part isn’t about you. I can promise you everyone is feeling kind of shitty right now, and this is just one of the first times you’ve cared enough about everyone involved for it to hurt.”

“What did you want to talk about?” Damian says, his shoulders drawn forward. He drags an arm across his face.

Tim’s heart aches more than any physical wound, watching Damian desperately try to hold it together and move on to the next task. Because of course that’s what his little brother assumes— Damian has relationships that aren’t boiled down to negotiations and cases, but that isn’t what he usually has with Tim.

It wouldn’t even have occurred to Tim to check in on him if it wasn’t for the wispy, painkiller-fogged memory of Damian silently weeping with his forehead pressed against Tim’s bed. Tim barely remembers it now, hadn’t really remembered it at all until Jason had folded Damian into a hug in Tim’s room.

Thank you, is all he remembers Damian saying, which made very little sense until Dev had let on that the underclothes armor was the reason Tim was even alive.

They’d fought about it, he and Damian— about wearing it at all, about how unfair it was for Damian to wear it if no one else had to, that Tim had pretended he’d meant himself, too, all along.

It stings that he can muster that level of care but would have left checking on Damian after to literally anyone else before this.
“Well?” Damian prompts, his voice rough and thick, while Tim just stares at him.

“This,” Tim says. “Just this. This was all. Are you doing okay?”

Damian’s head whips around so fast it makes Tim’s own neck ache, and Damian’s gaze burrows into him, maybe trying to discern if he’s being mocked. The furrow in his brow smooths out, very gradually. His long fingers are back to picking at threads, his scarred knuckles twitching like a spider tripping on a live circuit.

“I don’t know,” Damian says, looking down. “The school will send a letter soon. Everyone will be mad at me.”

Tim reaches for those fingers and stills them by holding Damian’s hand. Damian, again, doesn’t pull away, but lets his hand be held.

“I’ll talk to Bruce with you. It’s not crazy that you need a break right now, okay?”


“What?” Tim prods. “If it’s dumb, then you have to tell me, so I can make fun of you.”

One side of Damian’s mouth curves into a smile and his grip on Tim’s hand tightens, while he pinches the bridge of his nose. It’s an oddly grown up gesture, something that makes him look so much like Bruce.

“Sometimes after…situations. We take trips,” Damian says vaguely.

“Are you asking me to go on vacation with you?” Tim asks, curling onto his side a little.

His answer is just a nod.

“You do not have to,” Damian adds tersely. “I understand if you would find my company to be—”

“Wait til I get the go ahead and we’ll go.” Tim tugs his arm, gently. “We’re overdue for some brotherly bonding.”

“Ugh, now you sound like Richard,” Damian scoffs, with a disgusted noise. His hand stays in Tim’s hand.

“Where are we going? Wanna go visit Martha?” Tim asks. His face is pressed into the pillow, and he can feel the remains of his energy slipping away. The pillow smells like Bruce, his shampoo and the faint tang of sweat. It’s soothing and he’s drifting faster than he thought he would.

“I go there in a month,” Damian says. “Somewhere else. I will go review options.”

Damian’s hand slips out of Tim’s grip and it has to be the pain meds that make the words slip out of his mouth, because he didn’t mean for them to at all— these were words he was saving for Bruce, the reason he wanted to be in Bruce’s room like he was little all over again.

He hadn’t felt little, sneaking in after nightmares when he was thirteen— he hadn’t even lived full time at the manor then— but he can recognize now that’s what he was. He’d wake up with Bruce’s arm slung around him and feel a kind of safe he’d never felt with Jack or Janet, a kind of safe he didn’t know existed. Sometimes, in the tiny hours of the morning before the sun rose all the way, he could see the salt tracks of tears on Bruce’s face while he slept— trails cutting through scars not yet hidden by makeup. He’d tell himself then it wasn’t just for him, it wasn’t selfish to seek
comfort if Bruce needed it, too. That’s what made it okay, when Tim was thirteen and too old to need a dad that cuddled him through the aftermath of horrible dreams.

Bruce is having a hard time and that’s why Tim had planned that it would be okay this time, too—to confess it wasn’t just pain keeping him from sleep. What he absolutely does not mean to do is dump it on his younger brother.

“Stay,” Tim hears himself say. “I keep dreaming about it.”

“About Hush?” Damian asks, sitting back down.

Tim nods into the pillow. “Except instead, it’s you that he shoots.”

The other reason he had wanted to talk to Damian. He wanted see him and see that the kid was okay. He needed proof that Damian wasn’t in a pool of blood somewhere, drowning in waves of muting pain.

“That’s absurd,” Damian says. “I was at school.”

“Your nightmares always make sense?” Tim challenges, too sleepy to muster the bite he thinks the words should hold. He already regrets it—he can already see the admission being lobbed at him like a barbed attack at some future point. He’d forgotten for a moment that this was Damian, who might have matured in a lot of ways but still probably kept a tally of Tim’s flaws.

“Tt,” Damian says.

The door swings open and it’s only because Damian is so close that Tim can see—or feel—him startle.

Bruce walks in, his gait less stiff than a few days before. Tim knows going to graduation wiped him out, because he spent a night in the armchair in Tim’s room and slept a straight twelve hours. He looks exhausted again, and Tim doubts he’s slept much since then.

“What,” he says, pausing only briefly upon seeing them. “Both of you.”

The mattress dips under his weight as he sprawls across the middle of the bed and without hesitation slings his heavy arm over Tim’s shoulders and hauls him a half inch closer.

“C’mere, sport,” Bruce says, and tears spring to Tim’s eyes. “How are you?”


“Shh,” Bruce says.

Damian is gone from the side of the bed and Tim can’t feel too awful about giving him this ammunition before he escaped the room. The others wouldn’t let him get away with using this.

Then, he hears Damian’s voice, thin and low from the other side of Bruce.

“Timothy told me he has been having nightmares,” he says.

“Hnn,” Bruce says, and the arm around Tim is that much snugger.

Tim wants to hiss at Damian because that was his admission to share or not share, then Damian speaks again, his tone even lower.
“I have been, as well.”

“Hnn,” Bruce says again. Tim rolls, with some difficulty and a soft groan, over into Bruce’s arm and Bruce shifts it around so instead Tim’s head is pillowed on the hard muscle of his upper arm.

He can see Damian stretched against Bruce’s side across the expanse of Bruce’s chest. He’s lying on his back, much like Bruce, but there’s an arm tugging him closer too.

“If anyone else comes in,” Bruce rumbles, his eyes closed, “tell them to keep their voice down.”

Tim wriggles just a little bit closer and tips his head down so he can hear Bruce’s heartbeat. Bruce’s arm curls around him, a hand splayed across Tim’s chest and he exhales.

It’s okay, because Bruce needs this, too.

It’s okay, because they both do.

It’s okay if Damian needed Tim’s confession to be able to make his own.

For the first time since waking up after anesthesia, Tim doesn’t dream.
The spread of cheese and bread is artfully arranged on a wooden serving platter, set atop the white linen table cloth. Jason takes another sip of the house wine and resists the urge to fidget.

“Is something the matter?” Alfred asks, his tone casual but his expression immediately guarded. He’s picked up on Jason’s tension and this is Gotham, so it isn’t paranoid to anticipate disaster.

“Nah,” Jason says, forcing himself to inhale and exhale slowly. “Just. We didn’t have to come… here.”

There’s a sharpness now in Alfred’s gaze and he sets the wine glass he was holding on the table. He isn’t fidgeting, at all—he looks as at home here as Bruce probably would. Jason has the distinct impression that he’s offended him.

“Here, being a place where you are a fish out of water, is that it? And my intention was to make you uncomfortable, rather than celebrate a wise decision and a recent graduation.”

Jason glances down at the cloth napkin and feels the flush rising up beneath the collar of his tuxedo.

“This isn’t really where I belong,” Jason mumbles. His mouth feels like it’s full of heavy ball bearings, oily and clinking and pinning his tongue down. It’s only that it’s Alfred that he even feels obligated to give an explanation. “They all know it. Normally, you know, I’d say…well, I’d say ‘fuck ‘em,’ because who needs the rich?”

Alfred clears his throat and Jason ducks his head even more, until he’s almost hunched down in the chair. He hates it, hates the weight pressing on him, the sense that he’s screwing this up and it’s Alfred’s evening on the line. Alfred, who rarely goes out like this, and it occurs to Jason that maybe he’s being an asshole if Alfred picked this restaurant because he likes it.

“Sorry,” Jason mutters. “I’d tell ‘em to go to hell, I mean. That’s antiseptic enough for this joint, isn’t it.”

“You are gravely mistaken if you think your choice of words was my chief objection,” Alfred says, and the tone is so kind that Jason risks a glance up. It’s not the scolding he was expecting.

“Sorry,” Jason says again. “I know dad is one of them.”

“You are one of ‘them,’” Alfred returns evenly.

“I’m not…” Jason says, and he swallows hard. So, this is where it went wrong. It stings, but it’s better to correct assumptions now even if it means ruining dinner. “Look, Al, when I said I was retiring, I didn’t mean I was signing up for this…this traditional social scene. I’m sorry if you thought that’s what I wanted.”

“You think I was under the impression you wanted to shirk responsibility in favor of a vapid and self-gratifying existence? That is certainly the only viable alternative to what your father has chosen to do, so I can see why you would assume I’ve come to that conclusion despite the fact that you expressed to me, directly, your plans and intentions.”

Alfred’s hands are on his lap, and his words never rise above the volume of a conversational murmur. His tone telegraphs that it’s a private conversation to any nearby ears, but it’s pitched low
enough that anyone would be pressed to make out individual words or even grasp that Alfred is upset.

It’s exactly the kind of lecture Jason was expecting a minute ago.

The thin arch of Alfred’s eyebrow is a challenging question mark and Jason withers a bit under it.

“No,” Jason says, quietly. “I didn’t think you thought that. Can we…can we maybe go, or maybe I should just go. I’m sorry I’ve ruined dinner.”

He folds the napkin and drops it on the table, unwilling to meet Alfred’s eyes. He expects Alfred will let him go, and follow him out, because Alfred is so often accommodating— for a man who does not speak much of emotions, he is incredibly sensitive to the moods of those around him.

“Jason Peter Wayne,” Alfred says calmly. “Sit down.”

“You know that’s not my name anymore,” Jason says, looking around furtively.

“Is it not?” Alfred asks flatly. “Sit.”

Jason sits.

“Is the food unsatisfactory?” Alfred asks, nodding to the appetizer board.

Jason shakes his head.

The few pieces of cheese he’d tasted, before his stomach soured and his tension rose, had been amazing, actually. For all that he mocks Tim and Bruce about expensive food tastes, Jason really, really likes good food. It was one reason he’d been looking forward to this dinner— it’s a classic old staple of Gotham dining culture, not one of those fad places that gives you art masquerading as edible material.

He’d ordered off the menu in French and up until ten minutes ago had been looking forward to the meal.

“Has the waitstaff treated you in an unacceptable manner?” Alfred asks, and Jason can feel the look drilling into the top of his head.

“No,” Jason says, quietly, irritation seeping into his tone. “You know they haven’t, you’ve been right here the whole time.”

There’s a silence and Jason is afraid he’s been rude enough to warrant it, possibly for the remainder of the evening and this miserable dinner it’s clear he’s not escaping. He could storm off, but that would probably wound Alfred more than it was worth.

“Then do you object to the present company?” Alfred asks, and it’s such a calm and steady question— devoid of any teasing— that Jason’s head snaps up.

“Of course not,” he says, a little too loudly. He hushes his voice. “Why would you even ask me that?”

The creases near Alfred’s eyes are bunched together in such a sad expression that Jason’s mouth goes dry. The older man couldn’t have possibly thought…

“Al, I’ve looked forward to this with you since you made the reservation,” Jason protests.
"That is precisely my point," Alfred says kindly, and that’s the moment Jason realizes that Alfred wasn’t sad for himself— something about Jason made him sad, and it’s so close to Jason’s fear of pity that he nearly leaves the table after all.

"What is this," Jason demands, throat tight. He used to be terrified that pity was the only reason the older man was nice to him, when he was little. It had taken him a long time to see Alfred’s care, even more reserved than Bruce’s, as genuine. “If this is some kind of push to play the social game…”

Jason trails off, uncomfortably aware that he’d started to sound like he was lobbing threats.

“I don’t want to…” he stammers. “I don’t want to do that, like Dad does, that isn’t…”

Criticizing Bruce is one thing sure to dig his hole deeper with Alfred— the older man has always offered polite sympathy when it comes to dealing with the more grating bits of Bruce’s nature, but he is often closed to outright critique.

“Your father chose his act,” Alfred says, his hand curled around the stem of his wine glass. “Maintaining relationships, leading his company— these were things I encouraged. The social falseness, never.”

“Then what…” Jason, for the first time in several minutes, looks around like he might find some clear indication of Alfred’s goal. His attention returns to their own table when he’s spotted nothing obvious.

“You ought to enjoy things,” Alfred says simply. “You were enjoying this— the food and the evening— until some point where you regressed into feelings of inferiority. You are a Wayne, Master Jason. More than that, you are a good man. If you desire a pleasant evening with fine food, it is within your means and I will not see you flee from that merely because you think of yourself as lesser.”

“Money doesn’t make—”

“It does not,” Alfred agrees, committing the sin of interruption.

Jason can probably count on one hand the number of times he’s personally heard Alfred interrupt anyone. Jason’s mouth clips shut.

Alfred gestures, a small and discrete wave of his hand, to the tables around them.

“Who are they, to make you feel you do not belong?”

“I’m just a kid from the Narrows,” Jason mumbles, his napkin tight between his fingers. He needs to have something to hold and pull at or he’s going to snap.

“Nonsense,” Alfred says. “You aren’t just anything, my boy. You are their equal, in every way— more than their equal. You have the education, the means, and more than that, the heart. How many languages do you speak? How many lives have you saved? How many books have you read? You’ve been graduated from university, Master Jason, and have studied more subjects than you’ve been awarded formal acknowledgement in. You are a man to be proud of, sir, and it pricks the heart to see you think so little of yourself.”

Jason has his lips pressed so tightly together he’s certain they are bloodless. He will not cry at the table, he’s determined not to cry at the table. He takes a swig of wine, a drink too long to be properly polite, and he knows he’s sticking to ice water after this.
“If you disliked the food, the service, the overt rudeness of fellow patrons, the company— these would be reasons to extricate yourself with brief apology and little explanation. There are ways a gentleman handles such complaints. If those, however, are non-issues, then I will not stand by while you deny yourself on the basis of your own worth. Anywhere gentlemen are welcomed is a place where you belong. Is that understood?”

Jason nods, and nods again.

“Yes,” he finally manages.

Alfred reaches over and pats his hand.

“Good. Do you need a moment?”

“I’m okay,” Jason says, taking a piece of soft, veined cheese. He pops it in his mouth. “This is really good, isn’t it,” he says, around the bite.

“It is,” Alfred agrees. “What, if I may ask, are your summer plans?”

“I’m going to teach some summer classes at the 9th Street Community Center,” Jason says, feeling more at ease with every word. “I’m volunteering the hours and writing up some grant applications for them for a few programs. One of them is a kids’ theater group.”

“Oh?”

The warm smile in Alfred’s eyes is all Jason needs to go on, and as he rambles about the class curriculum he’s drafting pairing heroes in fiction and personal character lessons, the rest of his discomfort fades away.

They talk about the summer, the end of school, the food, and more through the rest of dinner— Jason even gets a few stories about Bruce when he was little, and then Bruce the first year with Dick. He suspects that Alfred offers these out of a desire to quell any anxiety about eventual foster kids, and he would say it’s unnecessary except it does actually make him feel better.

By the end of the evening, Jason is full. He’s full of good food and conversation and a steady kind of happiness. He can’t stop smiling— it’s one of the best dinners out he’s had in a long time.

It feels like a beginning.

He’s already packed up Red Hood stuff and phased most of the specialized equipment out of his apartment. He’s kept only enough hidden weapons to make sure he feels safe. The list of his safehouse locations was distributed awhile ago, when he no longer felt like he needed escape routes. Graduation was Saturday; summer classes start next week.

He bids Alfred farewell in front of the restaurant and gets another rare, quick hug in parting, as well as a small wrapped gift slipped into his hand.

“You didn’t have to, Al,” Jason protest, while his fingers are closed around the box. “Dinner was plenty.”

“And here I thought you had better manners,” Alfred returns, teasing and bright.

“Thank you,” Jason says. “Should I…”

“Open it at home, my boy,” Alfred says.
And then with promises of Jason’s attendance at the next family meal, they part on the darkened street.

Jason keeps a hand on the gift in his pocket the whole way to his apartment, where he sets it on the counter and tosses his jacket over a stool. He bites his lip and then peels the metallic paper off, uncertain what to expect—Alfred’s gifts range from traditional to sentimental and Jason isn’t sure where this one will fall.

Inside the paper is a slender box with a stack of index cards and a slip of paper inside. The cards are filled with Alfred’s neat script, recipe titles as the headings of each one. Jason unfolds the note.

It’s also in Alfred’s handwriting.

_Dear Master Jason,_

_This is neither a traditional graduation gift nor a traditional parenting one. It is my hope, however, that you will find it useful._

_The year I became your father’s guardian, I had limited skill in the kitchen. He, as you know, was grieving a terrible loss and adjusting to a new situation. Many of the youth who will enter your care are likely to be in similar circumstance._

_These recipes are for meals I have rarely prepared the past many years, but that first year, when my expertise had to develop quickly and the household was under strain, they were meals I utilized often. They are quick, simple, nutritious, and filling. Perhaps you will never need them. If, however, you find them helpful during seasons of adjustment, then I am honored to have offered such aid._

_All the best, sir._

_Your humble servant,_

_Alfred Pennyworth_

Jason leafs through the recipes, looking over headings, after setting the note aside. He digs his phone out of his pocket after he’s looked through all of them, his heart full.

“Master Jason,” Alfred says, after the second ring.

“You driving?” Jason asks. “I won’t keep you long. I just wanted to say thank you. For the gift. I’ve got manners, I’ll send a note. I just had one problem.”

“Oh?” Alfred says, just a touch of concern.

“Al, you’re not my servant. Formality, yeah, yeah, I know, but c’mon. You’re like my grandfather. I’m going to find a way to convince you someday.”

There’s a bit of a relieved chuckle and Alfred says, “Very well, Master Jason. Thank you for your company this evening. Have a good night.”

Jason looks through the recipes again after hanging up, and then stacks them all neatly with the note and leaves them in the box on the counter.

When the tux is hanging and zipped up in its protective bag, Jason finds himself wandering the apartment and checking the rooms. It’s clean and neat, but more than that, it’s childproofed. His
paper preference for teens didn’t exempt him from house study standards, so there are caps on outlets and locks on the windows. Twin beds and empty dressers wait, and now it seems that that’s all Jason is doing— waiting.

It’s strange.

The recent crisis is ebbing to a close, school is over, he doesn’t have work for a few more days. He has no patrol route to follow, no papers to write, no recovering family member to sit watch over.

Jason finds he doesn’t know what to do with himself. It’s not like he’s never had nights off before — it’s just the yawning horizon of everything being new. It should be exciting, but like the beginning of dinner, it curdles in him and for the first time since deciding to retire he’s nervous. He wonders if he didn’t make the wrong decision after all, cutting himself off from that life.

He could go back. He could haul his mask back out of storage, tell them all he’d changed his mind, deal with the teasing and Alfred’s disappointment. Dick would be happy, at least. He’s barely two weeks out— his muscles and mind are still sharp. He hasn’t even stopped working out. He’s had longer periods where he’s been benched for recovery or out for school.

Still, as obvious as it suddenly seems that he should just put the mask back on— maybe he could just not work while he’s got kids, restrict it to nights like this when he’s not doing anything— he doesn’t reach for his phone or keys.

He takes a cue from Alfred and makes a cup of tea, in the silence of his apartment at ten at night, feeling miserable. The earthy taste of the herbal blend he’d picked is sharp with ginger and he sips it slowly.

Then, tea is gone and he doesn’t feel much better.

Jason reaches for his phone and taps the name in his contact list. It rings while he sits on the edge of the couch and then there’s the answer, sharp and terse with an subtle undercurrent of worry.

“Jason?”

With all the hundreds of times they’ve talked on the phone the past few years, it’s a wonder Bruce hasn’t grown out of that initial panic yet. Even when they talked every few days while Jason was at the Kents, Bruce still answered his phone like that when it was Jason’s number.

“Hey,” Jason says casually.

“How was dinner?” Bruce asks, audibly more relaxed.

“Incredible,” Jason says.

“Good,” Bruce says, and he sounds distracted now.

“Is this a bad time?” Jason asks, glancing at the clock. It’s patrol time— Bruce shouldn’t be out again yet, so it’s late enough for— “Oh, shit, did I wake you up?”

“No,” Bruce says calmly. “I’m working on some things, but I can pause for a bit. What’s the matter, Jay?”

“Nothing,” Jason says, surprising himself. It takes a second for him to realize it feels odd because he isn’t lying. Nothing is wrong, except worrying that nothing being wrong is a sign that he’s doing something wrong. He sighs and falls back on the couch. “Nothing’s wrong. I think I’m
bored.”

“It’s one in the morning,” Bruce says. There’s a fizzing sound, like live currents being connected, in the background. “You could sleep.”

“Am I doing the right thing?” Jason asks, covering his eyes with one hand. He holds the phone close to his ear, the screen warm against his skin. “I mean. This. Is this okay? Is it…enough? I’m not doing anything.”

There’s a long silence and then the distant hum of a machine shutting down.

“Jay. Most people aren’t awake—”

“Yeah, but we’re not most people,” Jason shoots back. “So. Tell me the truth. You know who I am. What I can do. Is this just a cop out? Am I picking the easy way out of what I should be doing? You told me you couldn’t make the choice for me, and I made the fucking choice. Now tell me if I made the wrong one, before it’s too late.”

“Is this line secure.”

“Why the frick would it not be? Of course it is. I’m out, not stupid,” Jason snarls, and then he sucks in a breath and pinches the bridge of his nose. “Sorry. I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright,” Bruce says quietly. “Then I can tell you that last year, I was off-world with the League and we got trapped on a planet that was cursed. It was a place that made you see your worst nightmares.”

“We should go on more space vacations,” Jason says, with a humorless laugh. “Sounds fricking delightful.”

“Mm,” Bruce says, sounding briefly distracted. There’s a hiss and then the familiar sound of Bruce settling in the cave chair, the chair. It creaks slightly when someone leans on the armrest, probably because of all the parade of people who have lent against it while Bruce works. The oil doesn’t help or it doesn’t get oiled, but whatever the reason, it creaks a little.

“So. Worst nightmares. This is going to be a good pep talk, I can tell,” Jason says, when the silence continues.

“You think perhaps I would see myself out of control,” Bruce says, and Jason nods more to himself than anything else. “Or locked up. Insane. Alone, everyone I cared for gone.”

“But it wasn’t,” Jason says, though he feels a shiver run up his spine at the idea that these must have been things Bruce expected to see as his worst nightmares.

“No. It was…I was a bad father. That’s what I saw. I’m not a good father in reality, I know that. But I am trying. But this, this was unforgivably awful. I…”

The tight, choked noise has Jason sitting forward.

“Hey, it’s okay,” he says, quickly. “I don’t need all the grisly details. I get the picture. I know what bad parents look like, okay, I get it. You’re wrong, though, that you aren’t good for real.”

Over the line, Bruce takes a breath so measured Jason can hear it. “I didn’t tell you this because I need you to reassure me. I am aware of my own failures. I’d rather not add the burden of requiring you to falsely comfort me to that list.”
“Fuck you,” Jason says evenly. “Honestly, I mean that. I’m not lying to you, asshole.”

“Hnn,” Bruce says, a hint of smile in his tone. “Alright. Thank you. My point was, out of all the important work I do, there is one role that has become the most important. I do not always honor or fulfill it the way I know I should, but it is the thing I worry about the most and the thing I am the most proud of accomplishing, to whichever degree I have done that. I can’t take credit for what good people my children are, but I am honored I got to watch you become those people. I’m sorry I’ve never been good at saying so.”

“Jiminy crickets, you’ve become a cliche. A sappy cliche,” Jason teases, scrubbing at his eyes. “So. I’m doing the right thing.”

“If you want to devote your time and energy to being the guardian of children who need someone, even temporarily, and if you think the best way to do that is to step away from working in a mask, then you are doing something I could not. You’re already a better man than I am, just like I knew from the moment I met you that you would be.”

“Stop,” Jason says thickly. “I just wanted a yes or no, not this…whatever this is.”

“This is me saying things that are far overdue.”

“Yeah, because you can’t see me crying, or you would have freaked out and stopped like five minutes ago,” Jason says, sniffing.

“Are you crying,” Bruce says. His voice has been quiet the entire conversation but now there’s a tense quality. “I’m sorry.”

“Geez. I’m not asking you to apologize. It’s fine. And you do get to take some credit, you know. Even when I was angry at you all the time, I was angry because I couldn’t get away from wanting to be just like you. I just knew I was already such a disappointment that I’d never get there.”

“You’ve never been a disappointment, Jason.”

“Oh, bullshit,” Jason says, irritably.

“You don’t think I was terrified for you?” Bruce asks, and this time there’s an actual inflection in the question. “You don’t think I was scared to death all the time, of you letting yourself become something I couldn’t save you from? I couldn’t make this choice for you, and I couldn’t make your choices for you then. I would have let you kill me if I’d thought it would help you. It was what that life was doing to you that made me hate it so much. No, I wasn’t disappointed in you, Jason. I had failed you and you were suffering for it, and I didn’t know how to help you. If I’d known a brain tumor would be the key to drawing you back, I would have put one in my own skull the moment you showed back up in Gotham.”

“You wouldn’t have,” Jason says, the dread of old familiar regret welling up in him. “Shut up. You wouldn’t have let me kill you.”

“I would have,” Bruce insists. “If I had thought that it would have helped you move on and heal. I would have given you the weapon myself. But I didn’t think it was what you actually needed, even if I didn’t know what to give you instead.”

“This. For future reference, this is nice. The talking and the saying things. I’m not even bleeding out this time.”

Bruce’s laugh is low and grating and to Jason, it’s like music. He grins, something easing in his
“Noted,” Bruce says.

“Wait, you’re not bleeding out, are you?” Jason says, sitting forward a little.

“No,” Bruce says. “I’m fine. Alfred just brought tea. He’s in a good mood. I’m glad you got to
have dinner. He won’t tell you, but that was the highlight of his year. He sang all the way through
the hall to his room when he got home.”

Jason glances at the box of recipe cards on the counter across the room, where the living room
transitions to the kitchen. “He gave me a present, tonight. Did you know he didn’t know how to
cook before he was, well…before you. You know. That year.”

“I figured it out later,” Bruce says. “I didn’t notice much at the time. The cook left. I don’t
remember why. We ate a lot of sandwiches and soup. When I ate at all, that is.”

“You still eat a lot of sandwiches,” Jason says. “I didn’t even know sandwiches came in something
other than PB&J or bologna until you took me home.”

“I like them,” Bruce says. “They’re easy to eat while working.”

“That’s because you are a machine of some kind,” Jason retorts. “And all your favorite things are
determined by sheer utility.”

“Mmm. That explains why I took you out for ice cream so much as a kid.”

“Social bonding,” Jason says. “I learned that trick in college. And foster classes. Everything had a
purpose.”

“Did it work,” Bruce asks.

“Fuck yes,” Jason says, laughing, and then yawning. “Okay. I lied. Maybe I am tired. Thank you
for…whatever this was. I needed it. You should sleep, too, old timer. You doing okay? It’s late for
you on a night off.”

“I’ve been working,” Bruce says. “Just not going out.”

“Yeah, well, work on getting some sleep,” Jason says, yawning again. “Please?”

“I will try,” Bruce says. “Good night, Jay-lad.”

“I love you, Dad,” Jason says, sliding sideways on the couch.

“I love you, too, Jason,” Bruce says, and Jason presses the end call button on the screen.

He should get up and go to his actual, very comfortable bed, but he dozes on the couch for another
twenty minutes before the click of a window lock being slid over has him shooting upright and
onto his feet.

The window slides up and then stops when the window is only raised three inches.

“The fuck,” comes Nightwing’s frustrated exclamation through the gap. “Jason.”

“Child-proof latches. You have to use the door, dickhead.”
There’s a blur of black and blue movement through the glass and then a defeated, “If I come all the way around, will you open the door? I know you’re mad at me.”

“No shit,” Jason says. “But yeah. I’ll open it. Only because I’m in a good mood right now and I get to punch you in the teeth if you ruin that.”

Nightwing sighs deeply and then vanishes from view.

Jason makes another cup of tea while waiting, and it takes Dick longer than he expects. When there is finally a knock on his door, the tea isn’t just started-- it’s already finished steeping. Jason checks through the peephole and then disengages the lock.

It must have taken so long because Dick took the time to change into plainclothes. It wouldn’t surprise Jason to know Dick had backup clothes in the basement or another one nearby-- having stashes all over is ingrained into all of them. Dick steps into the apartment when Jason swings the door open and he stands in the hall, not going in any further, while Jason raises his tea in mocking salute.

“Come to remind me how much I’m letting you down?” Jason asks, heading to one of the bar stools at the counter. “Because I gotta say, this nostalgia thing sucks.”

“I owe you an apology,” Dick says stiffly. His hands are jammed in his pockets and Jason studies him for a minute-- he’s practically vibrating with the tension of not moving.

“Yeah, you do,” Jason says. “That isn’t one, by the way. We’re just agreeing you need to give one.”

Instead of a foul-tempered lashing out, Dick chews his lip.

“I’m sorry,” he finally says. “For how I handled your announcement. I thought you were being selfish, but after thinking about it for a while, I think I was the one being selfish. I thought it was putting me in a difficult position, but the position I was in was really my fault. You just made a decision that wouldn’t let me keep avoiding that.”

Jason’s grip on his tea mug relaxes and he sets it on the countertop with a frown. He gets up and pulls down another mug, turns the still-warm kettle back on.

“Apology accepted,” he says, both the bite in his tone and the desire to be biting gone. “What’s going on, Dickie?”

Dick toes off his shoes and sits on the stool next to the one Jason abandoned. He puts his head in his hands and would be utterly motionless if not for his leg constantly in nervous, upset animation. His foot is propped on a support of the stool, his knee bobbing rapidly.

“I’m swamped,” Dick says into his hands. “I can’t do this anymore. I go to the station in four hours and it’s a twelve hour shift, and then Damian will want to go out, and Bruce is benched, and….shit.”

The kettle whistles and Jason pours water over another ginger lemon tea bag and sets it in front of Dick.

“You need a break,” Jason says.

“Yeah, where. Where do I get a break in this,” Dick says bitterly. Then he sighs and drops his hands to the counter. “I’m sorry, I didn’t come over here to argue with you more. I’m just wanted
“to apologize for being an asshole and then leave.”

“What,” Jason says, sitting on the stool next to him, “exactly do you feel like you can’t do?”

“I was jealous of you, you know,” Dick says, sliding the offered mug to right in front of him. He wraps both hands around it, his long fingers curling over each other. “I am jealous of you. How easy it was to just decide.”

“You want to stop,” Jason guesses. “And now you think you can’t, because I’m out.”

“No, actually,” Dick says, with a ghost of a smile at the tea. “The opposite. I…I love this. I love all of it. I always have. For a while, I thought I could, you know, pull weight in both places. It looks good on paper, right? Jim has me on track to make higher rank. I’d have authority, and influence, to do some good work. Maybe even commissioner someday, he thinks. He doesn’t want to hand it off to just anyone.”

“Commissioner Dickface,” Jason says, like he’s testing it out. He bumps Dick with his elbow when there’s no chuckle or exaggerated upset. “But…”

“I hate letting him down,” Dick says softly. “He’s a good man. And I thought I could do this. I thought I could do both.”

“And you can’t,” Jason surmises. “It’s too much.”

“Maybe I’m getting old,” Dick says. “But fuck. It really is. I’m out as Nightwing when it’s dark, I’ve got all these cases the police can’t touch or don’t even know to look at, but being a detective means I’m on call, too. It’s not walking a beat. I’ve got cases I have to chase there, I get off-hours calls with leads and tips and catch more cases because they’re understaffed. And the hustle is…it’s important. I can’t skip it. If I’m going to make rank the way Jim is hoping, it has to be my life. It’s like having a job I’m married to, except I have two of those jobs. Something’s gotta give and I can’t…I can’t do it all. I can’t be Bruce.”

“You know Bruce has a day job he can just skip for weeks at a time, right,” Jason reminds him. “Like. This is more than any human could expect to manage. You’re being too hard on yourself, Dickie. It wasn’t easy for me to decide either.”

“Shit,” Dick says, massaging his forehead. “I’m going to let someone down no matter what I do.”

“Yeah,” Jason says. “And that feeling sucks. Trust me, I know all about letting people down.”

“This is…I can’t live without this, Jay. The mask isn’t just something I put on. It’s who I am. I know I’ve given B grief about that before, but it’s…this is me. I was born to do stuff like this. But I don’t even know how to talk to Jim or change anything because I can’t catch five fucking minutes to just think. I barely have time to sleep.”

“Let Steph take Damian out tonight, if he’s gotta go. You can crash here. Call off work. Spend the day sleeping before you end up getting hurt or making a bad call.”

“I can’t, I have to—”

“You don’t wanna be dad, then don’t be dad. Not like this,” Jason says, his voice firm.

Dick’s shoulders sag.

“Yeah,” he says, quietly. “Okay. Only because I think if I go back out, I’m going to fall asleep
midair or something. I’m pretty sure I have a fever. I can head back to my place, though.

“I’ve got extra beds,” Jason says. “Nobody’s using ’em tonight. Except you. Because you’re wrong, it wasn’t easy for me to decide, but I had help and I had time to think about how I needed to do things, and you need that, too.”

“Thanks,” Dick mumbles. He stands, the tea only half finished. “If you’re serious, I’m going to go crash right now.”

“Night, Dickie,” Jason says. “I’m glad you stopped by.”

“Hey, how did your…” Dick stops and half turns. “Your thing. The thing with Alfred. How’d it go?”

“It was awesome,” Jason says. “Best dinner I’ve had in a while.”

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