Taking Flight: A Tragicomedy in Four Acts

by WingFeathers

Summary

John and Mary Grayson die; Dick becomes Robin. This is everything that happens in between, a/k/a, how Gotham City ripped one family and identity from Dick and gave him another.

An origin story in the Rebirth spirit, weaving together threads from Tec #40, Dark Victory, Robin: Year One, New 52, and more.

Dick just wanted to go back to the circus, to go back to his normal life, waving to crowds and flying through the air. But instead he was in a giant cave under a giant mansion in (outside of?) Gotham, swiftly becoming part of a billionaire's cobbled-together family and trying to solve a murder. And the worst part? He sort of liked it.
For extra fun, here's a soundtrack playlist!
the star of the show

Chapter Summary

Act I: You Can Take the Boy out of the Circus...

Across Gotham, families prepared for a night at the circus. Maybe they were going to dinner, maybe they were letting the kids take a longer nap before a late night, or maybe they were simply beginning a long commute across the huge city.

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Across Gotham, families prepared for a night at the circus. Maybe they were going to dinner, maybe they were letting the kids take a longer nap before a late night, or maybe they were simply beginning a long commute across the huge city.

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“This is so unfair,” Dick whined, though no one could hear him. No humans, at least. A grey trunk nudged his shoulder, and he pet the young elephant. “Thanks, Zitka. You understand.”

Zitka was a good listener, and the time went faster complaining to her about his unjust punishment. Zane and Raymond, the other boys in the troupe of acrobats, had accidentally-on-purpose dropped his costume in bleach, making pale splotches all over the beautiful deep blue. True, Dick had ruined theirs in turn, but it was only what they deserved.

His mom hadn’t cared for that excuse. Justice is making the world right and good, she’d said, not hurting someone just because they hurt you. She was right, of course, but it seemed unfair that they’d only had a stern talking-to while he’d earned an afternoon mucking manure.

Zitka sprayed water at him. It was strangely refreshing given the muggy May heat. The city trapped heat and humidity in its bubble of smoggy air.

“I know, right? It’s all Zane’s and Raymond’s fault.” Dick shook his head like a dog, letting the water drop onto his shoulders.

“You did kind of bring this on yourself, Grayson.”

Dick looked up to find the source of the voice. Raya Vestri, the most beautiful girl in the circus, was sitting on the fence of the pen, a good twenty feet above him.

“Yeah?” he asked. “How’s that?”

Raya tossed her braid behind her and laughed. “I don’t know, maybe by saying that everyone was coming to see you.”

“Well, they are.”
“God, you’re the worst sometimes,” she said. But she didn’t leave, either. “Need help down there?”

Dick looked around at the pen. He was surprised Raya was even talking to him. Usually she sided with the other kids, but he wasn’t about to complain. Maybe Mister Haly was right, and she liked him. But she was a whole year older, and a good six inches taller. Someday, maybe.

“Thanks,” he said, “but… I think I’m supposed to do it myself.”

“Well, need company, then?”

“Yeah.” Dick grinned. “Company’s good.”

Raya walked the edge of the fence, holding out her arms for balance. “Hey, think I can cartwheel on this?”

Dick leaned on his shovel and eyed the fence. He shook his head.

“Really? Bet you think you could do it.”

Dick looked back down to his work. He did think he could do it, but he was supposed to be learning a lesson about bragging, or something.

“I’m just saying,” he said, “if you fall and break your arm three hours before our first show at the biggest stop of the tour, Haly’s gonna kill you.”

“Fine,” she sighed. “I’ll come down there, then.”

“Raya, don’t—”

His warning fell silent as she threw herself into a flip off the fence. He dropped the shovel, letting it fall to the ground with a loud clunk, and rushed toward her. She made two turns and landed right into the pile of manure—as did he, in his effort to catch her.

Raya rolled out of the heap of elephant dung and wiped her face. “Ta-da!”

Dick pushed himself up and wiped his hands on his shorts. “You got a little something on your leg,” he said, totally straight-faced, as if she weren’t covered in the stuff head-to-toe.

She looked down at her leg, and they both burst into laughter.

“Here, try this,” he said, uncoiling the hose from the corner of the pen and tossing it to her.

“Ready!” she shouted. He turned the gear and shouted back, “Hup!” just before the water sprayed out at her end.

She laughed and sprayed herself down—arms, legs, head. She shook out her dark red hair and ran it under, too. He watched transfixed, until she pushed the nozzle into his hand. “Here, get my back, will you?”

Dick nodded and did as she asked. She was pretty. All the grownups had said that they’d end up together some day. Not that he wanted to marry her, but circus families stayed with their own kind, and she was already a Flying Grayson in all but her name.

“Glad I didn’t break my arm, but that was gross,” she said, flicking the water out of her hair. “So, how was it? The somersault, I mean.”
Dick hadn’t exactly been watching for form, but he screwed his face in thought, trying to remember. “Well, you could probably—”

“Oh my God, Dick Grayson. I don’t want notes.”

“Oh, I thought—.” Dick blushed and picked his shovel back up, suddenly aware of how much work he still had to do, in the pen and with his friends.

Raya grabbed another shovel and joined his work. “It’s okay.”

“I’m—”

“Supposed to do it yourself, I know. Honestly, I should’ve stopped Ray and Zane, but I didn’t. I was mad about what you said, too. So I guess we all sort of share the blame.”

“Sorry about what I said,” he said.

“It’s okay. They are all coming to see you.”

“Not just me.” He moved another shovelful of dung from the pile into the wheelbarrow. “All of us.”

Raya looked down and smiled, a secret kind of smile. “The new costumes say otherwise.”

Dick stopped his work. “New costumes? Did you see them?”

“Maybe.” Raya’s smile grew wider now. “I don’t want to give it away or anything. They’re supposed to be a surprise.”

“Then how do you know?”

“Your parents didn’t want you boys thinking the new costumes were a reward for your stupid pranks. I had nothing to do with it, so…”

“So?” Dick’s eyes opened wide. “What are they like?”

Raya mimed a zipper across her lips.

“Aw, come on! You can’t say that and then not tell me!”

“Hey. I’m just giving you a heads up so you don’t say something stupid again. Mister Haly wanted yours to be different. Something special for the star of the show.”

“I’m not—”

She waved off the attempt at humility. “Just don’t have a big head about it.

“Right.”

Raya sighed as she dropped another shovelful of elephant manure into the barrow. “Man, I hate to ditch you, but I really need a shower.”

“Oh?” Dick began to smile and let it grow into a grin. “Didn’t get enough sham-poo?”


“Nah, you love me.”
“Uh-huh.” Raya put her shovel back in place. “See you at call?”

“Yeah. Thanks for your help!” He followed her to the door of the pen and watched as she crossed through the back yard. Dick’s heart fell a little at her leaving, but he’d been lucky she’d come by at all.

The yard was mostly empty, with everyone getting their last minutes of freedom and quiet before the come-in hour let in the stream of guests. But in the distance, he saw two men walking by. They looked familiar, too—a lot like the ones he’d seen with the jerk of a guy who’d been arguing with Mister Haly the night before. He set out to go tell his parents, but then thought better of it. He still had to finish his job. And then he’d have to own up to eavesdropping on Mister Haly, just when he was getting out of trouble.

It was probably nothing. If they were back, maybe they’d just worked out whatever deal it was with Mister Haly. Probably a scuffle over hawking privileges in the midway, concessions and all that. It wasn’t unusual to have unsavory types trying to weasel in on bigger cuts than the circus could afford.

Dick back-pedaled into the pen and tried to get his mind off of it. He’d find a way to ask about it later, after the pen was clean and he was showered.

He rounded the corner and leaned into Zitka’s leg. “Did you hear, Zitka? New costumes. And mine’s special.”

The young elephant’s trunk curled around and clutched at his hair.

“I know, I know. You’re special, too.” He reached up and stroked the thick hide. “Two weeks, and we’ve sold out every night, can you believe it?”

Zitka’s weight shifted side to side. Dick took that as shared astonishment.

“Yeah. Gotham’s got a lot of people, though, right? You can’t really see them, but there are so many buildings, and tall ones.” He pointed out at the skyline in the distance. “See? They’re taller than trees. I bet we could stay here a whole month and still sell out.”

Zitka trumpeted a sound of objection, and Dick laughed.

“I know, you wouldn’t want to stay here that long. But we gotta make it count. Dad says that Gotham’s different from other places. Hungry. They want something exciting, something big. And that’s us.”

Just as his father had said, Gotham City’s audience was unlike any other. The whole hour before the show, they poured in, buying food and taking pictures and gathering souvenirs. They hummed with energy and anticipation beyond any other crowd, and while they hadn’t loved the clowns, they hung on the edge of their seats and gasped and cheered for every act, each more daring than the last.

“Smile for the crowd,” his dad told the troupe, like every time, just before they began their climb.

Ten minutes later, Dick was smiling wide as he could, beaming ear to ear in his new costume. He puffed out his chest and his new red vest, something special for the star of the show, as his mom ran her hands through his hair before chalking her palms.
“Time to fly, little Robin,” she said, like every time, just before she took off. He took her warm-up cape and helped steady her on the mount, and off she went.

Ten minutes after that, and he was screaming, screaming so loud he thought the whole world had erupted in horror. He wasn’t the only one screaming. Everyone saw it happen, the whole sold-out crowd. They had all come to see the Flying Graysons. And then they all left. Fled. Even the grinning little boy from before the show, so small and eager: little Tim—or Tom? Todd? Tim, definitely Tim. Dick had told him he’d be performing just for him, that it wouldn’t be scary.

So much for that. The kid would probably never be the same again.

Dick reached the ground sobbing, feeling like someone had physically ripped out his heart. It was too much to hope that it was just broken bones. Mister Haly shook his head as Dick ran to their bodies, confirming his worst fears.

He threw himself on them and clung to his father’s torn leotard, his mother’s matted hair. They were bleeding everywhere. It soaked through the tape on his hands, stuck to his elbows and knees, making everything smell like metal. He begged them to stay alive, but his words came too late. Gotham City had killed them.
death-defying stunt

Chapter Summary

"Hands reached around him and pulled him back from the bodies that were somehow his parents and yet not at all his parents. A voice he didn’t know shushed in his ear and he fought against it. The arms were covered in dark wool, like a businessman’s suit, but they were strong."

"Come away," a voice said. "You have to let the responders in."

"No!" Dick struggled, but the arms held his tight. "Let me go!"

"I can’t do that." The arms turned him away from the scene, and he looked up to see a young well-polished man looking down at him. "I’m sorry," he said, with eyes full of grief. "They’re gone. I’m so sorry."

"Where’s… where’s Mister Haly?"

"With the police."

"I need to talk to the police!" He’d seen things. The mobster who’d threatened Haly. And those men outside the tent, before the performance. It couldn’t be an accident.

"You will."

"No, now!" Dick tried to jerk away from the grip of the suited man, but he couldn’t. "I know who did this!"

"You think this was on purpose?"

"I know it was! I saw a mafia guy making threats, and… and… they musta messed with the ropes." Dick burst into tears. A heavy blanket wrapped around his shoulders, cloaking him in warmth and weight.
“You can tell all of that to Captain Gordon, in just a few minutes when he arrives.”

Dick blinked until the blur from the tears cleared. “Who are you?”

“I’m Bruce Wayne.”

“Like... the billionaire Bruce Wayne?”

“I’m just going to sit with you, for a bit.”

“Why?”

He didn’t answer. Instead, he gestured to a bench on the side of the ring. “Let’s sit.”

Dick hesitated. He looked back where his parents had fallen, but they were now surrounded by emergency responders and police, so he reluctantly followed Bruce Wayne to the side and pulled the blanket tight around his shoulders.

They sat, and Dick shut down. His whole world had crashed into pieces. He stared at his feet in silence until the police captain did come over. Dick answered each question robotically, until Bruce Wayne interjected.

“Jim, the boy was telling me about some suspicious characters he saw... Someone making threats.”

“Yeah.” Dick nodded. “What Mister Wayne said. Some guys yesterday... I saw them talking to Mister Haly. They, um... they were talking about protection, and they said something like they’d hate for any accidents to happen...” And it had.

Gordon raised a bushy eyebrow. Had Mister Haly not told him?

“Dick,” said Gordon, kneeling to Dick’s level, “Do you remember anything else about the conversation? Any names, faces?”

“The main guy, he was big, but he had a hat, so I couldn’t see his face. I think his name was Zoo... Zoo something.”

“Zucco?” Captain Gordon supplied.

“Yeah! That was it.”

Gordon grimaced. “Did you tell anyone else about this?”

Dick wrung his hands. He hadn’t. His eyes watered, burning hot with angry tears. “No,” he whispered. “I should’ve, I know. I’m sorry, I should’ve—”

“It’s okay, Dick. This isn’t your fault.” Captain Gordon’s voice was firm, but Dick didn’t quite buy it. He glanced up and saw that Gordon was looking at Mister Wayne as much as he was at Dick.

“Except it was,” Dick said, breaking into real tears this time. “I saw two of the guys today, the other ones. And I still didn’t—I didn’t do anything. I just... I was in trouble and I was thinking about the costumes and the elephant pen and I forgot about it by the time I saw anybody.” He could’ve stopped it all. The horror of it faced him dead on. He grabbed his hair in his hands and tugged at it. “I didn’t do anything.”

“You’re doing something now,” said Mister Wayne, taking Dick’s wrists in his hands and guiding them gently down away from his head. “But Captain Gordon’s right. This wasn’t your fault. You
didn’t know what they’d do.”

“Can you describe the two other men?”

Dick gave a shaky nod. “Um, one was tall and skinny, pale… with a long nose. And… the other guy, he was normal height, I guess. I didn’t see his face, but he had a limp. His left leg.”

“That’s really good information, Dick,” said Captain Gordon. “This is going to help us.”

“Y-yeah?”

“Yeah. I’m going to take this case myself, see it through.”

“Thank you,” said Mister Wayne, like it was some kind of personal favor.

“You hang tight here, okay, Dick?” Captain Gordon adjusted his glasses and smiled at Dick. “I need a word with Mister Haly.”

“I’ll stay with him, Jim.”

“Thanks, Bruce,” said Captain Gordon.

Bruce Wayne just nodded stiffly.

Gordon stood up and left him with Billionaire Bruce Wayne. Dick couldn’t sort out why this guy was here, of all people.

“How are you holding up?”

Dick blinked and looked back at the ring, at the blood-stained dust under the hot lights. So recently, he’d been on top of the world, ready to wow and amaze Gotham with his already-famous quadruple somersault—

The Flying Graysons, in their death-defying stunt—

His breath hitched. The words had never meant anything before. Just show business. And now…

How was he holding up?

“This can’t be real,” he muttered. There was no way his parents, his parents were gone. He swallowed and blinked away the tears. “It can’t be.”

A firm hand met his back. “I understand, Dick.”

Dick jerked his shoulder away and snapped his body toward Bruce Wayne. “No, you don’t,” he bit. “You can’t.”

“I do,” Bruce Wayne countered. “I was close to your age, when my parents… They were shot right in front of me.”

“Oh,” Dick swallowed. “But that’s different,” he said. “People get shot all the time.”

Bruce Wayne had no answer to that. His eyebrows just tightened together and his eyes dropped, as if he were the one who’d lost everything tonight. A tug pulled in Dick’s chest. He hadn’t meant to hurt anyone.
“I didn’t mean—”

“You can’t take him!” Mister Haly’s shouts cut off Dick’s apology. Haly was red-faced, arguing with Captain Gordon. “This is his family!”

Captain Gordon said something quiet and grimaced, his eyes darting around the circus tent.

“He’s perfectly safe with us! You… you’ll take him away, put him with some crooks looking to make some money from the foster system, land him in the system—”

“He’s not safe, Mister Haly,” Gordon snapped, his patience wearing out. “If his story is true—if someone did this and it wasn’t an accident—then that boy’s in danger until we find out what happened and get the murderer in custody so he doesn’t try to finish the job.”

Dick dropped his shoulders and his chin and turned back toward the ring. He leaned forward on his palms, hovering over the sticky bleacher bench until his arms began to feel the strain of it. They shouldn’t have felt any strain at all. Grief had weakened him. He swung himself lightly, subtly, and then came back to a sitting position a fraction closer to Bruce’s fine-woven wool sleeve.

“It’s not an accident. My parents don’t make mistakes.” His brow knit in frustration. “I know it sounds like I’m just a stupid kid, but I’m not.”

“You don’t sound stupid.”

“I’m not saying they’re perfect all the time, but they don’t make mistakes like that.” Didn’t. He swallowed back the choking feeling in his throat. “Not in the air. Not with the ropes. They always test the ropes,” he said, with more conviction. “It had to be those guys I saw. That Zucco.” The bitter taste of the name twisted his mouth into a scowl.

“If it is, the police will find him.” Even as Wayne said it, the words sounded hollow, lifeless.

“Did… did they catch the guy that killed your parents?”

No answer.

The silence ripped through Dick’s heart. There was no promise they’d catch Zucco, either. And they’d never let Dick come back home, because it would never be safe. He’d lose the circus, the only family he had other than his parents. Who were really, actually gone. Tears welled back into his eyes as the anger made way for the grief to return.

Suddenly the coldness of the air hit him. He’d shaken off the heavy blanket earlier, and now he sat shivering with his arms bare, all warmth and happiness gone, forever.

“I just want them back,” he whispered.

“I know.” Bruce Wayne wrapped his jacket around Dick’s shoulders, and this time Dick leaned into him. “I know.”

They sat there in silence for quite a while, while Captain Gordon and the police continued taking statements from everyone who had been around before the show. There were a lot of people to talk to. Dick scanned the room for familiar faces, trying to make eye contact with each of his friends, but
none of the other artists would meet his eye. Everyone stayed clear of him, except for Mister Wayne, who stayed still and quiet but held his arm tight around Dick without weakening.

“Hello, Richard. Good evening, Mister Wayne.” An older woman with glasses and severe makeup looked down at them and smiled. It wasn’t a real smile. It was fake, practiced. Dick hated it. He hated that she called him Richard. He hated the way she said *Mister Wayne* like an insult.

She bent her knees to match Dick’s level and looked him in the eye. “Hi, sweetie. I’m Miss Plummer, and I’m from the Department of Children and Families. Once the GCPD gives the okay, we can go somewhere warm, where you can shower up and get some sleep. You’ll be able to come back soon, I promise.”

Dick looked at the ground. He didn’t want to leave. Her promise meant nothing. It could take months to catch the guy who did this. Years. Everyone always said that Gotham was run by crooks. Why would they arrest their own?

It wasn’t *fair*.

Bruce Wayne seemed to agree, because his embrace became tighter, holding Dick close. “Dick can stay with me,” he said. “Until he can come back here.”

Miss Plummer stood to her full height now and looked down her long nose at Bruce Wayne. “I do appreciate the thought, Mister Wayne, but there is a process for these matters. Are you licensed to foster?”

“Well, I—”

“You either are or you aren’t, Mister Wayne.”

“He’s spent the past hour with me. I have plenty of room, a safe neighborhood, a security system.” Bruce rose from the bleacher, now towering over the social worker. “Miss Plummer, I’m sure we can work *something* out—”

That was the wrong thing to say. Plummer stepped in front of Dick now, as if shielding him. If Dick had distrusted her before, he downright hated her now. Not that he wanted to go stay with Bruce Wayne, necessarily, but he didn’t *not* want to. It’s not like he wanted to go wherever she was taking him.

“I’m sure you are very accustomed to getting your way, Mister Wayne, but the State’s concern is for this child, not for you. We have no evidence that your house is safe for a child, that you can provide the emotional stability necessary, that you have *any* idea what foster care involves. I’m happy to give you a card, if you like, but—”

“Yes, *I would* like that.” Bruce Wayne side-stepped back into Dick’s view as he tucked her card into his vest pocket. “Where are you taking him?”

“Sir, you have no relation to the boy. *I really* can’t divulge—”

“I’m right here!” Dick stood up, losing Bruce’s oversized probably-thousand-dollar jacket in the peanut shells and dust behind the bench. “Stop talking about me like I’m not here.”

Miss Plummer looked sort of guilty, but only in the way that someone looks when they get caught, not when they’re actually sorry. Bruce Wayne, on the other hand, looked properly sorry. He was growing on Dick.
“I’m sorry, Richard,” said Miss Plummer. “I know these all might look like unnecessary rules, but we’re just trying to look out for you.”

“What do you care?”

She opened her mouth, probably with a perfectly rehearsed answer for all the angry kids from messed up families that she dealt with, but Dick didn’t want that.

“I’m not even from Gotham. I shouldn’t have to stay here.” Gotham had killed his parents. He wanted to pack up and leave it as soon as he could, not move in with some family here.

“Well, I’m afraid you do have to stay here. It won’t be long, I’m sure. Your entire…” She looked around at the circus. “Everyone here is going to have to stay in Gotham for a little while, until the police and OSHA get everything settled.”

“Where are you taking me?”

Miss Plummer sighed. “We’ll go to a home tonight with other children, so you won’t be alone. And then we’ll work to find you a family you can stay with until everything’s worked out.”

That didn’t sound promising. Bruce Wayne’s face had twisted at her words, and he seemed to be holding back some kind of argument.

“Can I say goodbye to Mister Wayne?”

Plummer looked between the two of them and gave a pity-smile. “I need to check in with the police. You’ll be ready when I’m back?”

Dick nodded once. It’s not like he had much of a choice. After she left, Bruce turned back to him.

“Mister Wayne?”

“Call me Bruce. Please.”

“Where are they taking me?”

“I don’t know,” he said. He said it slow, confused, like he couldn’t quite believe his own ignorance. “It’ll be a group home… other children who aren’t with foster families. Listen, the other boys may be a bit rough around the edges, but that doesn’t mean they’re bad. You’ll have to have patience with them.”

Bruce wasn’t exactly selling the place. “Like juvie rough?”

“There are good kids there, like you,” Bruce insisted. “And the place should be all right. Most of the homes have been renovated in the past five years.”

“By you,” Dick guessed.

“Not personally,” Bruce said, as if Dick actually had imagined him repainting walls and installing new lights. “You’ll be okay there. But Dick… Gotham isn’t a safe place.”

“Oh really.” He blinked once, a little surprised that Bruce “I understand” Wayne would say something so tone-deaf to the situation.

Bruce dropped his head and sighed. “Not just Zucco. I need you to listen to me. Are you listening?”
Dick wrinkled his nose. “Yes.” He wasn’t sure why he had to listen to a man who had no
relationship to him, no authority at all in any way, but something about him—his voice? His severe
brows? His clearly heartfelt concern?—made Dick feel like he should.

Bruce took Dick by the shoulders and looked down with an unmistakable gravity. “The streets of
Gotham are not safe. For anyone, least of all someone who doesn’t know the city and who’s pointed
a finger at a crime boss. I don’t care if you hate the home or your family placement. Do not go out
alone.”

“I’m not some sheltered lit—”

“Dick, promise me.”

Dick looked away. He didn’t want to make promises he couldn’t keep. What if it was terrible?
What if he had the chance to find Zucco?

Bruce seemed to read his mind, because he swore under his breath in a strange gesture of
helplessness. Dick looked up in surprise.

“Just give me three days,” Bruce said. “Keep your head down, be safe, stay inside. Three days.”

Dick kicked at the ground, not sure if he should agree to something like that. “I already kept my
head down. I saw those guys and I didn’t say anything, and that’s why my parents are dead.”

Bruce furrowed his brow. “That wasn’t your fault.”

The words meant nothing. He could’ve done something, and he didn’t. And now he was supposed
to keep doing nothing. “What if he comes for me?”

“Zucco won’t know where you are. That’s why you have to leave. They—”

“No. What if he comes for me here? What if he hurts someone else?”

Bruce’s face tightened. “Captain Gordon will keep them safe.”

Dick leaned past Bruce and peered over at Gordon, sizing him up. He wasn’t so sure the Gotham
City Police were going to keep anyone safe. “But—”

“I’ll tell the press you’re coming with me,” Bruce offered. “That way, if Zucco wants to come for
you, he won’t come here or to the group homes.”

That just made another problem: “But what about you?”

“Don’t worry about me. Will you do what I said?”

“I guess.”

“Not good enough. Promise me.”

“Fine. I promise.”

Bruce nodded. “Good. Whatever I can do for the GCPD, for Haly, for you, I’ll get it done. And I’ll
see you in three days, one way or another.”

“Okay,” Dick whispered.
Bruce’s eyes flickered to the side, and then he nodded behind him. “She’s coming back.”

“Goodbye, then, Mister Wayne. Thank you.”

Miss Plummer was there now. But Mister Haly was there, too. He wrapped his big arms around Dick and soon Dick’s feet left the ground for the first time since he’d been brought down the ladder.

“I wish I didn’t have to go,” he said, wiping tears onto Mister Haly’s red coat.

“I know.” Mister Haly squeezed him tight. “You’ll come back, though. It’s just for a little bit.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. You’re our star, Dickie.”

Miss Plummer cleared her throat, and Mister Haly placed Dick gently back on the ground. It was strange, to be handled so carefully, like a fragile glass that would break. Mister Haly was probably as sad and scared as he was: John Grayson had been like a son to him. And now John and Mary were gone forever, and Gotham was tearing Dick away, too.

Dick felt lost and confused, but he knew one thing: he couldn’t wait to leave Gotham and never, ever come back.
a talon for your head

Chapter Summary

“We got a killer clown here.”

“What?” What was this city, with its mobsters and its billionaires shot dead and its killer clowns?

“Yeah, some kinda serial killer,” waved off his roommate. “You don’t actually have to worry about that. We got the Bat to lock up guys like that: Holiday, Riddler, he gets all them guys. How many people actually get murdered by serial killers anyways?”

“Rich coming from you, Paco,” said Freckles. “You’re afraid of the Owls.”

“Jewel says you’re a circus freak.” The kid looked down at Dick from deep-set eyes, hooded from lack of proper sleep.

Dick gritted his teeth. He wanted to bite back, but he just felt sorry for his new roommate. That side of the room wasn’t exactly well-decorated, and the other boy seemed to be living out of his suitcase, but he had a full laundry basket and a desk full of homework papers. Definitely not a one-night stay, like Plummer had promised Dick. “I’m from the circus. But I’m not a freak. I’m an acrobat.”

Apparently that helped. The boy tilted his head in thought, evaluating Dick. “Like flips and shit?”

Dick’s scowl turned into a smile. “Yeah.”

“Cool.”

“Yeah? Wanna see?”

That worked. “Yeah!” The boy—Dick still hadn’t caught his name—stuck his head into the hall. “Yo, youse guys, come see the circus freak do some flips and shit!”

Dick didn’t fight the term this time. It seemed like a sort of weird form of acceptance, but he wasn’t sure how things worked in Gotham. Two more kids pushed their way in and looked at Dick with curiosity. The first was tall and wiry, with freckles splattered across a sneering face. The other looked shell-shocked, with wide eyes and small ears that stuck out from his head.

“Did you really live at a circus?” asked the freckled wiry one. “I’ve never been.”

“I have,” said Dick’s roommate. “My dad thought it would be some kind of bonding or something, but he mostly got drunk and yelled at the animals.”

“I went once, but never again. Not with the clowns,” said the shell-shocked one. “You ain’t scared of clowns?”

Dick shook his head. Fearing clowns never made much sense to him. He’d seen kids come to the circus and hide behind their parents, sometimes, and then he’d go up to them in his acrobat’s uniform and draw them out, show them there was nothing to be afraid of. “Real clowns aren’t actually
scary,” he said.

Freckles laughed. “You’re not from Gotham.”

“No.” Dick thought he’d already made that obvious. He crossed his arms. “I’m from the circus. I mean, I’ve been to Gotham before, but not—”

“We got a killer clown here.”

“What?” What was this city, with its mobsters and its billionaires shot dead and its killer clowns? Why did he have to get stuck here, of all places? Why couldn’t this have happened in Metropolis? They had Superman. Then again, nothing as terrible as this would have happened in Metropolis.

“Yeah, some kinda serial killer,” waved off his roommate. “You don’t actually have to worry about that. We got the Bat to lock up guys like that: Holiday, Riddler, he gets all them guys. How many people actually get murdered by serial killers anyways?”

“Rich coming from you, Paco,” said Freckles. “You’re afraid of the Owls.”

Paco, as Dick’s roommate was apparently called, puffed up his chest. “You shut your goddamn mouth, Braydon.”

Gotham officially made no sense. Killer clowns, scary owls, bats… Maybe they were criminal code names or something. What did he know about mobs and gangs and all that? He’d half-thought of trying to catch Zucco himself, but listening to these kids made it clear how much he had to learn about the criminals of Gotham City. And sure, maybe kids in the foster system weren’t the best experts either, but they knew more than he did. At least they were from Gotham.

“What’s the owls?” he asked.

Braydon and Shell-Shock laughed, but Paco paled and shook his head. “They’re like… evil ghosts, man. But real.”

“Don’t listen to him—they ain’t real,” said Braydon, which seemed to be Freckles’s actual name. “Just a stupid story to keep kids in line, like Santa and the Tooth Fairy or whatever. Only little kids are scared of that. And Paco.”

“What’s the story?”

The boy with the fear of clowns cleared his throat. “Beware the Court of Owls,” he said, in a croaking whisper, “that watches all the time—“

“Yo, Jamal, shut up,” said Paco. He acted annoyed, but his eyes shifted around betraying actual fear.

“—Ruling from a shadow perch, behind granite and lime,” Jamal continued, almost chanting the words. He stepped closer to Dick, who was still sitting on the thin mattress. “They watch you at your hearth”— Another step. “They watch you in your bed.” He was close to Dick now, looming over him. “Speak not a whispered word of them, or they’ll send the Talon for your head!”

Jamal and Braydon drew forefingers in a knife-like motion across their necks, eerily in unison.

Paco shuddered and looked out the window across to the roof of another building. Nothing was out there but pigeons and steam from vents, but Paco still kept a watchful eye. “The rhyme even says not to talk about them, you morons.”
Dick furrowed his brow. “I don’t get it. They’re some kinda mafia?”

“Nah, the mafia’s just asshole people,” said Paco. “The Owls are like, everywhere. And the Talon… he can’t be killed, and he never dies. Way scarier. I’m not afraid of stupid mobsters.”

Dick’s face hardened. “A stupid mobster killed my parents,” he said.

The kids fell silent.

Freckles—Braydon—spoke. “You’re parents are like… dead-dead? Both of them?”

“Yeah. That’s why I’m here, isn’t it?”

Braydon shrugged. “Lucky.”

“What?”

“I said you’re lucky. You don’t have to deal with them anymore.”

Dick looked around at each of the boys. Paco looked away, and Jamal shrugged. He remembered what Bruce Wayne had said, that the boys might be rough around the edges. Not to hold it against them. “I’m not lucky,” he whispered. “They were good people.”

“That’s lucky, too.”

“Ay,” Paco kicked Braydon in the shins. “We’re all stuck in this dump, huh? No difference.”

Braydon rolled his eyes, but he didn’t argue.

It was kind of a dump, even though it was, as Bruce had said, recently patched up. New bright lights and clean carpets couldn’t change the fact that the home was in an old duplex in a run-down neighborhood of Gotham, or that the beds were cheap and the food was barely edible.

“Were your parents acrobats too, Circus Freak?” Paco leaned on the plaster column next to Dick’s bed.

“Yeah. My family’s been in the circus for generations. The Flying Graysons!” He held out his arms like they did on the board every time they were introduced. “’Cause… trapeze. But I can also do tumbling. Flips, handstands, stuff like that.”

“Yeah,” said Paco, “you were gonna show us! That’s why I brought you dummies in, not to hear you whine about clowns and get us all on the Talon’s hit list.”

Dick grinned. They all stared at him, waiting for him to stand up, clear some space. But he didn’t need it. He’d scoped out the room as soon as he’d entered. There was a pipe above his bed, probably strong enough to support him. He brought his feet onto the mattress and shifted his weight forward, crouching on the edge of the bed. And then—yes! He launched himself up to grab the pipe. It was rougher than he’d expected, but that was fine. Without missing a beat, he swung himself once to gain momentum and once more to spin himself once over their heads and onto the floor.

“Dammommnn,” Paco said.

“How’d you do that?” Jamal asked.

“That’s like, the easiest thing in the world,” Dick said. He crouched and flipped backwards away from them, landing right in front of the door.
“Mister Grayson, what do you think you’re doing?”

He jumped to face the door, where a stern middle-aged woman stood. “Um…” He faltered. Her pinched face made it clear that he had done something Quite Inappropriate, but he didn’t see how he’d done anything wrong.

“Time for bed, boys. And no more fooling around.”

And with those words, Dick was brought back to the harsh reality around him. He wasn’t just hanging out with some scrappy townies in between shows. He wasn’t going back to the circus. He was stuck here, in a completely strange world with strange people, where people were afraid of clowns and a flip was considered fooling around.

He had never felt more alone in his life.

Bruce was used to alone. He liked it, usually, his thoughts, his mission, and nothing more. But tonight, staking out one of Zucco’s known associates in the late spring rain, it felt different. It wasn’t loneliness. He was always lonely: different, separate, even when surrounded by people. This feeling was an extended hand met with a closed door, a person-shaped gap.

Maybe he’d felt a little of that before. When his parents first died, before the reality set in and pushed him into mourning, he’d constantly looked for their presence, wondering what they would say if they saw a new development in Gotham. But that was death.

Or when Harvey had given up, given over to his anger and turned it into a persona that controlled him. Harvey was unwell. He needed doctors, not Bruce.

Or when he—Batman—had reached out to Selina, hoping she’d reform, only to have her steal a priceless jade statue (which he’d hated, but that wasn’t the point) right off of his—Bruce’s—mantle and leave a note blaming him for standing her up one time too many. But that had been willful rejection. And so Bruce had been able to push past it, sort of, to convince himself that they’d never work out anyway.

But Dick was a child, a terrified and angry child who needed him. He wanted to be with Bruce. There was no reason for that social worker to have taken him to a state orphanage. There were too many kids, not enough adults, and the kids there had usually been through several stops first. Bruce could help him.

As soon as he left the circus, he’d done as he promised and set to work on every front. Tracking Dick’s placement. Monitoring Haly. Hunting down Zucco. He’d have to wait until morning to contact his lawyer about the whole fostering business, but he’d asked Alfred to look into it.

Not that he was parent material.

He forced himself to set aside those thoughts and focus on the current mission: solving this case. Everything Dick had said about Zucco had checked out, except the protection racket motive.

It was disproportionate, for one. Haly only needed a warning: a broken arm would’ve sent the right message, got Haly to turn over money. And with such a public display, it didn’t get him much in the way of future clients, either. There was no way Haly was paying him now, and Bruce had trouble
imagining an act wanting to follow. All Zucco had done was to drive away business. Either Zucco was an idiot, or Bruce was missing something.

He gritted his teeth. He would find the missing piece and solve this case. He had to.

Dick didn’t sleep well that night. He drifted off from time to time, but he couldn’t get past dreaming and into a deep sleep without waking up in a cold sweat.

He was watching them fall, over and over.

Or falling himself.

Or being thrown off a Gotham skyscraper by a gangster, and then falling.

Once, once he was flying, swinging through the air, and then an owl swooped down and snatched him in its giant talons.

He sat up in bed after the last one, reminding himself that giant owls were not real. And then he’d seen a gargoyle statue on the building across the street take flight, and he wasn’t sure what was real or not.

Maybe that had been a dream as well. He dangled his toes over the floor, unsure what to do. He had too much energy to sleep. Too much sitting still in one day. And it was warm in this room, up on the fourth floor. He got up, crossed to the window, unlatched the lock, and dragged it open.

He immediately recoiled at the smell of rotting garbage on the street. So much for fresh air.

“Circus Freak?”

He’d woken Paco up. Whoops. “Sorry,” Dick whispered. “I was hot.”

He pushed the window down, grimacing as it made a terrible screech. He didn’t want to get in trouble so quickly.

Paco was sitting up in bed now. “Can’t sleep?”

“Nah.”

“That’s normal,” said Paco. “First night is always rough. I’ve had thirteen in the past two years, so I guess you could call me an expert.”

“Thirteen?”

“Yeah,” Paco said with a shrug. “Been here the longest. Families don’t like me.”

“That’s dumb,” said Dick. “Why not?”

“I dunno. I get in trouble easy, I guess.”

“Well, I like you.”

“Thanks, Circus Freak.”
“Hey!” Dick whispered, an idea suddenly hitting him. “Maybe when I go back to the circus, you can come with me.”

Paco laughed. “What, just run away with you? Like they won’t ship me right back?”

“Practically half the troupe are runaways, or were once,” he said. “We had one kid show up just a few months ago—he was really messed up, but now he’s got us. It’s one big family.”

“I don’t know… That’s just a lot more moving, isn’t it?”

“You’re always moving, but you move together.” It hit Dick that even though he’d been in every state in the country, he’d always slept in the same train car. He missed hearing the rhythm of it overnight, running his hands over the ugly orange carpet, sending messages from car to car.

Something moved outside of the window, and Dick forgot about his recruitment ideas. “Did you see that?”

“See what?”

“Someone’s out there.”

Paco shrunk back. “They watch you in your bed,” he whispered.

A chill crawled across Dick’s skin, raising hairs on his arms and sending a creeping feeling down his spine. He didn’t think he was being followed by Paco’s Owls, but he couldn’t say for sure. Someone had been there. And even if it wasn’t some urban legend bird-assassin, it could have been Zucco come to finish the job. He went back to the window and swung the latch to lock it tight.

“It’s okay. We’re safe,” he said, with far more confidence than he actually felt. “But I’ll keep watch, if it’ll make you feel better.”

“Seriously?”

Dick shrugged. “Not sleeping anyway.” He retreated back to his bed, but sat down on top of the rough blanket, legs crossed, eyes alert.

Paco seemed to accept that—or maybe he was just more tired than scared—because he lay back down and curled the blanket around him, despite the heat. Soon his breath changed to the slow, heavy rhythm of sleep, and Dick was left in the night.

The city was still the rest of the night, or as still as Gotham could be. There was always noise below of motorcycles roaring and sirens blaring—some far-off, some right on the street below, always lights flashing as cars drove past. For a good half-hour, Dick was sure he heard a drag race going on, with engines revving and crowds cheering. Middle-of-the-night crowds. It took all his willpower to stay in the bed, to not go out to track down Zucco. But he’d promised. Three days.

It was only as the noises of the morning birds started and the light tinged with hints of sunrise that Dick let himself lay back down.

Three days, Bruce had said.

They couldn’t come soon enough.
The Gotham Bat

Chapter Summary

Dick hadn’t meant to break his promise to Bruce Wayne. A Monday afternoon on a holiday seemed safe enough to slip out. But getting home had taken a long time, and somehow the sun had set faster than he’d expected. In a matter of an hour and a journey back uptown, the city turned into a terrifying place, full of screams and lurking criminals. Dick had tried to get some distance from the underbelly—and maybe a vantage that could lead him back to the home—by swinging up a fire escape to the top of a tall apartment building.

But someone was there, on a building behind him. He started to walk and looked behind to see the shadowy figure now on the same rooftop. He couldn’t make out much of the person, just a dark figure and glinting eyes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bruce startled awake at the sound of footsteps coming down the Cave stairs. The blue light of the computer glowed in front of him, still displaying everything he could find on Zucco, Maroni, Haly’s Circus, and the Flying Graysons. The clock read 7:23. He’d lost two hours.

“Any revelations?” Alfred’s voice echoed through the cave.

“No.” Bruce tapped his fingers lightly across the keyboard, ignoring the pressure building in the front of his head. Sleep deprivation. He had no time for that right now. “Coffee?”

Alfred answered by handing him a cup. “If I may make a suggestion, rest in a bed might more more effective. There’s a lovely house upstairs, did you know?”

Alfred was only looking out for him. He knew that. Still, he didn’t appreciate the flippancy. “I told Dick three days.” Seventy-eight hours. It had already been twelve.

“You told the boy you were going to single-handedly catch his parents’ killer in three days?”

Bruce ignored that. He brought the coffee to his lips and skimmed his eyes across the open windows. “Did you look into DCF?”

“I did.” He took a plate off his tray and slid it in front of Bruce: hard-boiled eggs, a yogurt, a scone. “The Plummer woman was right: there’s plenty of red tape and requirements. But most of them won’t present any trouble: you’re over twenty, financially stable, clear of any criminal charges, with a spare bedroom. Or two. Or ten.”

“Hn.”

“But you do need a background check and home-study to verify those things.”
“Expedite them. I’ll talk to Jim about the check.”

“And you need to attend an educational training program for ten weeks.”

The mug’s base hit the workspace with a thud. “Ten weeks? What, full-time?”

“No, I expect a few hours at a time, after work hours. Ordinary work hours.”

“I’ll do an intensive course. Clear my schedule for Monday and Tuesday.”

Alfred sighed. “I’m not sure it works like that.”

“Then we’ll make it work, Alfred!” Bruce spun the chair away from the computer in frustration. “Doesn’t the Martha Wayne Foundation fund half of the agencies? I’ve put millions of dollars into foster and orphan care in this city, and you’re telling me I can’t two days of someone’s attention?”

“I didn’t say you can’t. I said I’m not sure—”

“Dick isn’t safe. He promised me he would stay off the streets, but—” He pressed the heels of his palms against his forehead, holding back the impending headache. It would only be a matter of time before some dirty cop tipped off Zucco, and as soon as Zucco learned that the police were looking into him, he’d go after Dick. “I can’t protect him like this. I can’t stop him from going after Zucco himself.”

“Did he say that he would?”

Bruce furrowed his brow. “Not to my face. But he will. The way he talked… he think this is all on him.”

“Ah.” Alfred dropped the tray to his side and nodded sagely with a sad smile. “I do have some familiarity with that, Master Bruce.”

He’d walked right into that. His concern for Dick did give him a new measure of sympathy for what he had put his own guardian through. “At least you knew where I was,” he grumbled.

“Sometimes. And other times, you’d disappear for weeks. Training. It was bloody well terrifying,” he said, his words clipped more than usual. “Now, I’m not going to have you suffer as I did. I’ll make the necessary calls. But if you take this boy in, you make him your priority. Is that clear?”

Bruce scowled. He didn’t like the insinuation. And he didn’t like Alfred scolding him as if he were still a child himself. “He’s already my priority.”

“Today, he is. If I may say, Master Bruce, how long until one of these Arkham escapees stirs up trouble again? How long until the Hangman’s next killing? Will he be your priority then?”

It was terrible timing. Gotham was slipping into a mafia war that would make the Grayson murders look like a drop in a bucket. Arkham still had several dangerous escapees loose. A killer was hanging cops, and Harvey—Two-Face—was being suspected.

Except Harvey wasn’t hanging people. He was, somehow, doing something even worse. He was working with the Joker.

The oncoming headache hammered at Bruce’s skull.

How could he save a child when he hadn’t been able to save his best friend?
“You don’t know how this will go,” Alfred continued. “You don’t know how long this Grayson case will take, or if the boy will ever go back to his circus. He’s stranded and alone, and you cannot shut him out in service of your… mission.”

“I wouldn’t—” Bruce’s protest faltered. What relationships had he been able to maintain since his life turned upside down? Alfred. Leslie. Lucius. Jim. It didn’t take the world’s greatest detective to notice that they were all his elders, people who helped him, people who didn’t make demands on his time or attention that would take away from his work. Three of them were on his payroll.

Well. There was a first for everything. Dick needed him. He wouldn’t let himself fail.

“I won’t. I’ll make him my priority.”

Alfred smiled, this time with hope more than pity. “Very well then, Master Bruce. I’ll set up the meetings. But get some sleep before you see anyone, will you? You look a right mess.”

Dick hadn’t meant to break his promise to Bruce Wayne. A Monday afternoon on a holiday seemed safe enough to slip out. But getting home had taken a long time, and somehow the sun had set faster than he’d expected. In a matter of an hour and a journey back uptown, the city turned into a terrifying place, full of screams and lurking criminals. Dick had tried to get some distance from the underbelly—and maybe a vantage that could lead him back to the home—by swinging up a fire escape to the top of a tall apartment building.

But someone was there, on a building behind him. He started to walk and looked behind to see the shadowy figure now on the same rooftop. He couldn’t make out much of the person, just a dark figure and glinting eyes.

Dick ran. He ran as fast he could along the rooftop. The building was coming to an end, but the next one wasn’t too far away, just a narrow alleyway. He could make the jump. Hopefully the strange person following him couldn’t, but Dick wasn’t optimistic for once. Paco’s stories of the Owls and Talons rattled in his mind. Did the man behind him look a little like an owl? He didn’t intend to stop to take a closer look.

He took the leap and rolled on the hard pavement of the next roof, only to roll right into something. Boots.

Was his pursuer magic, able to transport himself? But no, there was a black cape billowing around the feet of this person. There hadn’t been a cape before. He was pretty sure of that. Even so, he scrambled back. What would he do? He had no way to protect himself against this—whatever this was.

“What,” the thing growled, “do you think you’re doing?”

Dick’s eyes widened as he looked up at the man—monster?—in front of him. At least it talked. That was something. The man before him looked like a giant, dressed in grey and black head-to-toe, and his face was covered. On his chest there was some kind of symbol, and combined with the odd little ears on the mask…

“You—you’re the Gotham Bat!”
The Bat didn’t answer. He picked Dick up with one arm, held him to his chest, and—*jumped off the building*?

Before Dick could scream, he realized they weren’t in free-fall. The cape had billowed out and they were gliding to the street, landing to the side of a sleek black car. The roof retracted to reveal two seats.

Dick swallowed in fear. Bruce had told him not to go out. And he’d promised to listen. Clearly, this was why. Mobsters, gangsters, creepy owl-assassins, and a giant bat who kidnapped children. Gotham was *horrible*.

“Get in.”

“No.” Dick bent his knees, preparing himself for a fight.

The Bat had started to walk around the car, but he stopped in place and turned slowly. “Get. *In.*”

“Where are you taking me?”

“Back.”

“Back where?”

“Saint Swithun’s.”

Dick blinked. “How do you know about that?”

“I know everything. Now get in the car.”

He obeyed. He tried to stay angry, but the blinking lights and buttons and video console in the cabin of the car filled him with wonder and curiosity instead. His anger returned when the angry Bat got in the driver’s seat.

“You’re real creepy, you know that?”

“And you’re reckless.”

One point to each to them. “Have you been following me?”

No answer.

“Only… I thought I saw a gargoyle fly away once, and I thought… well, it could’ve been you. My roommate thinks it was the Court of Owls.”

“The Court of Owls isn’t real,” the Bat growled.

“Yeah, because someone pretending to be *an owl* is totally crazy.”

The shiny white eye-holes of the Bat narrowed. “It’s a myth. To frighten children.”

“And what are you?”

“I’m Batman.”

O-* kay. Dick crossed his arms. “Well, *someone* was following me. Just now.”

“Gotham’s full of monsters. You’re lucky I was there.” The car rounded a corner. “Stay inside.
Don’t go out at night.”

“I didn’t mean to! I was downtown and trying to get back.”

The Bat blinked. “Downtown?”

“Yeah, I…” Dick held his tongue. He didn’t know what this bat-guy was up to. But he seemed like a good guy. He’d saved him from whoever-that-was. And the ride back to the home was nice enough, even if Dick had no interest in being in the group home. “I told the nuns I wanted to see the parade—for Memorial Day. But I was looking for Bruce Wayne.”

The car broke sharply. Dick jolted forward. Outside the windshield was the group home. The ride was over.

“Why Bruce Wayne?”

Dick groped around for a door handle, but there didn’t seem to be one. “He’s my friend.”

Batman turned his head to face Dick, but his cowl made his expression impossible to read.

“I’m not lying,” Dick said. “I just wanted to see him. I promised I wouldn’t go out alone, but I thought it would be okay during the day. I just… got lost. And then it got dark. Turns out Bruce Wayne doesn’t live at Wayne Tower.”

The Bat made a weird sound at that, almost like a stifled laugh.

“Yeah, I get it. Very funny. The security guy gave me a hard time already, thanks. Can I go now?”

A click and a hissing sound came from the door, and it opened above him.

“Don’t let me find you out there again.”

Dick smirked and answered with a salute. After the chase, he wasn’t sure he wanted to go back out, though he did want to check on Haly’s. He climbed out and started toward the group home, crossing in front of the Bat’s car. As soon as he reached the sidewalk, the car screeched into motion and turned out of sight.

They’d made Dick go to school starting that Tuesday. It wasn’t terrible, all in all, but Dick had never been to a normal school like that, and sitting still for hours and hours was no simple challenge. After dinner on Wednesday, Dick lay on his bed, staring at the first pages of book he was supposed to read for school. The rest of the class was over halfway through, but he’d never read it, so he had a lot of catching up to do.

“Hey, Circus Freak, you got a call downstairs,” Paco said, popping his head into their shared room.

Dick swung his legs off the bed. “A call?”

Paco shrugged and opened the door, pointing his way down.

Sister Bernadette was holding out the phone when Dick got into the room. “GCPD,” she explained.
Had they caught the killer? Or was it bad news? Dick nodded and brought the receiver to his ear, hopeful for the best but afraid of the worst. “Hel…Hello?”

“Dick Grayson?”

“Yeah.”

“This is Captain Gordon. We met the other night.”

“I remember. Did you find Zucco?”

Gordon sighed on the other side. “We have some leads. But we’re trying to build this case airtight, so he can’t walk. Does that make sense?”

“I guess. Why’d you call, then?”

“Actually, I have a friend with me who wanted to talk to you, but he says the lady at your home hung up on him when he tried to call. So, uh, don’t tell her who it is.” That didn’t seem like a very police-officer thing to do, but Dick held on with anticipation. There was a noise of a phone passing, and a younger voice came over the line. “Dick! You okay?”

It took all of Dick’s willpower to not shout out, “Bruce!” Instead he just grinned and shouted, “Hi! Yeah. Yeah, I’m okay.”

“I got a message from the office that you came looking for me.”

“Yeah, I know I wasn’t supposed to. But it was daytime. I just wanted to talk.”

“I know. I’m sorry, Dick. I tried to call yesterday to check in, but they didn’t like that I knew where you were. I guess that’s a good thing, keeping you safe. Are they treating you all right?”

They’d made him feel like a wild animal. They’d sided with Braydon when he and Dick got into a fight. But he had food and the boys were okay, on the whole. “I guess. I just want to go back. Do you think I will soon?”

“We’re working on it. I’m working on the legalities, to get you out of there, and Captain Gordon is doing his best investigative work. I just need you to hold tight, okay?”

“Right.”

“Can you give us one more day? Trust us to take care of this?”

Dick shifted his weight side to side. It was hard to focus on reading books and learning math and doing his chores, knowing that Zucco was out there. That his parents were dead and Haly’s could still be in danger.

“I… guess so,” he said. One night. He could do that. Make up for the one he’d disobeyed.

“Good. And uh, Captain Gordon wanted me to let you know that the coroners are…” Bruce cleared his throat. “They’re holding on to the bodies. He’s trying to get them moving along quickly, so you can have a funeral.”

A funeral. Everything had been so strange and busy that Dick had almost forgotten that that would happen. “Right. A funeral. Thanks.”

“I’ll swing by Haly’s for you, let them know. We’ll work all that out, so don’t worry about it.”
“Okay.”

“Listen, I don’t go to Wayne Tower much anyway, so I’m going to give you my personal number. If you need anything, you can just call, even if it’s late.”

“Okay.” Dick scrambled for a pen and wrote the number on his hand as Bruce listed it out to him.

“I’ll talk to you soon, Dick. With better news.”

“Okay.” He stared down at the number. “Um, bye.”

Dick hung the phone up, feeling somehow worse than before.

“So what was that?” Sister Bernadette asked.

He didn’t answer. It’s not like she really cared. And apparently she’d hung up on Bruce Wayne earlier, which seemed particularly rude if he’d really paid to renovate this place.

“I’m going to go do my homework now,” he said.

He slunk upstairs and back into his room, where he collapsed onto the bed.

“You okay, Circus Freak?”

Dick shrugged. “I don’t get how they still haven’t caught the guy. I saw him.”

“Probably he’s got connections,” reasoned Paco, who was on his bed, doodling in the margins of his homework. “Braydon’s dad’s in the Irish mafia. The Sullivans, but most of ‘em are dead these days. That’s how come he keeps getting out of jail and Braydon has to go back to him. And then he gets arrested and Braydon comes back.”

Braydon’s comments about him being lucky made a little more sense now. “Braydon’s a jerk.”

Paco laughed. “Yeah. That’s a separate issue.”

“Hey, Paco, you still want to join the circus?”

“You were serious about that?”

Dick rolled to his side. “Yeah.

“What would I do, walk the tightrope?”

“Well, tightrope’s harder to break into…” Paco laughed again, but Dick didn’t see the joke. “I saw you throwing pencils at the ceiling, at school. You’re good. You ever throw knives?”

Paco side-eyed him, like Dick was looking to bust him for something. “Maybe.”

“Our knife-thrower lost his assistant. You could learn that.”

“Whoa, cool.” Paco’s pencil stopped scratching. “Wait. He lost him?”

Dick laughed. “Not an accident. He’s too good for accidents.” The words hung heavy on him, but he shook it off. “The kid got good, got an offer from another troupe. What d’ya say?”

Paco opened his eyes wide, imagining. “Maybe. I’d love to get out of this stinkin’ city.”
“At some point, there’s gonna be a funeral,” Dick said. “Everyone from the circus is gonna be there. Maybe I can ask if you could come along? You can meet Mister Haly—he’s the owner. See if he’ll give you a job.”

“Yeah, that’d be cool. Thanks, Circus Freak.”

“No problem.” He opened his school book back up, trying to distract himself.

“Oh, that’s a good one,” Paco said. He was a year older than Dick in school, and had lots of advice and sage wisdom. “It’s the only book I read the whole way through last year. It’s like, all these kids are chosen to compete to figure out who killed this guy, and whoever solves the mystery gets to inherit his millions of dollars.”

Dick rolled his eyes. “That sounds stupid.”

Paco laughed. “Yeah, you say that now.”

So maybe Paco was right. Two hours later, when Sister Bernadette came around for lights-out, Dick hadn’t looked up from the book. It was nice to escape into a mystery he could actually solve. With the lights off, he grew antsy again, but he’d now promised Bruce Wayne twice that he wouldn’t go out. Instead, he lay in the dark, rewinding the days and trying to see if he could remember anything about Zucco that he’d forgotten. Maybe there was something, a clue somewhere, that could prove that he’d done it.

Despite himself, he succumbed to a huge yawn and found that his thinking was a bit fuzzy, between his nights of poor sleep and his refusal to eat much of anything. He started back over replaying his memory, but if he had any ideas, he wasn’t able to record them, and soon he drifted into sleep.

“Dick Grayson?”

Dick turned at the sound of his name and saw his teacher from the morning leaning out of her classroom.

“Yeah?”

“Principal Higgins says to go to his office after you pack up.”

But he’d stayed out of trouble, today. Dick’s face must have indicated some sort of concern, because Mrs. Giacco smiled and waved her hand. “Nothing bad, dear.”

“Oh, okay.” He leaned back over his bag, zipping the backpack shut over the books and binders the school had loaned to him.

“And Dick?”

“Yeah?”

“It’s been nice to have you here this past week. I hope you know that.”

Her face pinched a bit, as if holding back some kind of sadness or pity. He smiled back. “Um, thanks.”
He swung the backpack onto his back and waved to the teacher before heading down the hallway. His eyes glanced over the displays in the halls, brightly colored poster-projects about different states. He’d been to most of them, seen most of the landmarks featured. He’d always loved circus life, but he’d never realized how lucky he was. These Gotham kids just came to this school day in, day out, every year, the same place.

When he arrived at the office, someone else was already sitting with the principal, in a suit jacket. Dick felt every muscle tighten in concern. Was this a detective from the GCPD? A lawyer?

Before he could say anything, the man stood and turned. *Bruce Wayne.*

“Hello, Dick.”

Principal Higgins pushed himself out of his seat as well.

“What’s happening?” Dick dropped his bag on the floor of the office.

“I know it’s been a little longer than I thought, but…” Bruce grinned. “You’re coming home with me.”

Dick looked between Bruce and Higgins. “Really?”

“All the paperwork’s been settled. And St. Swithin’s already knows. I swung by, and have your things in the car already. So as long as you’re interested…”

After shaking himself out of a second of shock, Dick threw himself forward, wrapping his arms around the wool-clad waist of his new protector. Bruce’s body stiffened at the embrace at first, as if surprised, but soon his arms wrapped around Dick. They were stronger than Dick expected, and for a second, if he closed his eyes and forgot everything, he thought he might be able to pretend his father was back. But Bruce felt like wool and smelled like subtly spiced cologne. It wasn’t the same at all. But it was still a comfort.

“You’re sure that’s all right with you?” Bruce asked.

Dick drew away. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, of course.”

“I know you’d already made some friends at the the home—”

“It’s okay. Only Paco, really. My roommate. But I don’t want to stay there anymore.”

“All right, then.” Bruce turned back to Principal Higgins. “I think we’ll need to chat a bit before deciding, Mister Higgins. Regardless, Dick will be out tomorrow to settle in. But I’ll give you a call and let you know what to expect for Monday.”

Higgins answered with a curt nod. “We did lend Dick some supplies…”

Bruce cut his eyes over to Dick’s hand-me-down backpack and pulled out a checkbook. He scratched out a figure and signed before tearing it off and handing it over. “Will that cover them?”

“Uh, yes.” Higgins took the check and slid it onto the top of his papers. Dick couldn’t see the exact number from where he stood, but it was safe to say that Bruce had overpaid by at least one digit. “Hope to see you Monday, Dick.”

“See you,” said Dick. He trailed behind Bruce as they left the school and came out to the pick-up area.
As soon as they were outside, Dick tugged on Bruce’s sleeve. “What did you mean with Principal Higgins, about what to expect?”

“We’ll talk about it in the car.”

Dick looked around. A sleek two-seater convertible in racing green was parked right out front, completely out of place given the run-down neighborhood and junky yellow buses filling up with schoolchildren.

“Is that your car?”

The car beeped in the affirmative. “One of them. Hop in.”

Chapter End Notes

Here ends Act I. Act II will be posted over the weekend!

I named Dick’s principal after Kyle Higgins as a particular nod to his origin story in New 52, as a way of saying, “I loved what you did; sorry for trashing 90% of it.” A lot of what I scrapped from the New 52 accords its weird (awful) adjusted timeline. For instance, Dick figures out Bruce’s identity in Higgins’s Nightwing, but I’ve chosen the Dark Victory route of it being a surprise. Similarly, the New 52 Batman gives Dick far more lenience in pursuing Zucco. That seems less appropriate for a younger Dick, someone who reminds Bruce more of himself as a freshly orphaned pre-teen rather than himself in early vigilante days.
Act II: The Billionaire and his Ward

Dick unwrapped himself from the tight form. “You really think they’ll catch him, Bruce?”

“Captain Gordon will.”

“Okay,” said Dick, slowly, uncertain. And then suddenly, he brightened. “And if he doesn’t get him, the Gotham Bat will, right?”

“Hh.” What could he say to that? Thankfully, they’d hit a red light, giving him a window to pressed the button for the top. It retracted back, catching Dick’s attention as a fresh breeze broke the humidity. “Here we are. Welcome home, Dick.”

Dick seemed to forget his earlier question, and instead asked, “Where?”

Bruce took his turn and then drove up the long drive to the manicured lawn and gate. He held down the security button. “Bruce Wayne, four-one-nine-four-zero-four-zero,” he recited, and the iron-wrought gate creaked open, recognizing both voice and code.

“Here,” said Bruce.

Chapter Notes

[[content warning for one mention of an anti-Romani slur (not taken lightly)]]

Bruce made it his business to be prepared for any probable—even possible—foreseeable situation, but until recently, taking in a child had never been one of them. He’d never met a challenge he couldn’t tackle, but in the low passenger seat, Dick seemed impossibly small. Had he been so small before?

The engine of the Aston Martin whirred into an eager hum, and Bruce pulled into the familiar streets. He had to take care to drive safely, not how he usually drove through this area. The streets were different during the daytime, and Dick was precious cargo.

“Can we have the top down?”

“When we’re out of traffic.” The convertible was the best way to see Bristol, where the late spring air had brought the refreshing smell of cut grass and flowers. That wasn’t the case here, in the inner
city full of car fumes and urine and rotting refuse, at the start of rush hour no less.

“So.” Dick fixed Bruce with a keen eye. “Higgins?”

“Principal Higgins needs to know if you’re returning.” The foster training had been clear that he was responsible for keeping Dick’s education as uninterrupted as possible, but then, sending Dick to school had itself been an interruption. What did you do for school before, in the circus?”

“Couple of the clowns taught us all,” said Dick. “You know those one-room schoolhouses, like in movies? It was like that. All of us together. We learned all kinds of stuff. But I’m best at geography. And languages, but that wasn’t school. I just picked those up from the families. Spanish, ASL, Romany—though not as much as I should know, given that my mom…” He seemed to realize he’d strayed off-topic, because he got quiet and looked back up. “Why?”

“We could continue that at home. Or there’s Bristol’s public middle sch—”

“What’s Bristol?”

“Where I live.”

“Not in Gotham?”

Bruce stole a glance, unsure where whether not in Gotham was appealing or disappointing. The answer was complicated, but Dick probably wasn’t interested in political jurisdiction. “It… overlooks the city.”

That seemed to suffice, as Dick eased back into the seat.

“Where’d you go to school?”

“Private schools. But they’re all out for the summer, starting today.”

“Wait.” Dick shuffled to face Bruce head-on. “If I go to private school,” he said, drawing air-quotes around go, “I’m on summer break already? Let’s do that.”

“Hh. We don’t need to decide that now.” As much as he hated the idea of Dick going into Gotham every day, an immediate summer vacation with no friends or family or activities didn’t seem wise. Bruce had reached out to a couple of the private schools in the area, just in case Dick’s stay lasted through the summer, but he wasn’t sure if that was a good idea. He’d been expelled from one (or two—or three…) of them himself for fighting in the halls, and Dick didn’t need that kind of instability. And as different as Dick was in some ways… “Sister Bernadette said you hit one of the other children.”

Dick crossed his arms defensively and looked out at the passing cityscape. “Yeah. Braydon. He was being a jerk.”

“You can’t solve every problem with your fists, Dick.”

“He was being a racist jerk,” Dick clarified.

“Even so.”

“I know;” he grumbled. He sighed dramatically and pulled his legs in, tucking his feet on the edge of the leather seats and wrapping his arms around his knees. They sat in silence for a while, but it was a good silence. A thoughtful one. “I was just so mad.”
“At that boy?”

“At everyone.” His voice was shaky.

Bruce glanced over at the boy. His eyes shone and his lip trembled. On the verge of tears. “At me?”

“No!” Dick’s eyes widened in protest. “Not you. Everyone else. That Plummer lady, the nuns, the cops. Myself. Mister Haly. Zucco. Every day he’s out there, I just get madder.”

Bruce couldn’t argue with that. But it did complicate his promise to Alfred. The case was going to weigh on Dick until Zucco went away. If he could give Dick the closure he never got, wasn’t that still prioritizing him?

He could guess Alfred’s answer to that question. He didn’t like it.

“It’s like every day they don’t catch him,” Dick continued, “it feels more like I’ll be stuck here forever.” He caught himself. “Sorry! I didn’t mean—”

“I understand.”

“I miss the circus. No one there would’ve ever talk about getting gypped.”

Ah. Bruce grimaced. “Hence the punch.”

“Yeah. Hence.” Dick screwed up his face in a mixture of guilt and satisfaction and anger, and then sighed. “He wasn’t trying to be mean about it. Just stupid. But no one would even listen to me, and —”

“Not exactly a welcoming home,” Bruce supplied, “if no one stands up for you.”

“Yeah.”

Bruce wished he could say he understood that, but he’d always had Alfred. He’d never needed to move out of his childhood home, except by choice. Nor had he ever been at risk for people accidentally insulting his heritage. The closest anyone could come were those arrogant asses from Metropolis complaining about Gotham Shit-heap. And he couldn’t even fully blame them. Gotham was far from his forefathers’ vision.

The boy’s frame drew even more impossibly compact, and teary eyes looked up at Bruce.

“What if they never let me go back?”

That was a terrifying thought. And not just to Dick. Bruce was happy—honored, really—to watch over and mentor the boy, but he wasn’t an ideal permanent solution, as Alfred had made so clear.

But if Zucco walked…

That wouldn’t happen. He would track down everything he could on this racketeering murderer to get him locked away for life. What use was Batman if he couldn’t put away the creep who’d left this boy without a family?

And tampering with ropes… Bruce thought guns were cowardly enough. At least Joe Chill had needed to look Thomas and Martha in the face, had to hear Thomas shouting leave her alone and Martha shouting help and Bruce screaming out into the alley after him. But Zucco, he was the worst of the worst kind of scum, to not even—
“Mister Wayne? Are you okay?”

Bruce forced himself to relax and only then realized how much he’d tensed, how tight his jaw and fists had clenched, how white his knuckles had blanched on the wheel.

“I didn’t mean to make you angry,” Dick said, eyes wide, brows knit. “I know you don’t want a kid cramping your style forever.”

Bruce’s heart dropped. He was no good at this.

“Dick…” The traffic came to a standstill as they approached the bridge, and Bruce looked over at his passenger and the brown river in the distance behind him. Home, soon. He adjusted his stance to squeeze Dick’s shoulder, like his own father used to do with him, saying something like, It’s all right, chum. Back on your feet. Except it was not all right. “I’m angry that this happened to you, not that you’re with me. I worked hard to have you here.”

“Because you feel guilty,” Dick grumbled.

“No, because—” He did feel guilty for not having done anything to stop the crime before it happened, but there was more to his decision. “Because you should have someone who knows what you’re going through. Even when you’re back to Haly’s, you’ll have someone to call on the bad days.”

Dick’s bright eyes glistened with new tears. “You still have bad days?”

Bruce nodded. Any word would’ve been an understatement.

A car honked behind him. The traffic was now moving again, slowly but steadily across the bridge.

“Grief’s not a straight line,” he said. “People don’t get that. They think that once you look better, it’s all over. But sometimes it hits out of nowhere. So… when that happens, call me and I can meet you. Or you can come over.”

“And if I’m not in Gotham?”

Bruce shrugged. “I’ll meet you.”

Maybe it was too big a promise, but there was nothing too much to offer this boy, with his too-familiar broken heart and tear-filled blue eyes and angry fists. And that was it, in the end. He couldn’t do anything to help himself, but he could help Dick. Could save him from the fear and anger that threatened to consume him. Could make him feel safe, before the world turned him into a manifestation of angry discontentment.

Dick wouldn’t share his fate.

“Thank you, Mister Wayne.”

“It’s Bruce.”

Dick unwrapped himself from the tight form. “You really think they’ll catch him, Bruce?”

“Captain Gordon will.”

“Okay,” said Dick, slowly, uncertain. And then suddenly, he brightened. “And if he doesn’t get him, the Gotham Bat will, right?”
“Hh.” What could he say to that? Thankfully, they’d hit a red light, giving him a window to pressed the button for the top. It retracted back, catching Dick’s attention as a fresh breeze broke the humidity. “Here we are. Welcome home, Dick.”

Dick seemed to forget his earlier question, and instead asked, “Where?”

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“Here,” said Bruce, finally answering the question.

Dick kneeled to get a better view. “Wait. This is your house? The whole thing?” He was shouting now, halfway out of the car. “Are you SURE?”

“Pretty sure,” Bruce laughed.

“I could’ve brought Zitka, even.”

“Zitka?”

“One of the elephants.”

Of course. An elephant.

“A small one.” Dick dropped back down to the seat, crossing his legs under him in a fluid motion, and shook his head. “Mister Wayne, you could fit an actual three-ring tent here, did you know?”

Bruce looked down at the boy with curiosity. His whole world had shattered within the week, but his enthusiasm still outmatched anything Bruce had ever seen.

“I’ll… keep that in mind,” he said.

“Hey, you know what they say,” said Dick, grinning even wider. “You can take the boy out the circus, but you can’t take the circus out of the boy!”

Dick broke into ebullient laughter, and Bruce found himself joining. And for once, it wasn’t a fake party chortle, or a self-deprecating snicker, or a quiet chuckle at Alfred’s sardonic wit. This was a real, joyful, carefree laugh.

Maybe he’d gotten it backwards. Maybe Dick was the one who would save him.

Wayne Manor was unreal. After a tour of what could only have been a tenth of the place, they’d had a big dinner all together, Bruce and Dick and Alfred (the English butler, because there was an English butler), and then Bruce had put on an old black-and-white movie in the home theater. Dick only made it three scenes in before passing out on Bruce’s shoulder.

For the first time that week, Dick didn’t wake up to nightmares. Instead, a hand rustled him awake.

“Master Richard?” It was the butler. “Come on, lad, let’s get you up to bed.”
Dick blearily dragged himself through the mansion, up to the oversized bed in the oversized room. He woke up to the sound of screaming. His own. His heart pounded as he blinked, trying to figure out where he was. Not the circus. The group home? No, there was no Paco here. Loud footsteps pounded outside his door.

He remembered where he was just as Bruce Wayne threw his door open. “Dick! Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” The mattress fed his body heat back to him, and he shifted uncomfortably in the stickiness of his sweat. “Bad dream.”

“Oh.” Bruce crossed into the room and sat on the edge of his bed. “Um. Do you want to… tell me about it?

Dick shook his head. “You already saw most of it,” he mumbled.

“More of a memory than a dream?”

“Yeah.” Dick blinked up, his eyes adjusting to the dark. The light from the hallway cast a severe glow on Bruce’s angled features, even as he softly brushed back the curls that clung to Dick’s forehead.

“I get those too, sometimes. They say that’s a good thing. It’s your brain’s way of healing.”

“It doesn’t feel good. It makes me afraid to go to sleep,” Dick confessed. “It was easier to stay awake at the group home. The bed was uncomfortable, and the city was loud.”

“You need to sleep, Dick.”

“I know.” Dick sighed. “It’s just scary.”

“It’s okay to be afraid.” Bruce put his hands back on his knees, facing away from the bed. “It took me… a long time to learn that. Sometimes, instead of fighting it, it’s better to accept it, to say, I am afraid, but I’m more than that. Fear is just an emotion. It’s only dangerous when you let it control you. Does that make sense?”

It didn’t. All Dick knew is that he was terrified and angry and sad and tired of reliving his parents’ death every time he slept. He just wanted his parents to be there again. “Bruce?”

“Yes?”

“Can… can I have a hug?”

“Oh,” Bruce said. “Yes. Of course.” He turned back toward Dick and lifted him into his arms.

Dick reached around his neck and grasped tightly. Bruce’s embrace was a little stiff, but the feeling of bone and muscle under his silk robe and the smell of spice and shampoo and the sound of Bruce’s breath all anchored Dick back into reality. Behind Bruce, a clock blinked 4:24, the red light gleaming in the dark.

“Thanks,” he whispered, drawing away. “I’m sorry for waking you up. It’s so late.”

“Not at all,” said Bruce.

“Can… can you stay here? Just until I fall asleep again?”

Bruce nodded, and Dick turned away, wrapping himself snuggly in the blankets.
Dick slept soundly the rest of the night, but when the sun peeked through the curtains the next day, he heard it mocking him again. Another day, and Zucco’s still free. That was immediately followed by his dad’s voice in his head: Every day the sun greets you is a day to smile. But his dad would never see a sunrise again.

Before he could prepare himself, sobs burst out from his chest.

The bed was all wrong. It was too big. The room was too big. Too empty.

Dick pulled himself completely under the covers, hiding from the sun. When a knock came on the door, he didn’t respond. It creaked open.


“No,” mumbled Dick from under the covers. His stomach disagreed, betraying him with a loud gurgling.


Dick pulled the blankets down just far enough to reveal his head. No neck, no hands, just his chin popping over the fluffy down spread. He’d lost most of his appetite since That Night. “Cereal?”

“Cereal!” Alfred cocked his head thoughtfully, as if he’d never thought of the most basic breakfast food. “I don’t think we have any cold cereal, to be honest, sir. But you give me the name of your favorites, and I’ll have it tonight.”

“Oh. Just toast for now, I guess.”

“Come along, and we’ll have that ready on the double.”

Dick slid out of bed in the weird rich-people pajamas that Bruce had bought him, the kind with a totally unnecessary matching collared shirt. He’d balked initially, but they were a calming shade of light blue, and they brought out his eyes in the mirror.

“Can I just eat in the kitchen?” he asked, trailing behind Alfred, who was already popping bread into the toaster. The dining room was formal and stuffy. It felt weird eating in there.

“I don’t see why not, as long as you stay away from the knives.”

“I’m really good with knives,” Dick offered. “I used to help the throwers all the time.”

“All the same, Master Richard.”

“You can just call me Dick.”

“Very well, Master Dick. Juice?”

Dick rolled his eyes and leaned onto the counter. “It’s strange to call people Master.”

“It’d be stranger to call a child your age Mister Grayson,” noted Alfred, pouring the non-objected-to juice.
“What about just Dick? You work for Mister Wayne, not me.”

“I work for the Wayne family,” corrected Alfred, pouring the non-objected-to juice. “And you are now part of that family.”

That was a funny kind of logic, but it was nice to be considered part of the family. It made the strange mansion feel a little more like a home. He accepted the juice and drank half of it in one go. “I’m only here for a little while.”

“Master Bruce has made it quite clear that even after you leave, you’re welcome here. As far as he’s concerned, you’re family.”

“And as far as you’re concerned?”

The toaster pinged, and Alfred grabbed wooden tongs to draw out the bread to butter. “Master Bruce’s father, Doctor Wayne, hired me, originally. When we lost him and the Missus, I was all that was left for the boy. Jam?”

“Yes, please.”

“The funny thing was, with Doctor Wayne gone, I needed Master Bruce as much as he needed me. I think he is now experiencing something similar. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

He slid the toast over on a plate, and Dick took a bite. Or four. He was way hungrier than he’d thought. “Not really, sir.”

“Families come in all sorts of ways. There’s no reason why a family can’t be a grown orphan, his weary butler, and a traveling acrobat who pops in whenever he’s in town.”

Dick laughed, spraying some toast crumbs across the counter. “Sorry!” he said. As he scrambled to clean them up, he realized that maybe Alfred was being pretty serious, and he shouldn’t have laughed at all.

“Quite all right. Would you like anything else?”

Dick chewed on his lip. “What did Mister Wayne have?”

“He usually has an omelette, when he rises this late.”

“He’s not up?”

“He had a late evening, I’m afraid. Our midnight is the height of the business day in Asia, so he gets called in at all hours. But he’ll join us by midday.”

“Oh. I’ll wait for him, I guess.”

Dick didn’t mind waiting, at first. He spent the morning running through the manor, exploring rooms, getting lost, getting found by Alfred, getting lost again, getting found again, before finally running out of ideas of what to do.

At the circus, there was always so much to do. When he wasn’t on the flying trapeze (or the tightrope, or the static trapeze, or the trampoline) or conditioning or playing with the other kids, he was always looking for ways to help around the tents. He loved playing the rube and helping all the performers practice their skills: trying his hardest to keep a stony face at the clowns’ latest routine, asking the dumbest questions he could think of to have his cards read, fake-heckling the ringmaster
while he ran through his opening monologue… He even liked helping out the roustabouts carrying supplies or unpacking or packing up again. Raya and Raymond always made fun of him for acting so superior to his fellow fliers one day and then hanging out with lowly roustabouts the next, but he didn’t care. He liked staying busy, and he liked helping wherever he was needed most.

Even when everyone was too busy for him, the elephants always welcomed the attention. He liked making sure they were taken care of, and they were always up for listening to him when he’s chattered the ears off of everyone else.

There were no animals at Wayne Manor. There were no other children.

He tried to help Alfred, but he also got the sense that he was in the way more than helpful. When Bruce finally showed up downstairs, in a suit, Dick jumped on him. Literally.

He’d been crouching, laying in wait from the top of one of the stairway balconies, and then he shouted, “Heads up!”

It was only after Bruce caught him that Dick realized he shouldn’t have assumed a billionaire Gothamite would ever expect a child to fly out of nowhere—or to at least have a good enough reaction time to make up for the shock.

“Nice catch, Bruce!”

“Good morning.” Bruce’s deadpan voice contrasted with his face, which said something more like *please don’t do this every morning.*

“Good *afternoon,* I think you mean.”

Bruce set Dick down gently, but Dick bounced around him as they moved down the hall.

“Hey, so, it’s really, really swell that I’m not at school today, but I’m going crazy here. Can I come with you?”

Bruce raised an eyebrow. “I’m going to a meeting where old men are going to talk about steel. *Two hours* of numbers about buying and selling steel. If you think you’re bored *now*…”

“Oh.”

“It won’t be all day. Tonight there’s a gala—”

“What’s a gala?”

“A big party. Not thrilling either, but you’re welcome to join me. We’re recognizing local charities that are making a difference in Gotham. Soup kitchens, health clinics, that sort of thing.”

Dick nodded and trailed Bruce into the kitchen.

“Just one more minute on your breakfast, Master Bruce.”

Bruce turned back to Dick, arms crossed. “Maybe we need to revisit that school conversation. If you’re stir-crazy after *one* morning…”

Dick hated to admit it, but Bruce was probably right. “Okay. I’ll go back. It’ll be good to see Paco and the boys again.”

“You don’t want someplace…” He cocked his head. “Closer?”
Was Bruce being a snob? Or overprotective?

“Nah.”

“Oh.” Bruce fell silent, gears churning in his mind, and then nodded. “All right, but Alfred drops you off in the morning and you come immediately to the car at pick-up. If you step foot off the campus or get in a single other fight, we’re switching you to Bristol.”

Overprotective it was.

Dick held out a hand, and they shook on it.

“Are you caught up on homework?”

The homework was all a little meaningless. He’d been at the school for two days, and he wasn’t going to be staying long. It’s not like grades mattered, anyway. He already had a job. But he humored Bruce. “I have to read a few more chapters in my book and I think do some math sheets?”


“The Westing Game. It’s about—”

“I think I read that one when I was your age,” Bruce said. “There’s a girl named Turtle, right? Smart, good with stocks?”

Dick nodded.

“I liked her.”

Of course he did. “Yeah… I just… have a real murder to solve, you know? Even if I don’t get two hundred million dollars for it or whatever.”

Bruce grimaced, a bite of omelette on his fork. He eyes flickered between Dick and Alfred, and then he put his food down. “Dick, you have to leave this to the police.”

It was Dick’s turn to cross his arms. “But I told the police who did it, and they haven’t caught him yet!”

“You saw Zucco making threats. They need evidence that he followed through.”

Like two dead bodies wasn’t evidence enough.

“What if I can help them?”

“If you can help them from inside the Manor, fine. But if you find anything, you tell me first—before calling the police.”

“Why?”

Bruce mouthed the word back to him, like his brain had broken and he had to put it back together. “Dick, this city is—” He pinched his nose and pushed away the omelette. “Captain Gordon’s a good guy. But if you run to the wrong cops, your information could get straight to the bad guys.”

Dick chewed that over. How was anyone ever going to be caught if the cops themselves were criminals? “Gotham is the worst city in the world,” he concluded.
“Maybe it is.” Bruce stood up and handed the half-finished plate back to Alfred. “But it’s my city, so you’ll have to trust me.”

He left the room.

“Your city?” Dick shouted after him. “Like you own it!”

No answer. Was he not going to say goodbye? Just because Dick had told the truth about Gotham?

“Master Bruce is quite fond of his hometown,” Alfred noted. “He may not own all of it, but his family did help build it.”

Dick sort of felt bad for the insult, but Gotham had done plenty to him to earn what he’d said. Still, he worried about having offended the one person in the city who had made him feel like he had a home here. And Bruce must have been so angry, leaving without a word like that…

“Alfred?” Dick’s voice was small and quiet, afraid of hearing a bad answer. “Is he going to kick me out for what I said?”

“Why, of course not, Master Richard.”

“But he just left!”

Alfred shrugged. “He’s not accustomed to company.”

Dick wasn’t convinced, but before he could do anything, Bruce had reappeared.

“Alfred,” Bruce said, completely pleasantly, as if he hadn’t ghosted out of the room two minutes earlier, “are you driving me?”

“I thought I was staying with the boy here.”

Bruce’s eyebrows knit deeply, not with anger, but thought. Maybe Alfred was right. “If Dick can stand to go into the worst city in the world, he can come along for the ride. I’ll see if Lucius can show him around, and you can get him something suitable for tonight.”

And then he left again.

Alfred was looking down at Dick now. “What do you say, lad? Want to see a part of the city that Master Bruce does own?”
Lucius extended a hand, and Dick shook it. “Welcome to Wayne Enterprises, Dick. Bruce said he’s trying to win you over to Gotham. How’s that going?”

“Well, he told me all of the whole history of the city on the way here.”

Lucius smiled down, sliding his hands into his pockets. “So you’re an expert now?”

“Sure am,” Dick said. “Gates and Guardians and Gobblepots and all of it.”

Bruce grimaced in embarrassment. “Cob-blepots,” he corrected, as gently as possible. “With a C.”

The whole ride in, Bruce acted as tour guide, telling all his favorite stories about each borough and neighborhood of Gotham. Dick couldn’t have absorbed a quarter of it, but he played along, jumping back and forth across the back seat to see the buildings and sites as Bruce identified them.

When they came to Wayne Tower, Lucius was already waiting. Having a son of his own, he’d been a good sport about playing guide-slash-babysitter so that Alfred could get some actual errands run.

“Lucius! This is Dick Grayson,” Bruce introduced. “Dick, this is Lucius Fox, the man who kept my family’s vision for the company afloat when I was too young to have a say.”

Lucius extended a hand, and Dick shook it. “Welcome to Wayne Enterprises, Dick. Bruce said he’s trying to win you over to Gotham. How’s that going?”

“Well, he told me all of the whole history of the city on the way here.”

Lucius smiled down, sliding his hands into his pockets. “So you’re an expert now?”

“Sure am,” Dick said. “Gates and Guardians and Gobblepots and all of it.”

Bruce grimaced in embarrassment. “Cob-blepots,” he corrected, as gently as possible. “With a C.”

“Right, right! Cobblepots and Crownes, and Kanes and Waynes,” Dick recited, as if it were a song.

Maybe he had been paying more attention than Bruce had given him credit for. Though: “You left out the Elliots.”

Dick shrugged. “Didn’t rhyme.”

“Still quite impressive,” said Lucius. “I hope I’m as compelling as Bruce—who is, I think, about four minutes late for his two-o’clock.”

Bruce groaned. “All right, all right. Dick, I expect you’ll be just as good a student for Lucius as for me.”
“Will there be a test?”

“Two: Local History and Intro to Business. I did tell DCF we were homeschooling,” said Bruce, feigning sincerity. After Dick’s jaw dropped, he broke into a smile. Dick punched him in the arm—surprisingly hard, for a small boy—and Lucius looked at Bruce in impressed surprise.

“Was that a joke, Mister Wayne?”

Bruce shrugged and leaned over, straightening out the hood of Dick’s sweatshirt. “All right. I’ll see you at five. Have fun.”

He turned away with complete reluctance, but Dick didn’t seem to mind the hand-off.

As Bruce dragged himself away, he heard Lucius’ voice, lowered and conspiratorial: “You don’t really want to see a bunch of offices, do you? How about I show you some of our newest gadgets instead?”

Bruce was only a little jealous.

As promised, Bruce met back up with Dick a few hours later, at the Wayne Foundation Penthouse, where Alfred helped them change into their evening wear. Bruce had been skeptical about their ability to get anything within a day for Dick, but Alfred had assured him that bespoke suiting wouldn’t make sense for a growing boy who’d likely be a different size by the time a tailor could finish anything.

Dick’s tuxedo didn’t look too bad, all in all. Though the royal blue waistcoat and tie had been an odd choice, given that Dick was still in mourning.

“Blue?”

“It reminded me of my dad,” Dick said, thoughtfully touching the edge of the waistcoat. Honoring, not mourning.

“Believe me, Master Bruce,” sighed Alfred, “that was quite the compromise.”

“Yeah,” Dick said, grinning again. “I wanted a yellow coat, but Alfred put the ix-nay on the ellow-yay.”

“Alfred usually knows best,” Bruce said, thankful that they had dodged that bullet. What the silver-spoon set of Gotham would do with a garishly dressed circus boy… maybe it had been a mistake to bring Dick along so soon. The who’s who had acted terribly after his own parents had died. The words still smarted. What a shame, that poor boy, those no-good parts of town, senseless violence. All pity, no grief. All words, no action.

And Thomas and Martha had been two of their own. Maybe that had made it worse. Maybe Dick would be all right.

“Ready, Dick?”

Dick nodded, and they stepped into the elevator. “This whole place is yours, too?”
“This is the Foundation,” Bruce explained. “The Tower has WE—a business. The Wayne Foundation funds initiatives seeking to promote healthcare and education and to alleviate and eliminate poverty.”

“You sound like a boring brochure,” Dick said, eyes glossed over with lack of interest.

“Wayne Enterprises makes money,” Bruce said, simplifying. “And the Wayne Foundation spends it. Every dollar I make goes back into helping the community.”

“Minus the flashy cars, huh?”

“Those come from trust interest.” The elevator doors slid open, and guests and reporters swarmed around them. “That’s a lesson for another day.”

“Brruuuuucie,” cooed a blonde socialite in a strappy red dress. Collins, he remembered. Anna. He’d known her since his days at the Academy, when she spent all her free time with her horses. Last time he’d seen her, he’d brought her to the penthouse and then called her Andrea. She’d slapped him for it, but apparently it hadn’t deterred her too much. “You must introduce us to your charming young friend.”

“I’m Richard Grayson, of Haly’s Circus. But you can call me Dick.” He smiled wide and held out a hand before Bruce could introduce him. “Pleasure to meet you, Miss…”

“Collins,” Bruce supplied. “She went to Gotham Academy with me.”

“They have girls?” Dick looked betrayed, though Bruce couldn’t say how that was justified. “I thought your private schools were all boys! Maybe public school was the wrong choice…”

Anna-not-Andrea and her friends erupted into amused titters, and one of them chimed out, “Watch out for that one, Brucie.”

“Is this your new ward, Bruce?” asked another woman. She was just outside his field of vision, but he knew Vicki’s voice all too well. She’d taken Bruce’s last rejection less amicably than Anna and had recently taken our her anger by portraying him in the worst light possible in the press. He didn’t actually mind, for the most part.

One downside of his public persona was that each function he attended increasingly felt like a gathering of ex-girlfriends. Of course the one ex he actually wanted to see had vanished off the map. Not that she would’ve come to something like this anyway without him begging her. Not unless it was to case the place.

“Dick’s staying with me for a time,” said Bruce, laying on his most casual Billionaire-Playboy-Bruce-Wayne voice and demeanor for Vicki’s sake. She was always one step too close to linking him with Batman. “But you should treat him as part of the family.”

“He’s already inherited the good looks and charm of the Wayne men,” Anna said. “I bet he’ll break even more hearts than you!”

“Steady there—you’ll have to wait a few years before trading me in for the newer model.” Bruce forced a laugh before steering Dick away. “Excuse us, Miss Collins, Miss Vale, ladies—I should do the rounds before we’re seated.”

“Brucie?” Dick whispered as they made their way through the crowd.

Bruce shook his head and stepped up to the bar. “One tonic with a twist of lime. And a cola.”
He handed the cola to Dick, who began happily drinking it through the narrow red mixers.

“Sorry about them, Dick.” He should have known they would swarm him like that. He was only able to get through it by putting on a show and pretending it was fun. Bruce grimaced. “You probably think I’m a phony, huh?”

“Nah,” said Dick, in between sips of cola. “Everyone’s got an act.”

“I guess they do.” Unlike Bruce, Dick was a performer, through and through. He’d probably have no trouble rubbing shoulders, with a little bit of practice. “The Foundation Board does want to meet you. Just smile, shake hands, say little. That’ll get us through in one piece. We get to sit with the guests of honor for dinner—you’ll do just fine with them.” They were all charity directors. Dick would have them eating out of his hand within minutes. “You ready?”

“Got it,” said Dick, before loudly sucking the last drops of cola from the bottom of the cup through the mixers.

Bruce glanced around, worried that someone had noticed the grating sound. Clearly, there were some things Dick needed to learn. It wasn’t his fault, of course. He’d been trained to somersault through the air at high speeds. What would a circus boy know about fitting in with Gotham’s insufferable elite?

Ringed fingers tap on polished mahogany, which glimmers under an antique chandelier. The room has seen many generations, heard many conversations that held the fate of Gotham in the balance.

“This is not what was supposed to happen.”

The white-masked elite sit around the table, each of them tense, frustrated, angry, beneath their costumes of cashmere and merino, of silk and fur. Each of them blaming someone else for the hitch in their plans.

Another one opens her mouth to speak, wrapping her mink closer around her body, protecting against the icy gaze of the others, her peers and rivals. “The parents’ death is beneficial to us.”

Except, except, says every pair of eyes.

“He was never fully willing,” comes a low voice from the end of the table. “But the attachments are now detached. The boy is free. This should not stop us.”

“Perhaps, before. But now the Wayne boy has him. He brought him to the Wayne Foundation gala. Everyone has seen them together. It would raise questions.”

Bodies rustle with frustration. They have been watching the Waynes as long as they have been watching the acrobats of Haly’s.

A chuckle echoes in the room, from the lady in the mink coat. She inspects her nails. “He’s young. He’ll get tired of playing house.”

“Oh? Like he tired of his grief?” The low voice rumbles under the mask, and the listeners straighten...
in their seats. Outside, a rainstorm breaks, and the drops patter on the domed ceiling above them.
“Like he tired of investigating the Waynes’ deaths?”

A fourth voice speaks, silky and confident: “Why should Bruce Wayne be an obstacle? When we have bowed to his whims? The acrobat is ours, by right. His name has been written. He has been marked.”

“By right,” the first speaker confirms. The diamonds on her rings cast a glittering light across the dark room. “But there is no way to interfere without drawing attention to ourselves. We could take the child in the night. We could stage a death. But the young Wayne will still suspect foul play. He would search forever.”

“Let him try.” The fourth speaker leans back and holds out his well-manicured hands. “He suspected us of dispatching Thomas and Martha, only to conclude that we do not exist. Let his arrogance guide him down the wrong path. Bruce Wayne will not find us until we choose to be found. The next time the boy escapes into Gotham, he will simply not return.”

After the dinner (not that bad—everyone was keen on hearing Dick’s stories of the circus and what he thought of Saint Swithin’s) and the speeches (painfully boring), Bruce had sent Dick home with Alfred, explaining that he could stay at the penthouse so that Alfred could remain at the manor to babysit. Dick had suggested that they all stay downtown, but Bruce had sternly refused.

“Do you think Bruce just wanted to bring some girl over?”

Alfred’s eyes flickered to the rearview mirror.

“Excuse me, Master Richard?”

“I mean, the penthouse. That must be where he takes girls, not all the way back to the manor. Paco said that’s why Sister Bernadette didn’t want Bruce talking to me. The papers all say he goes to parties all the time and drinks too much and brings home drunk girls.” Dick was blushing bright red now, regretting bringing up this fun fact.

“Appearances can be deceiving,” Alfred said, in a tone somewhere between sage advice and stern warning.

Dick thought that over. “So it’s just part of the act?”

“You could say that. I can assure you, Master Richard, he never drinks much at all, and he certainly does not bring girls anywhere.”

“But—”

“The women that Master Bruce entertains are his business. But since he is not here to defend himself, I’ll be the one to say that he engages in no more than witty conversation with any woman who’s had too much to drink. I raised him better than what the tabloids would suggest. And he would not want you following a false example. Are we clear?”

Dick scrunched his nose. “Yeah, got it.”
“Tabloids write what sells, not the truth. Don’t trust everything the papers say.”

“Like the paper that called me a charity case?”

“What shoe-rag of a paper said such a thing? The Gazette?”

“Yeah, I think so.” Dick shrugged, acting like it hadn’t bothered him, like he didn’t remember exactly where and when he’d read that: Can Charity Case Orphan Give Wayne Gravitas?

“Damn that Vale woman,” Alfred cursed. Dick went wide-eyed. He hadn’t seen Alfred angry before. “Don’t listen to a word of that drivel, Master Richard. You are a gift to Master Bruce as much as he is to you.”

“He doesn’t have a lot of friends, does he?”

Alfred hummed a non-committal answer. “You met one today. Mister Fox.”

That was just it, though. Bruce had introduced Mister Fox as one of my best friends, but Mister Fox had looked closer to Captain Gordon’s age—or even Alfred’s—than Bruce’s. Bruce didn’t seem have normal friends so much as older father-figures who’d helped him after his parents had died. Maybe that’s why Bruce cared so much about being there for him.

Dick hoped he didn’t end up the same way. He liked Bruce. They were friends. But he wanted friends his own age, too. Like Raya and Raymond and Zane and—

“What did Mister Fox show you? You said he took you to R&D. Exciting place, isn’t it?”

Alfred’s change of topic wasn’t exactly subtle, but it worked. Dick grinned, thinking of the tour.

“Yeah! He said some hokey line like, We bring the future into the present. But it’s actually kinda true.”

“Indeed.”

Dick repeated everything he had told Bruce at the gala: about the awesome goggles that could identify people and tanks and blinked with little instructions on their vital signs and weaknesses on the displays; about the line-launcher that could make a zip line anywhere with sturdy enough walls, and about how Lucius had even let Dick test it by demonstrating his (totally amateur, but not nonexistent) funambulist skills, and about the mesmerizing parachute material that went from being flexible and smooth to structured and rigid, at the press of a button.

It reminded Dick of Batman’s cape, how it had turned into a glider in an instant.

Dick hadn’t told Bruce that part.

He wasn’t sure exactly why he hadn’t. It’s not like Bruce was untrustworthy. Batman hadn’t forbade him from speaking of him. But something about it felt like it was supposed to be a secret. Then again, his mom had always said not to keep encounters with strange adults secret.

“I think WayneTech made the Batcape,” he declared.

“Pardon? What is it they made?”

“The Bat-cape,” Dick repeated, as if he hadn’t made up the term in his head just now. “The cape that the Batman wears. I think it’s made of the same stuff as the parachutes I saw.”
Had Batman given WayneTech the science behind it? Or did Batman buy from WayneTech?

He laughed at the idea of the black-cowled, black-caped vigilante strolling into Wayne Tower like a mall. *I’ll take one of everything*, he’d say, in his gruff Bat-voice.

“I met him, you know,” Dick added, since Alfred hadn’t said anything. “The Bat.”

“*Did* you really, Master Richard?”

“Mmmhmm.”

“And what was he like? They say he’s rather frightening, on those dark streets of Gotham.”

“Don’t trust everything the papers say, Alfred,” Dick teased. He *had* been scared, at first. But then the Bat had been like a weird grumpy uncle, and it was hard to be scared after that. “I mean, maybe he’s scary to criminals. But not to me. He was nice to me.”

His mind drifted back to the thought about WayneTech. About the Batman’s totally random concern for him. About Gotham.

Bruce would probably be best friends with the Bat.

And Bruce *did* need more friends.

“Hey Alfred, has Bruce met him?”

Alfred cleared his throat and coughed a few times. “I think that’s something to ask Master Bruce.”

Dick massaged the callouses of his palms as he thought. He probably should’ve told Bruce. But he hadn’t wanted to scare him. And he’d have to own up to blatantly disobeying Bruce’s request, in a way bigger way than a trip to Wayne Tower.

“You don’t think he’ll be mad that I was out at night?”

“*He* may be. But I think he’d like you taking an interest in Gotham’s more unique features.”

That was a good point. Dick had seen a part of Gotham that even Bruce hadn’t. Bruce would probably be jealous. Dick grinned.

“I wouldn’t be worried about the one wayward act. Just be clear that you, of course, won’t ever go out into Gotham alone again, and Master Bruce will understand.”

Dick slumped in his chair, avoiding eye contact with Alfred.

“Right,” he said. “Of course not.”

The one benefit of Bruce’s busy evening calendar was that it afforded Dick a chance to do some evening work of his own.

Alfred had put Dick to bed as soon as they’d arrived back home, and that gave plenty of time for trying to piece together everything he knew about Tony Zucco.
Exhibit A: Dick had seen Zucco make threats against Haly the day before the show. Zucco had offered Haly “protection”—Haly refused—and Zucco said, *be a shame if there was an accident.*

Exhibit B: The ropes had been tampered with, expertly. They hadn’t snapped under the weight of his father, or even his mother on her first trick. The force of the triple had done it. The murderer knew that the Graysons were famous for their somersaults, knew that John Grayson would be catching his wife at the speed of a highway car. That’s why it looked like an accident, too. Subtle.

Exhibit C: Zucco had grown up in the circus, Dick had learned from some after-school research at the library. He had the knowledge necessary to do this. And maybe the motive, too.

Apparently that wasn’t enough for the Gotham boys in blue. So Dick pulled out the stealthiest outfit he could muster: a grey leotard, black warm-up tights, and a dark green zip-up sweatshirt with a deep hood. He dug into his duffel for tape and wrapped his palms, laced himself into his sneakers, and grabbed a small pack that could fasten around his waist. Into it he packed emergency supplies (flashlight, quarters for a payphone, twenty dollars for a cab, a map of Gotham, his pocketknife) and the most important items, binoculars and a camera.

Guilt hit him hard as he stuffed the covers of the bed in an arrangement approximating a sleeping boy. He had *just* told Alfred he would stay out of Gotham. But he had no choice. He needed to do this. And anyway, he’d be back before morning. It would be just one night, and what Alfred and Bruce didn’t know wouldn’t hurt them.

Half-convinced, he opened the window closest to the tall tree that morning birds seemed fond of. *Ladies and Gentlemen, the youngest Flying Grayson, in his first solo performance!* It was a simple leap to the tree bough, an easy swing to a further branch, and a flip to the soft ground. The worst obstacle was the wall surrounding Wayne Manor. He turned on the flashlight and shone it on the stone wall until he found a path of chinks in the stones and mortar. Holding the light in his mouth, he jumped as high as he could onto the wall before scrambling up and over.

Dick rolled through the air and onto the grass outside of the Wayne Manor walls. He was out.

From there, it was a long walk to Gotham City, and no cabs came this way. Thankfully, Amusement Mile was close to the bridge, and easy to spot, with its lights shining even in the middle of the night.

Memories of his last night excursion in Gotham came flooding back. He had never figured out who *had* been chasing him, before he ran into the Bat. He was sure he hadn’t just imagined it.

He started into a jog and tried to ignore the inescapable feeling of eyes on the back of his neck.
Chapter Summary

Bruce leapt to the side, letting the cape take the fire—two shots—three—four—and kicked through the hole-ridden glass. He sidestepped the fifth and sixth shot and knocked the gun away, sending it spinning across the kitchen linoleum. “Tony Zucco. Haly’s Circus,” he growled, throwing the man on the ground. “Tell me what you know.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

After several hours of toasts and mingling and a silent auction, Bruce had finally excused himself from the gala and switched over to his more important responsibilities.

Alfred would have choice words for him in the morning. He’d expressed his displeasure clearly enough through his eyebrows when Bruce had sent him home with Dick. But Alfred, for all his many virtues, was wrong.

Bruce held up binoculars—those really had to go—and watched Tony Zucco’s cousin Frankie step through the door of his apartment building. Good. Making a mental note to have Lucius look into digitally magnifying lenses, he stepped off the edge of the building and glided silently onto the fire escape.

The light inside went on. Perfect timing. The gangster rustled around his apartment for a moment, and then shouted in surprise. He turned for his gun and pointed it at the window like an idiot. Right on cue.

Bruce leapt to the side, letting the cape take the fire—two shots—three—four—and kicked through the hole-ridden glass. He sidestepped the fifth and sixth shot and knocked the gun away, sending it spinning across the kitchen linoleum. “Tony Zucco. Haly’s Circus,” he growled, throwing the man on the ground. “Tell me what you know.”

“I don’t know nothin’!”

Maybe another night, Bruce wouldn’t had patience for this game. Not tonight. His boot pressed down on the fingers that had so recently squeezed a trigger. “Talk.”

“Ow-ow-ow! It was just protection, that’s all. Old circus man refused to pay up, so we taught him a lesson, okay?”

It wasn’t okay. Frankie Zucco yowled as his wrist crunched between the steel boot and the floor.

“What do you want from me?”

“Why kill them? Why not break their knuckles,” he added, demonstrating the ease of it, “if you just wanted money?”
The racketeer whimpered. “How were we supposed to know they’d die, huh? I thought they’d just get hurt, break somethin’.”

“The truth.” Bruce pressed his weight into his boot.

“Okay, okay! Some… someone said he’d never pay, long as those Graysons were around.”

Bruce let up the pressure. Once they started talking, it was easier. It was just getting them started.

“Why not?”

“What do I know, huh? They were big shots, weren’t they? Probably self-righteous or whatever.”

Something about the case still sat wrong with him. He’d seen Haly the second night, when he’d visited all the prime circus suspects. Haly had insisted he didn’t need to pay for protection, and this new story, long as those Graysons were around, seemed to suggest the Graysons had some kind of pull, but none of his investigation had yielded any links between the acrobats and organized crime. He had looked into that right off, so if anything had come up, he could have broken it to Dick himself, but there’d been nothing beyond some petty theft charges from Mary Grayson’s girlhood days in Europe. John’s family, meanwhile, had been in the circus for three generations, starting with an abandoned infant raised by the Haly troupe. No mafia ties, no anything. They seemed much like anyone else: they were safe, until they weren’t.

He grabbed Frankie by the collar and dragged him halfway off the floor.

“You’d have to ask Tony! Let me go, you Bat-Freak!”

“Where’s Tony? He’s not home.”

“He heard they died and scattered. I dunno where!”

“You want me to let you go?” Bruce leaned over, snarling close to Frankie Zucco’s face. “Tell me where I find him.”

“Maybe the safehouse by the docks. It’s Skeevers property—that’s all I know, all right? Just let me go. I’m not a killer. I just collect money. I’m not a killer!”

“Maybe you weren’t. You are now.”

A well-placed blow knocked Frankie out and Bruce cuffed him to his radiator. As soon as he was clear of the apartment, he put in a call to GCPD. Strange activity at Frankie Zucco’s address. Six gunshots. They’d come, and Frankie would talk.

Bruce had made it halfway to the docks when Alfred came on over the comms.

“Batman? Emergency, respond ASAP.”

“Here.” He jumped from a grapple onto a rooftop and slunk into the shadows. “What is it?”
“The boy, sir. He’s gone.”

Bruce’s heart stopped. “Gone? How?”

“He left his things here. But his bed was stuffed rather inexpertly, so I’d wager it was voluntary.”

“He went to investigate.” It was hard for Bruce to fault the boy, but he managed. Bruce had at least known where he was going when he was a boy. “He doesn’t know the city. He’ll go to Zucco’s last address. Or Haly’s.”

“He can’t have gone far, sir. He’s on foot.”

“Send the car to Haly’s. I’ll meet it. If he’s not there, I’ll still beat him to Zucco’s.”

“And if he doesn’t make it to Zucco’s?”

Bruce couldn’t think about that. There were too many ways Dick could get lost, hurt, kidnapped, or killed on the way from Bristol to Zucco’s address in Old Gotham. There were too many dangerous places for Bruce to patrol every one for Dick. There were too many ways it would be Bruce’s fault if anything happened.

“I’ll find him,” Bruce growled.

With that, he took off, flying across town, from the sea across to the fairgrounds on the river where the circus had set up.

Dick pulled his hood lower and hid behind one of the oversized circus advertisements. He clutched the camera tight in his hands. Whatever happened, at least his long trip in hadn’t been for nothing. The lights from the trailer below cast an eerie glow on the fairgrounds. His heart raced.

If he went down there, jumped into the fray, he could lose the evidence he’d finally gotten, of Zucco returning to the scene of the crime.

If he didn’t, Zucco might kill Haly.

He rustled around the top of the train car and found a piece of charcoal. Hopefully, that would do. Quickly, he set himself to drawing a signal, something that would draw attention to the evidence he was leaving behind, just in case he didn’t make it back up. He set down the camera in a nook at the tip of the drawing, and got out his pocketknife. It wasn’t much, but it was a start. He’d have to just improvise once he hit the ground. There were plenty of makeshift weapons down there.

Just as came to the side of the billboard and perched his toes on the edge of the train car, something moved behind him.

Had he been followed again? Paco’s nightmares rang in his ears. The Batman had sworn the Court of Owls didn’t exist, but Dick wasn’t so sure. Gotham was an evil place. Rotten through and through. If the Bat could exist in the shadows, why not an Owl?

No time for that now. If these illuminati Owls sent their Talon for his head, he couldn’t do anything about that. At least he could save Haly first. He took a deep breath and readied himself for the jump, but as he leaned forward, something landed with a flutter and a thump on the train car behind him.
The next thing he knew, something had caught the back of his hood. He lurched forward, but the hood only pulled at his neck, keeping him on top of the car.

“You again,” said a low, gruff voice.

Dick regained his balance and slowly turned around. The Bat. Better than a Talon, at least. He put on his most winning grin and waved.

“You’re looking for Zucco,” the Bat growled.

“No,” said Dick. “I found Zucco.”

“What’re you going to do with him?”

“I’m not gonna kill him, if that’s what you mean.” Dick scrunched his nose. He’d thought about it, plenty. “He’d deserve it. He killed my parents. I know he did.”

“So?”

“I’m getting evidence,” Dick said. “He wasn’t alone. If I get something on him, maybe the whole gang of them can get locked up.”

“You’ll find something the cops can’t?”

“I already did!”

Batman bent down and picked up the hidden camera. He looked over the charcoal drawing on the train, the one that looked just like the signal Dick had seen shining into the sky, and then back at Dick.

“For me?”

“I heard the cops here are crooked. They haven’t arrested him yet. Maybe they aren’t trying to catch him.”

“Maybe not.”

“So? Are you gonna help me, or get in my way?”

“I’m driving you home.”

Dick clenched his jaw. “No. It was hard to get here, okay? I’m not leaving while Zucco’s still here!”

Before Batman could argue, Zucco and a henchman came out of Haly’s trailer. Batman held a finger to his mouth and jumped down, landing right behind the two men.

He grabbed Zucco by the collar, and the mobster yelped.

“Eddie Skeevers,” Batman growled. Dick’s heart fell. It wasn’t Zucco. He didn’t even look like Zucco, now that the light was better and his brimmed hat had fallen off. Dick felt like a fool.

Dick couldn’t hear the next words from Batman, but Skeevers struggled to get out of the Bat’s grasp.
More words were exchanged, and Batman threw Skeevers onto the ground.

“This circus is protected,” he growled. “Spread the word.”

Skeevers scrambled to his feet and fled, with his henchman trailing behind. Batman fired a grapple gun and landed on top of the train car where Dick was hiding.

“What’d he say?”

“Go in the car and I’ll explain.”

Dick cocked his head, considering. It seemed like this Batman character was telling the truth, but it also could be a ploy just to get him to give up. “Fine.” Dick shoved his binoculars into the Bat’s hands and jumped from train car to train car until he saw the armored black car. He flipped to land smoothly onto its hood.

The Bat jumped and fluttered down to the ground and the doors lifted open. “In.”

Dick hopped from the hood and twisted around to slide gracefully in the passenger seat. The doors closed around them, and the car screeched out into the night.

“What’d he say?” Dick repeated.

“Skeevers and Zucco both answer to the Maroni Crime Family,” said Batman. “You didn’t find Zucco, but you found his partner.”

“And?”

“It wasn’t just protection. They were trying to pass drugs through.”

“Will the police arrest them?”

“Not based on that.”

Dick’s hopes fell.

“But I have more evidence,” said Batman.

“Will you show me?”

“On one condition: you take my lead on this case. Follow my orders.”

Dick scowled. “Why would I do that?”

“Because you don’t know what you’re doing.”

“I know Zucco killed my parents.”

“That’s not going to get him convicted.”

The car swerved suddenly and then took a hard right turn. Dick tried to look outside to see where they were or where they were going, but everything was moving too quickly.

"How do you know?"

The Bat’s eyes narrowed. “The GCPD. The mafia. Gotham. I know how they work. This is what I do.”
“Pff.” Dick was about two inches away from fed up with superior attitudes about knowing Gotham and its corruption. At least this time there was a way for Dick to do something other than mess around on the computer at Wayne Manor.

He thought of accepting when they turned again. The red sky of the night reflected on water. They were heading out of the city.

“Hey! I said not to take me back!”

“I’m not.”

What a liar. Dick didn’t know Gotham well, but he knew what the way to Bristol looked like. But then they took a wrong turn. Maybe they weren’t going to Wayne Manor after all. Instead, they drove down a dark winding country path that Dick didn’t know, surrounded by tall trees that hid the sky. The road wove back and forth, but they didn’t slow down. Instead, they began to race directly into a fence with a large warning sign that reflected the headlights of the Batmobile.

“Batman! Watch ou—”

Dick’s warning fell silent as the fence retracted, and they drove past. When they then approached and drove directly into a cliff-face covered by a waterfall, he didn’t even blink. Of course the Bat had some kind of secret hideaway.

The road turned into an indoor ramp, lit by low running lights, and now they finally slowed down. Dick’s heart raced: the secret Bat-base was probably not too far from the Manor. If not walking distance, biking. And Bruce trusted Dick in Bristol. Bruce would get him a bike, probably, if he asked, and then he could easily come out here, to help the Bat track down Zucco.

Except there was no way Bruce didn’t know about a secret vigilante headquarters practically in his backyard. He knew every building in Gotham, every bridge, every story about every road. Bruce hadn’t trusted the police, either. Bruce probably had donated the cave himself.

“Where are we?” Dick demanded. “Who are you?”

“I’m Batman.” Batman pressed a button and the car went to autopilot as it pulled forward and parked. “And this is the Batcave.” The doors opened and Dick stepped out into the strangest space.

He gasped. It _was_ a cave, an actual, cold, dark, drippy, underground cave, with several stories top to bottom. But it was also some kind of secret headquarters, a strange mix of office and warehouse and gym, with a huge computer system and cabinets and cases and a space like a lab and training equipment. Eerie cold light shone from the floor and overhead, but naturally, it would have been completely black. Dick shivered, adjusting from the heat of almost-summer Gotham City to the underground chill of the cave. In the distance, the flutter and squeaks of bats echoed. Of course. The Batman. In a Batcave.

Batman swept forward to the seat in front of the computer, leaving Dick standing agape in the wake of his billowing cape. Dick broke into a run, hurrying after.

A few clicks, a few buttons typed, and the oversized computer monitor filled with information on Zucco and his parents and Haly’s.

“Wow.” He had to have spent hours pulling all of this together. Days.

“It’s not enough,” Batman growled. “But I’m close. The information from Skeevers will help get this solved faster. Especially with your photographs.”
He spun in his chair and faced Dick.

“You did good work, but you can’t keep going out there. Keeping track of you wastes time I could spend building this case. So you have a choice. You can leave this to me. Or you can help take down the man that murdered your parents, but under my watch and my rules.”

Dick wanted to say yes, immediately, but he hesitated. Bruce had been good to him, and had only asked one thing: for Dick to stay out of Gotham City. Dick had hoped that tonight would be all he needed, and that then it would be over and he wouldn’t be under Bruce’s care anyway, but the idea of working with this Batman… it felt like a big thing to do without Bruce’s permission. Even if he did get a bike.

“What’s holding you back?”

Dick sighed. “My…” His what? What was Bruce? He shook his head in confusion. “Bruce Wayne asked me to stay home, stay out of the city.”

“You didn’t listen.”

Clearly.

“I know. But I thought it would be a one-night thing. How long is this gonna take?”

“It could be one more night. Could be several.”

“I want to get Zucco. Bad.” Dick scuffed his shoes against the stony ground. Guilt struck him hard. What if Bruce or Alfred had noticed he’d gone missing? They’d probably think Zucco had kidnapped him, or that Dick had run away. Would they worry? Call the police? What if DCF decided Bruce wasn’t fit to take care of him and he was sent back to the group home?

His heart raced. He hadn’t thought enough about this.

“But?”

“But I don’t want to lie to Bruce.” He looked up, crushed but resolved. “It was wrong to go out tonight without him knowing. I don’t want to give him the runaround every night. Not even one more night. If I have to keep this a secret, then I can’t do it.”

To Dick’s surprise, Batman smiled.

“You don’t have to,” he said. His voice was smoother now, refined, almost familiar. Very familiar. But just before Dick could place it, Batman had pulled the cowl away from his face.

It was Bruce Wayne.

Chapter End Notes

Here ends Act II.

As I mentioned before, I decided to go with the pre-Flashpoint version of things where Dick (a pre-teen) doesn’t figure out the Bruce-Bats connection on his own, but I also don’t think he was too far away from it. Honestly, given about ten minutes of solid
thinking time with the adrenaline level down and he probably would have gotten there. This is part of the reason why I contracted the extremely decompressed timeline of Dark Victory: the holiday hangings are clever, but I can't buy that Dick would live at the Manor for months without piecing this together himself. He's too clever and too nosy.

I'll start posting Act III (3 of 4) tomorrow and have it all up by the end of the weekend at latest. Thanks so much for reading!
Chapter Summary

Act III: The Flying Gray Son

_Bruce, to his credit, made it a point to catch him up on the ongoing investigation over dinner each night. Pot roast and witnesses who could place Zucco’s men at the circus the day of the crime. Risotto and receipts for the acid that was used on the rope, the same acid that Sal Maroni had used on Harvey Dent’s face. Burgers and money trails of the drugs Zucco had been smuggling._

_On Friday, though, Bruce simply slid a brochure across the table._

_Gotham City Aerial Arts, it said._

Chapter Notes

_I made a soundtrack playlist!_

_The deleted scene _"This Isn't an Interview"_ between Bruce and Clark discussing Dick takes place in the middle of this chapter. I'm of two minds about cutting it, so you can read it in between where it would have gone (in between the two scenes here, at the break) or afterwards as bonus material. :)_

_Batman’s voice was smoother now, refined, almost familiar. Very familiar. But just before Dick could place it, Batman had pulled the cowl away from his face._

_It was Bruce Wayne._

_“Bruce?” Dick stepped back in shock, but there were traces of connection, habits that Dick had seen in Bruce and Batman. He should’ve put it together sooner. Tension in the shoulders. Twitches in the forehead and eyes. Too much stress for a billionaire playboy. Too quick reflexes, enough to catch Dick leaping from on high. Dick had just been too caught up in his own problems to put it together._

_He looked around the cave again. It made too much sense, really. Why Bruce was always gone at night, sleeping in late even when there hadn’t been a party. Why he had such an over-exaggerated act in public, keeping people from ever connecting him to Batman. How Batman had known exactly who he was and what group home he’d gotten separated from. Why Bruce was so skeptical of the GCPD but so confident that they would catch Zucco._

_Why he’d taken an interest in Dick in the first place._

_“Am… am I only here because of this?” he asked. “Not down here but… Here. With you. At the Manor—I mean, I assume this is connected to the Manor somehow.” He looked around, unsure of_
exactly *how* it connected. It didn’t matter. What mattered was that he’d been lied to and used.

Bruce’s eyes narrowed.

“See, I first thought that you’d taken me in as a charity case,” Dick continued, “but it didn’t match up with the party-boy act. So I thought, well, maybe you actually *want* me here, enough to mess that up. But you didn’t take me in as *Bruce Wayne*, did you? You did it as *Batman.*” Dick shook himself and stepped back from Bruce. “I thought you cared about *me*, but you only cared about the case. You didn’t want to lose a witness, was that it?”

Bruce shook his head. “That was never it.”

Dick spun around. “How do I get out of this place? I want to go home.”

When he turned back, Bruce had lost a good two inches of his height. Was he *slouching*? How dare he act like *his* feelings had been hurt?

“There are stairs to the manor on the other side.”

“Not the *manor*! I want to go *home*. To my *family*!”

Bruce recoiled. Dick almost apologized, but *no*. He was not here to take care of a grown-up, to forgive him for acting like he cared.

“I just gave up finding *my parents’ killer* because I didn’t want to be a liar. But *you!*” A normal kid probably would’ve been intimidated, learning that his caretaker was a terrifying bat-vigilante. Well, Dick never claimed to be normal. He stepped right up to the Bat and glowered spectacularly.

“You’ve been lying to me *this—whole—time.*”

“I’ve never lied.”

“You pretended to be someone else. That’s lying!” Dick had never felt so betrayed. “You could’ve told me!”

“I *did* tell you,” Batman—Bruce?—no, Batman—growled.

“Yeah, *now* you did. You could’ve told me right away, that first night you drove me back to St. Swithun’s.”

“I didn’t know if I could trust you.”

“So, what? I passed your test?”

“Do you know how many people I’ve told?” Bruce’s voice was low, so quiet that Dick could only hear him because he was standing so close.

Dick shook his head. It clearly wasn’t common knowledge or anything.

“Three. *Including* you.”

“Alfred, and…” Dick realized that Bruce didn’t really have anyone as close as Alfred. “Who? Captain Gordon?”

“No. Leslie Thompkins. A friend of my parents. She helped raise me after they were killed. And she’s my doctor.”
Honestly, Dick wasn’t even sure how he had passed whatever test Bruce had. It hadn’t taken long to see that Alfred was way more than a butler to Bruce, and he hadn’t met this Leslie woman, but the two of them were clearly the closest thing Bruce had to family.

And then him.

The guilt that he’d pushed away before returned, swinging back hard into him. Bruce had reached out, and Dick had rejected that outstretched hand. Some trapeze artist he was. He hung his head.

“I’m not just a witness?” His eyes flickered up to check Bruce’s reaction.

“No.” Bruce dropped one knee and held Dick’s elbows. “I didn’t bring you here because Zucco’s my top priority. Zucco’s my top priority because of you.”

Dick just wanted to go back to the circus, to go back to normal life, waving to crowds and flying through the air. But instead he was in a giant cave under a giant mansion in (outside of?) Gotham, swiftly becoming part of a billionaire's cobbled-together family and trying to solve a murder. And the worst part was, he sort of liked it.

It was different and strange and scary, but if there was one thing Dick could do, it was to take a chance. He’d make the leap and hope Bruce really could catch him.

“Yes,” Dick said.

“Yes?”

“Yes, I’ll help you. I’ll help Batman. I’ll follow your lead and rules or whatever and not go out on my own.”

Bruce sighed with relief, and then straightened up suddenly, as if remembering something. He dropped Dick’s arms and tapped something on his left wrist.

From the other side of the cave came the sound of a door opening and someone running down steps. Alfred.

“My dear boy,” he called out, “you gave us quite the fright!”

Dick couldn’t bear playing it cool anymore. He ran to the butler and threw his arms around him. “I’m so sorry, Alfred,” he mumbled into the rough waistcoat. “I didn’t mean to scare anyone.”

“He was looking for Zucco,” Bruce explained, sort of halfway between his normal voice and his Bat-voice. Maybe this was his normal voice, and the Billionaire-Brucie voice and the Bat voice were two exaggerations. Sort of like a clown’s act, drawing out part of your personality to create a sort of new character.

“So you brought him here? Told him everything, I see.”

Dick released his hug and stepped back toward Bruce. “He said I could help. So I’m going to.”

“With the Zucco case,” Bruce clarified. “And he’ll be helping from the safety of the Cave.”

“What?!”

“My rules. You agreed.”

He had. Dick huffed, but didn’t push it. For now.
“Very well,” sighed Alfred. “Welcome to the world of vigilantism, Master Dick. I hope it’s a very short stay.”

Even though Bruce wouldn’t let Dick go out into Gotham, he kept him busy. His first lesson was a crash-course on the crime families of Gotham. While learning all of that, Bruce taught him how to use the Bat-Computer and access different files and footage, and he’d would take Dick for an hour or two a day to practice different forms of self-defense, just in case Zucco did come after him. Mostly, Dick shadowed Bruce’s detective work in the Batcave, piecing together evidence and clues. By the end of the weekend, Bruce had enough to convince himself of Zucco’s guilt, but he said that the courts would need more that that to get Zucco in prison.

Most of the time, though, Bruce went off alone, working other cases that he wouldn’t let Dick help with. Dick started to regret choosing the public school in Gotham. It was good to see the same familiar faces, even Braydon’s very punchable face, but it took a half-hour to get there in the mornings with all the traffic, and Bruce used it as an excuse to send Dick to bed by nine every night. And he had to do his homework. It left very little time for detective work.

Bruce, to his credit, made it a point to catch him up on the ongoing investigation over dinner each night. Pot roast and witnesses who could place Zucco’s men at the circus the day of the crime. Risotto and receipts for the acid that was used on the rope, the same acid that Sal Maroni had used on Harvey Dent’s face. Burgers and money trails of the drugs Zucco had been smuggling.

On Friday, though, Bruce simply slid a brochure across the table.

Gotham City Aerial Arts, it said. Dick knit his eyebrows as he looked at the drawing of someone hanging from a trapeze. “I don’t need a school,” he said. “I could probably teach—”

“No, not for you,” said Bruce.

“You’re going take a trapeze class?” Dick looked past Bruce to Alfred. Alfred shrugged.

“I thought we could go together. It doesn’t have to be trapeze,” said Bruce. “We can stay on the ground—”

Dick was too entertained to dismiss the concerns. Bruce Wayne, on a trapeze. Dick burst into a gleeful laughter.

“What’s so funny?”

“What’s not funny? You’re all…” He rose dramatically to stand on his chair, furrowed his brow and hunched his shoulders, extended his arms and leapt off to pounce on the floor.

“Bruce Wayne’s not,” Bruce said, ignoring Dick’s amazing impression.

“Yeah, so you’ll have to be extra bad at it, which means it’ll be even funnier.”

That won a smile, and Dick returned satisfied to his seat.

“I thought it would be a good idea for us to do something together, something other than the case. Spend a real day without any school or board meetings or criminals in our way. But if you’re going
to be mean about it…” Bruce said, laying on a thick act of offense. He began to drag the brochure under his fingers.

“Wait, Bruce!” Dick grabbed the edge of the paper with one hand and Bruce’s wrist with his other. “It’s a good idea. A really, really good idea.”

Bruce turned his head ever-so-askew and looked at Dick sidelong.

“I miss flying. If I can’t go back to the circus yet, then this—it’s really good. The best.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah. And hey, maybe it’ll get Zucco’s attention. I’d like to see him try to come for me here.”

It turned out Bruce had been serious about making a day of it to make up for how little he’d been around. After a breakfast of the sweetest, most neon-colored cereal Alfred could find, a morning at home watching cartoons of Dick’s choice, and a lunch at some noodle place that Bruce said was the best in Gotham, they took the metro-rail across town to the aerial arts school. The whole way, people pointed and whispered at them, but Bruce played it expertly: he gave money and a smile to every panhandler but completely ignored everyone else, seemingly riveted by Dick’s very, very long series of knock-knock jokes.

It was obviously part show, for Bruce to been seen by Gotham a good guardian, taking care of his adorable circus-boy ward. It added depth to his public act and brought it more in line with his private self without exposing his work as Batman. But Dick didn’t mind. He’d grown up in show business, and he understood publicity. Maybe it’d be good for Haly’s, too. And beyond that, beneath the publicity stunt of it, there was something real. Bruce really did want to get to know him beyond the case. Even at lunch, when Bruce had chosen the restaurant, he had prompted Dick to tell story after story about his life: about being a circus performer, about his parents, about all of the cities he’d visited and strange people he’d met. Not that Dick needed much prompting.

Finally, they reached their stop and walked along the sidewalk, looking for the entrance. It wasn’t the most charming spot in Gotham, just a bunch of parking lots and warehouses near the docks. When the words Gotham City Aerial Arts appeared on a sign in front of them next to a rehabbed warehouse, Dick stopped short.

“They—they have a net, right?”

Of course they did. Everyone had nets, except for stupid Haly’s Circus in stupid Gotham City when performing the stupidest most daring death-defying stunts.

“You’ll be safe, Dick.”

Dick shook his head, dismissing Bruce’s misunderstanding. “I’m not scared for me.”

“Oh,” Bruce said, his voice barely loud enough to hear.

Dick reached for Bruce’s hand and held it, tight. Bruce wasn’t his mom or dad, but he was something. Something that Dick wasn’t ready to lose another of. He wanted to tell Bruce all that, to make him understand how much he’d come to mean to him, even in the short ten days he’d been in
his care, but the tabloid photographers were all too close.

“I know what I’m doing,” he said instead. “You’re the one who’s never held a fly bar.”

Bruce ruffled a hand through Dick’s hair in silent understanding, and Dick pulled the heavy door open. Together, they walked through a hallway of white that turned and opened into a huge airy space.

Dick hadn’t actually been sure what to expect, but he didn’t expect to suddenly feel short of breath and clammy-handed. What was happening to him? This was everything he’d been dying for since he moved to Wayne Manor, all here, welcoming him. Finally, a cure for his restlessness. But all he heard was screaming, and all he saw was rope snapping, and all he smelled was blood and dust. He couldn’t move.

Bruce dropped one knee and put a hand on Dick’s shoulder, bringing him to look him right in the eyes. “We don’t have to do this. If you aren’t ready—”

“I have to,” he said. His gaze went past Bruce toward the flying trapeze, where other students were practicing a catch. An incredibly simple catch. “If I can’t do this, I can’t do anything.”

Bruce’s forehead furrowed deep, and his eyes blinked rapidly in worry. “It may be too soon.”

“It’s always gonna be too soon.” He took Bruce’s hand again and dragged him forward, into the reception space. They had an audience again, and they both knew how to play their parts, the billionaire bachelor and the circus star. Smile for the crowd.

Even if they hadn’t planned on being center stage, there was no way around it. Wherever they went, Bruce Wayne was a magnet for attention. But here, in the trapeze school, Dick Grayson rivaled him for it.

“Oh my gosh,” gushed the young woman taking their names. “Grayson? Like, Grayson Grayson?”

Dick grinned. “That’s me.”

“I am so sorry about what happened. We were all totally devastated. I mean, I got into trapeze because of watching your parents. Not that it’s anything like—”

She cut off her words, catching Bruce’s scalding glare.

“It’s okay,” said Dick. “I’m, um. Glad they inspired you. They would’ve loved this—sharing the art.”

The woman’s eyes shone. “Wow, thank you. That—that means a lot. And we’re so honored to have you here—I don’t think I can charge you for the class! It’s for beginners, you know. There’s a lower fee for free use of the space when we aren’t teaching, if you can pass the mastery test, which—“ She laughed awkwardly.

Dick pointed a thumb up at Bruce. “I’m doing the class with him. Total beginner.”

“We’ll pay the full fee,” said Bruce. “We’re still taking two spots in your class. His talent can make up for how much help I’ll need.” He flashed the charming grin he used only with strangers, and she ate it up and directed them to a changing area.

Dick was hopping with antsiness by the end of each of the ground lessons, but it gave time for his excitement to outweigh his fear. Not to mention that it was, as expected, hilarious to see Bruce trying
so hard to *look* like he was trying so hard, accidentally-on-purpose fumbling with the bar or falling flat on his butt. Every once in a while, Bruce would slip up and pick up a skill too quickly, causing the instructor to praise him profusely, and Dick would bite his cheek trying not to laugh.

The safety lecture before their first flight was less entertaining. The rules were obvious, standard even, but they made Dick want to throw up the whole time. His brain kept changing the completely reasonable rules into *it was their own fault*, over and over. The instructor avoided eye contact with him throughout it, which was probably supposed to help, but didn’t at all.

By the time he reached the ladder, Dick’s heart began to pound again. If he froze at the top, who would he be? If he couldn’t fly, he wouldn’t even be the *last* Flying Grayson anymore. He’d just be broken. Could he even go back to the circus like that? What else could he do? *Juggle?*

Bruce climbed up behind him. Dick had initially insisted that Bruce go first, but he had flat-out refused. *You need to show me how it’s done,* he had tried to reason. As Dick watched the student in front of him step onto the rise, Bruce’s true logic suddenly became crystal clear. He’d heard what Dick had said—about not being afraid for himself. Bruce didn’t want to leave him up there on the board, to make him watch his guardian take off while remaining powerless to do anything.

Dick had never taken the trapeze himself that awful night, so once the bar met his hand, he was transported back not to the show in Gotham, but to every other day and night he’d done this, since he was old enough to hold himself up by his own grip. It was nothing at all. Students below stopped their trampoline activities and held themselves in place on the silks to see the last Flying Grayson fly. He couldn’t disappoint them.

“*Ready!*” came the cry.

“Time to fly, little Robin,” he whispered to himself, just like his mother always had. He heard the signal to leave—“*Hup!*”—And off he went.

He was supposed to come to a knee-hang and then let himself drop onto the net, but once he was in the air, his muscle memory kicked in. He had to restrain himself from returning to the board, and instead left the trapeze with a tight double somersault onto the net below, which bounced him softly up.

He was already ready to go back.

A sigh of relief escaped him. He could still do this. Maybe he’d lost his parents and Haly’s would need a new catcher, and a rival family would take over the main act and probably sideline him, but he could still be a flier. That’s all that mattered. Zucco hadn’t clipped his wings.
Chapter Summary

While Dick took care of his evening routine, Bruce reviewed the files that he’d kept secret from Dick. It was a strange lead that hadn’t gone anywhere, but it had haunted Bruce, keeping him awake the four days since he’d noticed it.

Missing children from Haly’s circus.

There wasn’t an obvious pattern. Just something that started to peek out after the thirty-sixth time reading through the records, the thirty-sixth search for something that would silence the niggling voice that kept saying that this case was too simple.

Chapter Notes

Semi-spoiler warning for comics from the past decade: the title and the material for a lot of this chapter takes from the New 52 storyline, found in the Court of Owls and Robin War events.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The rest of the lesson was easy-breezy, and at the end, they asked Dick to do a special trick for them. Not his quadruple— their catcher couldn’t handle that—but something to inspire the other students. Well, twist his arm.

The thrill of swinging higher and higher, of turning through the air and reaching out to the catcher, of soaring back to the fly bar and spinning in a pirouette to return, of landing back onto the board with everyone’s arms outstretched around him and the sound of applause below—well, there was nothing quite like it. He was beaming, ear to ear, when he finally came back to the ground.

Bruce smiled, too, and reached out to their instructor, handing her a business card. “You made our day. Let me know if you need investors.”

He pulled Dick toward the exit, while Dick dragged his feet, shouting out goodbyes to everyone at the school.

Alfred was waiting for them next to the car when they got to the street, and Bruce gestured for Dick to climb in before him.

“Was it a good day, Master Richard?”

“The best!”

Alfred smiled and shut the car door behind Bruce before returning to his own seat.
“Dick was quite the celebrity in there, Alfred. You should’ve seen him.”

“I’m sure. And how was Master Bruce?”

“Pretty good! I’d say he has the makings of…” Dick looked between the two men to make sure they were listening. “…An acrobat!” He held out arms and grinned, waiting for the applause as if he’d just finished a trick and return.

There was no applause, but Bruce holding back a laugh behind tight lips was just as good.

“Very clever, Master Richard. How long have you been sitting on that one?”

“Since about ten minutes into the lesson,” Dick said, dropping his arms and buckling himself in. “He was pretty good though.”

“Pretty good, huh?” Bruce raised his eyebrows. “Any tips?”

“Yeah.” Dick leaned forward, suddenly in coaching mode. The other acrobats at Haly’s had hated him giving tips. The younger ones were jealous. The older ones didn’t like getting criticized by a kid — and they were jealous. Really, they should’ve felt lucky to work with the best trapeze artist in the country. “You need to keep your toes pointed. That’s like, rule number one.”

Bruce nodded, like he was mentally filing away the note.

“And you have to trust the catcher.”

“What?”

“The catcher. You hesitated.”

“Everyone hesitated.”

“They didn’t trust themselves. You didn’t trust him.”

“Hnn.” Bruce narrowed his eyes. Behind him, city projects whipped past.

“My dad was a catcher,” Dick said. “He said that without trust, you can’t fly. Probably why all the best troupes are families.”

He suddenly felt very alone. The deafening silence of it filled the car.

“You were brave out there, Dick.”

Dick shrugged. “I grew up on the trapeze.”

Bruce’s gaze stuck on him, making it very clear that he hadn’t meant the height or the tricks.

“Yeah, I guess,” he muttered, embarrassed that he’d ever been afraid. But then he brightened, putting it all together: the indulgent morning, the whole premise of the trapeze school, the way Bruce had pushed Dick to focus on teaching him, going on a busy day when Dick had an audience to impress… “You did all this on purpose, didn’t you? So I wouldn’t be afraid anymore.”

Bruce shrugged, but the hint of a smile betrayed his answer.

“Thank you.” Dick launched himself across the backseat and wrapped Bruce in a sweaty, enthusiastic hug. “I was scared I couldn’t do it anymore, couldn’t go back to the circus. But I can.”
He loosened his grip, but continued leaning on Bruce. “I think I’m going to be okay. It won’t be the same. Won’t ever. But I can still be who I was. Maybe I’m not broken like I thought.”

Bruce said, “That’s wonderful, Dick,” but he sounded sad about it. Was he sad about Dick going back to the circus? Or about being okay? Maybe Bruce was sad that he hadn’t recovered in the same way.

Maybe Dick shouldn’t have been able to recover so quickly.

“Is that bad?” he whispered. He nestled his head into Bruce’s chest but cast his gaze down into the corner, under the front seat. “Maybe I shouldn’t be okay.”

“No.” Bruce took his shoulders and pushed him up to meet his eyes. “That’s not bad. Your parents would want you to be the best you can be. Not broken.”

Dick felt a lump in his throat form, but he nodded in acceptance of Bruce’s words. Bruce gave in and let Dick fall back against him again.

“What was that you said to yourself,” Bruce asked, “up on the board, before you took off?”

“Oh… just something my mom always said. I’d take off right after her, so she’d always say, *Time to fly, little Robin.*” He felt his face hot with embarrassment and looked away. “It sounds dumb when I say it like that.”

“No at all.” Bruce said. “Why Robin?”

“Just a nickname,” Dick said, at ease from Bruce’s approval. “I used to want to be Robin Hood when I was little. She told me the stories, over and over, and I thought he was so cool—”

“Robbing the rich, huh?”

“Uhhh…” Dick suddenly became uncomfortably hyper-aware of the hand-crafted leather seats and happily humming engine bringing him back to Bruce’s gated mansion. He turned his head up and grinned innocently. “Not you?”

Bruce broke into loud laughter, followed by a little register of surprise, just a twitch of his eyes. It was a small victory every time he made Bruce laugh, a real laugh.

“That’s when I was little, anyway,” Dick said, pushing himself back up and into his own seat. “After that it just sort of stuck—with my flying, and the bird, and all. My dad liked to sing that song at me… you know, *when the red, red robin goes bob-bob-bobbin’ along, along—*” His voice cracked and he stopped trying to sing. “So. That’s why I got a red vest, when we switched from the blue outfits to the green.”

Not that he’d had the chance to wear the new costume, really. He wished Bruce had seen him fly. Today wasn’t really anything, though he had made people gasp and smile. That was what it was all about anyway, really, filling people with a sense of amazement, getting them on the edge of their seats and their eyes on the flier defying gravity and pushing every human limit.

“Hey Bruce, can I go back next week?”

Bruce smiled. “If Alfred’s willing to bring you down here.”

“It’d be my pleasure,” said Alfred. “Better he swing on the trapeze than the chandeliers.”
Dick sank a little in his seat. “It was only once.” Once that they knew.

“Mmhmm,” hummed Alfred skeptically. He picked up a paper bag and handed it to the backseat. “Hungry?”

Dick snatched the bag. “Gosh, am I! Thanks, Alfred!” He reached in and found a sandwich, a banana, a sports drink, and a bag of nuts. He tore into the sandwich first and then held the bag of nuts out to Bruce. “Want some?” he asked, his mouth half-full.

Bruce took two nuts and handed it back. What weird person ate just two nuts?

“This won’t spoil your supper, will it?”

Dick picked up the other half of the sandwich. He wasn’t sure what Alfred had put in it, but he’d never had such a good sandwich. Maybe he was just really hungry. But hadn’t they just been at that noodle place? He paused between bites to nudge Bruce. “Why? What’re our big dinner plans?”

“Oh. I… won’t be able to join you,” said Bruce, looking away. In the front, Alfred cleared his throat with an unmistakable hint of disapproval. “I have a lot to catch up on. Dent has—”

“It’s okay!”

Bruce looked back, clearly confused by Dick’s enthusiasm. “It’s not okay. I said this day was for us, Dick. I don’t want to go back on that, but—”

“Then don’t.” Dick swallowed and grinned, proud of his clever plan. “Bring me with you.”

“Absolutely not,” Alfred said, at the same time that Bruce said, “Out of the question.”

“Come on! You said I could help you.”

“With Zucco. Dent, Joker, they’re not like Zucco. They’re… well, I wouldn’t take time away from the Zucco case if they weren’t as bad as they are.”

Dick groaned. They were close to home now, and his window for arguing was closing.

Home?

He pushed the question out of his mind and focused back at the issue on the table. “Then let me help on the Bat-computer.”

“Bat-computer?”


“Batmobile? The car?”

“The Batmobile is that car,” Dick said. “You have lots of cars.”

“If I want the Mercedes, I’d say the Mercedes. The car is the only one without a make and model.”

Dick rolled his eyes, hard. “It’s the Batmobile. Everyone in Gotham calls it that.”

“They do not.”

“The kids at school do.” It was possible he’d started that trend, but what Bruce didn’t know wouldn’t
hurt him. “Anyway, I’m gonna help you on the Bat-Computer.”

Bruce hummed in thought, and Alfred sighed from the driver’s seat. They pulled into the long driveway, and Dick looked pleadingly at Bruce the whole ride in, until the car stopped and Bruce unbuckled his seat belt.

“Fine.”

“YES!” Dick burst into a giant grin and practically threw himself out of the car. He celebrated with a cartwheel (the driveway pavement was not kind on palms) and jumped onto Bruce with a celebratory hug. “I’m going to be the best helper.”

“Only until midnight, though.” Bruce swept passed him to enter the house.

Dick ran up behind. “Only until you catch the bad guys and come home?”

“Midnight,” he repeated.

“Better work quickly-y-y,” sang Dick, “if you want to catch them by midnight.”

“Don’t make me change my mind.”

Dick was quickly learning which final pronouncements he could push on and which were actually final. This sounded like the second type. Though if Bruce were out as Batman, it’s not like he could force Dick into bed. Alfred might let him push the time, if he promised to help with chores the next day. Twelve-thirty, maybe.

“Fine, fine,” said Dick, cartwheeling back up to Bruce again, though this time his foot knocked the top of a vase. He caught it just before it hit the floor. “Sor-ry,” he muttered, propping it back into place.

“Get ready for bed first, too,” Bruce said, ignoring the near-accident. “Clean your room, shower, put on pajamas, get supper from Alfred, brush your teeth, and then you can come down to the Cave.”

While Dick took care of his evening routine, Bruce reviewed the files that he’d kept secret from Dick. It was a strange lead that hadn’t gone anywhere, but it had haunted Bruce, keeping him awake the four days since he’d noticed it.

Missing children from Haly’s circus.

There wasn’t an obvious pattern. Just something that started to peek out after the thirty-sixth time reading through the records, the thirty-sixth search for something that would silence the niggling voice that kept saying that this case was too simple.

He’d noticed it first while researching John Grayson. Like Dick, he was born and bred circus. Back then, the Flying Graysons had been a bigger family affair, with seven of them. When John was still young, younger than Dick, a boy in the circus had died, trapped inside one of the trailers while it burned. He’d apparently been close to the Graysons, appearing in several photos with the younger acrobats. And then the fire. And then half the Graysons left Haly’s. John’s brother George had gone with his aunts and uncles. John and his parents stayed behind.
That was common enough, tragedies breaking up people who thought they were closer than they really were.

But when Bruce went back a generation, to John’s parents, he found an article about a young Mary Turner, “the Mute Masked Lady of the Air.” She performed alongside the Graysons as an aerialist—until she was attacked on the streets of Gotham, vanishing with no trace.

And then one more generation, to the first Grayson at Haly’s. In his time, it was an animal trainer who died before reaching fifteen. One of the lions had turned on him, leaving only scraps of clothing.

He’d started to suspect something nefarious about the Graysons, but it predated them. Every generation, some child—always at least ten years old, always younger than seventeen—died terribly.

Bruce had worked enough cases, even in his brief time as Batman, to know that the obvious trail wasn’t enough. He knew to brainstorm every possible theory, however improbable. In this case, that had included the possibility that John and Mary weren’t the intended targets at all, but Dick. Mary had snapped the rope coming out of her triple, but she flew a fast triple. Dick was the one famous for his nigh-impossible quadruple somersault, the trick that required an outstanding speed and force.

In his exhaustive search, he’d tried to find any thread, any connection, but there was no rhyme or reason to it. Just random acts of God. Terrible accidents. A few had been in Gotham, but that meant little. Gotham was a popular stop.

The eyes of the dead children stared back at him from the newspaper clippings. They demanded an answer, but there was no answer to give.

Maybe that was just circus life. Defying death was on their billing, wasn’t it? It naturally attracted risk-prone types, runaways, thrill-seekers. It wasn’t as if adults didn’t die, too, in that line of work.

Maybe the niggling voice was just the same one that had searched for a grand conspiracy in his own parents’ deaths, to find meaning in a meaningless, random act of violence. The only deeper pattern there had been the one woven into the threads of society, one of wealth and poverty and crime and violence. One his parents had spent their lives trying to undo before it undid them.


Pearls scattering, rolling into the gutter.

Martha and Thomas Wayne had died for no reason other than being the wrong people in the wrong place at the wrong time. Why torture himself again, looking for something that wasn’t there with the Graysons? Wrong people. Wrong place. Wrong time. A mobster had targeted the circus and exacted an unfair revenge.

That was the way crime really worked: simple and irrational and cruel. This case was no different.

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*Gotham, in the day, is an unpleasant place: overcrowded, expensive, dirty. Its buildings of brick and stone, gifts from Yesterday, do not gleam like the steel and glass of Metropolis, the City of Tomorrow.*
Gotham is a city meant for the night. At night, darkness blankets Gotham’s flaws, and the city comes to life.

During the day, skyscrapers obscure the sunlight, casting the city streets into a permanent overcast. At night, they light up, shining like beacons in the sky, white and blue.

The intricate details of the stonework, the gargoyles, the geometric brickwork over each window, all fade into the background in the day. But at night, sconces and floodlights cast up, illuminating the small works of beauty overlooked by visitors from Metropolis. Reflections of streetlights glow on wet roads, lamps cast a soft glow on the branches of park trees, and the Gotham Rail races by on elevated tracks, reminding pedestrians below that they are not the only ones still awake.

But Gotham is not what it once was.

A face masked in white looks down on the cityscape from a high window, surveying what Gotham has become. Shots ring out below. Heroin changes hands, pulling more into its stupor. Police turn blind eyes to crime and assault the innocent.

This is not the city she had inherited. It is not the city any of them had expected to rule.

The reflection of a second masked Gothamite in a suit comes into focus in the windowpanes. He speaks her fears into words: “The city is slipping into chaos. Should we act?”

“Gotham slipped long ago.”

“It has become worse.” Hands fold. Cufflinks are adjusted. “The Bat is a new low. And now Arkham...”

“The Bat is necessary. Arkham was necessary.”

“I was not aware.”

“Everything has a reason.”

The newcomer turns away from the window, and the white mask shines in the gloom. Candlelight dances on the curves of the eyes, the pointed beak. “Even so, we are without a Talon. Carver failed us.”

“We should not have told him about his successor.”

“At this rate, we will have no successor. We have lost the Gray Son. Everything we have done will have been for nothing.”

“Hardly.” She turns from the window as well, facing her partner. Mask, diamonds, white silk: they all reflect the lights of the city from one side and the flickering candlelight from the room on the other. At her signal, heavy doors open, and the circus owner stumbles in.

His face burns with anger.

“You said we’d be safe,” he said. “Losing the Graysons—”

“It’s a shame,” the masked woman says. “But the Court will make satisfaction for your losses...”

“Thank you,” Haly mumbles.

“The Court will make satisfaction if you deliver the boy.”
Haly shrugs. “He’s with Bruce Wayne. I don’t control that.”

“When the mystery of the acrobats’ death is solved, the boy can return to your care.”

The candlelight shines on his brass buttons. “So that I can hand him over to you?”

“When the time is right.”

Haly’s face reddens. “Gotham has him. Why make him come home, only to just take him again?”

The Owls do not answer.

“Oh, I get it,” the rotund man says. “Wayne is one of your people. You won’t take him from one of your own, is that right? But a circus boy, that’s fair game.”

“Yes, Mister Haly,” says the second Owl. “Something like that.”

Haly’s face contorts with disgust. “And if he stays with Wayne?”

“You cannot protect the boy, Haly. He is ours. He has always been ours. Be glad we did not take his father.”

“Johnny died in your city. How do I know you didn’t take him?”

The masks both tilt to the side.

“I suppose you don’t,” says the woman. “Now go, Mister Haly. Play your part.”

“And if I don’t?”

“You will.”

A white-gloved hand gestures to the door, and the circus master leaves. The heavy doors are closed behind him, leaving the two owl-masked conspirators alone.

“He is resistant.” The masked man watches the closed doors. “What if the boy does stay with Wayne?”

“The city is slipping into chaos,” she echoes. “Let the chaos take care of Wayne. He will stretch himself too thin, and in the end, he will choose the Bat over the boy.”

Fingers wrapped in white silk grasp the window frame, and the white face of a barn owl is reflected in the glass once again.

“Young Wayne will yield up the Gray Son. And once we have our Talon, we can restore order to Gotham ourselves.”

Chapter End Notes

Dick’s explanation of the origin of the "Robin" name basically imitates DC’s history: it did begin mostly as a reference to Robin Hood, not the bird, but the acrobat and winged-animal references ended up strong enough that some origins have now reconned it to that. The "Red, Red Robin" song origin is from Dark Victory, while the
straight bird example is more recent. I figure there's no reason it couldn't be inspired by Robin Hood (just as Batman is so clearly inspired by Zorro), but that Dick's tendency toward making bird-themed puns has made everyone assume it was a bird association, and then Dick just played into that himself and rolled with it. Nicknames are dynamic and multidimensional like that, and I will firmly hold onto both Dick's childhood fondness for Robin Hood and his parents singing about him "bob-bob-bobbin' along" and sending the blues away.
Dick brought a different kind of energy to the mission. It had started with Bruce’s fierce obsession and Alfred’s protective anxiety, and then came Jim’s jaded grit, and Harvey’s single-minded rigor—though that last was gone now. But Dick was full of optimism and joy… Dick had laughed at Zucco. You can’t not have fun, he’d said.

How could such a bright light shine out in so much darkness?

“Batcave, I need the security cameras on Warehouse 13?”

Dick bit his lip and tried to remember which button brought up security cameras on the Bat-Computer. He pressed one—nope, that was traffic footage—and another, and then scrolled through a list for the right one. “Got it!”

“What’s inside?”

“Six henchmen—wait, no, seven. One of them has a big gun. The one closest to the bay doors.”

“Copy.”

Batman emerged from the corner of the screen into the scene, landing on the main gunman and swiftly knocking out the other six henchmen.

“Nice one, Batman!”

“Hh.”

“So these guys are, what? Zucco’s cousins?”

“No.”

“Then who?”

Batman took a while to answer. “There’s a diagram in the evidence folder. If you want to help me, learn it. Going silent.”

The least Batman could have done was to stay in view of the camera, but of course he didn’t. He grappled up and out of view, leaving Dick without any sense of what was going on. Dick spun himself around on the big chair at the computer.

His mind filled with all the ways Batman—Bruce—could die out there. He wouldn’t know, would he, unless the comms were turned back on? Maybe it wasn’t good to sit here, waiting to hear what would happen.

A long sigh escaped his lips, and then he obediently clicked one screen over to an image that looked sort of like family tree. It had already been open, and seemed like it always was whenever Dick had
been in the Batcave. Several names were marked deceased or imprisoned. Others were marked as active players, suspects Batman was watching closely. Dick clicked through each of them, starting with Sofia Falcone. Photos, biography, connections. Alberto Falcone. And on down, through all nine leaders. He finally returned to Zucco. Compared to these other characters, Zucco wasn’t much to write home about. Dick ground his teeth. How had his parents been killed by the weakest of Gotham’s criminals?

He pushed himself away from the computer, so hard that the wheeled chair toppled over the step. Dick rolled out, twisting in the air and landing on his feet. He stormed over to the training area. Halfway there, he launched into a run and vaulted himself onto one of the beams and then up to the bars.

He wasn’t dressed for anything serious, but he ran through an easy warm-up, swinging from one bar to the next, and then held himself upright above the bar as long as he could stand to stay still.

Finally, a crackling noise came back over the comms. Dick moved to dismount. He swung himself into a split—and an even louder noise came from his pants as the seam ripped clean down the middle on his way down to the mats. That would be a good one to explain. Sorry I broke my pants! Did you know they aren’t good for gymnastics?

He laughed as he landed, but his laughter was drowned out by more static, coming over just as Dick reached the computer.

“Batman?”

“Are you dressed?”

“In pajamas, like you said.” Sort of. He looked at his tattered pants.

“Go change. I’ll be at the Cave in ten minutes.”

Dick stared at the speaker in disbelief. “Are you… taking me into Gotham?”

“Nine minutes.”

Dick sprinted for the stairs, and then up, up, up he ran. Out into the Manor, and then up, up, up again, until he reached his room. He shuffled out of the ripped pajamas and pulled on a pair of athletic tights and sneakers. He grabbed a sweatshirt too, not really sure what he’d actually be doing, and then hit the hall again.

After checking that Alfred wasn’t watching, he swung over the balcony rail and then somersaulted onto the ground floor, breaking his landing with a roll. Then back to the study, back to the clock. More stairs. Those had a rail, too, though. It was probably there for Alfred’s safety, but Dick knew an opportunity when he saw it, and hopped onto the rail. He slid down and down and down and leapt off just in time to meet the Batmobile’s arrival.

As soon as the roof retracted, Dick vaulted up and into the passenger’s seat.

“What’s up, Brucester? Decided to let me give Two-Face the old one-two?” Dick demonstrated his newly-developed boxing technique.

“No,” said Batman. “I found Zucco.”

Dick’s fists fell. “Really?”
“The Maronis are willing to testify against him. They all turn, with the right pressure. I thought you’d want to see the arrest.”

“What are we waiting for?”

Batman handed him a black cloth. “Put that on.”

A blindfold? Dick turned it over in his fingers and realized it was a mask. “Whooooooaa,” he said. “Do I get a whole costume, too? A name?”

“You get to not be recognized as Bruce Wayne’s ward.” He passed him a small glass bottle. Spirit gum.

Dick rolled his eyes at the shut-down, but he was too excited to argue. He used the glare in the window as a mirror and affixed the mask over his eyes. For added effect, he then put on his sweatshirt and pulled his hood low over his face. “Look at me!”

“Buckle up.”

The Batmobile screeched out from the Cave, and Dick hurried to buckle in. Bruce was never a cautious driver, but Batman was even worse. Batman punched a button in the console and data from the Bat-computer showed up in front of him. “This doesn’t mean anyone should see you. I’m dropping you off across the street.”

“No way! I deserve to take him down!”

Batman didn’t answer.

They swerved along the country road that led into Gotham.

“You should figure out a way to use the tunnels,” noted Dick. “So people don’t see Batman driving home to Bristol.”

“I’m working on it.”

They wove through late-night traffic and haunting streets until Batman switched on autopilot and turned toward Dick. “Come here.”

Dick looked across at him, not sure where here was. He scooted closer on the seat, and realized that Batman was wrapping the cape around him.

“Hold on.”

Batman pointed to his neck and Dick latched on like a baby koala. “Uh, Bru—I mean, Batman, what are we—”

The roof opened above them and the Batmobile accelerated, and Dick’s question turned into a hissed, “Yessssssss!”

“Ready?”

“Ready!”

Batman flipped two levers, opened a latch, and pounded a button, and up they went.

Dick wasn’t sure he’d ever been happier in his life.
They reached the peak of their height, and the cape spread into a glider. Batman’s balance was a little off, with koala-Dick hanging from his neck.

“I’m letting go!” he shouted up.

“No, don’t—” Batman said, but it was too late. Dick had thrown himself away, back-flipping onto the roof below.

Batman landed in a pool of black cloth next to him. “What are you doing?”

“Having fun. You can’t not have fun doing that,” Dick scolded back.

“There’s a mission.”


“You will not—”


He glanced over. Batman had left. Good. The jerk-wad murderer Tony Zucco opened the balcony doors and stepped out to see what was happening outside his window. He raised a gun, but Dick flipped back out of the way before he fired.

Maybe he should have been scared. If the mobster didn’t kill him, Bruce was absolutely going to. But it didn’t bother him.

His plan, he saw with satisfaction, worked perfectly. Batman came right up behind Zucco, covered his mouth, and dragged him back into the apartment. Dick dropped to sit on the edge of the building, kicking his legs. It felt right to be in the air again, up high where he belonged. Not only that, but it was less muggy. And Gotham looked a little less grimy three stories up.

A gunshot rang out, but then the gun flew out of the balcony and fell to the pavement below. Batman was safe.

Sirens rang out from the streets around, and four cruisers pulled around Zucco’s apartment building. Cops raced out of them. In the apartment, Batman cuffed and gagged Zucco and then ran to the balcony. He fired his grapple gun across to Dick’s building, and launched himself onto the roof.

“You could’ve been shot,” Batman said, half angry, half terrified.

“So could you.”

“I’m trained. I’m in armor.”

Dick leapt up and jabbed a fist upward, at the underside of Batman’s chin that jutted out the unarmed window of his cowl. Batman stopped the jab, of course, but Dick’s point had been made: Batman had weak spots, and bullets were faster than fists.

“What’s worse: a grown man sees a kid die,” Dick prodded, jutting his own chin forward, “or a kid’s guardian dies, only two weeks after his parents?”

Batman threw Dick’s wrist down. “Don’t talk like that,” he snarled.

“I will if I want! You don’t get to tell me to stay safe if you’re doing…” Dick gestured around him.
“All this. Every night.”

“You’re going to miss the arrest.”

Of course he refused to acknowledge that Dick had totally won the argument. Still, Dick turned back to the apartment, resuming his perch. He didn’t want to miss the arrest. Gordon burst into Zucco’s apartment with his team, but there was no risk of the mobster fleeing or firing back: Zucco was tied up, wrapped with a bow for the GCPD. Five minutes later, two cops emerged from the front door, escorting Zucco into the back of a cruiser. Other cops stayed around to scope the apartment and gather evidence.

This was it. This was everything he’d been working toward. After a minute of watching the action below, he turned around and smiled at Batman.

“I told them where to find the receipts and links to related protection rackets,” Batman said. “You did good work.”

“We did good work.”

A light flashed on Batman’s wrist, and Batman huffed. “It’s Gordon.”

“Pick up.”

Batman fired the grapple again and took off, landing on a taller building the next block over. Dick ran off after him, though he wasn’t sure how to follow. He spotted a path through a fire-escape catwalk and hoped it was safe. He leapt over, and—yes, it held—and then swung himself up, over, up again, and climbed until he could scramble onto the bricks and grab the ledge of the roof above.

“…really excellent news.” Honeyed and cheerful Bruce-voice coming from Batman was jarringly disconcerting, even knowing they were the same person. So that was the problem—Gordon had been calling Bruce, not Batman. “Thanks again, Jim. No, it’s no problem. Good night!”


Dick pointed from where he’d come from. “I, uh, jumped?”

Batman held back whatever reply he had to that. “Gordon wants you to know that Zucco was arrested.”

Dick laughed, loud and carefree. “You don’t say!”

Batman smiled himself, but it faded as quickly as it came. “And the coroner’s agreed to a release. You can have a proper funeral now.”

“And… the circus can leave?”

“Yes. Haly might be subpoenaed for the trial, but he can return for that later.” Batman clenched his jaw. “As can you.”

Dick was safe to go back. Finally. Fatigue set in as he relaxed. He rubbed his eye reflexively, but the domino mask was in the way.

“It’s late,” said Batman, his voice a little less gruff now. “Let’s go home and sort this out tomorrow.”

“Okay,” Dick said, his voice small and quiet. He wanted to celebrate, but something was dragging at him and he couldn’t tell what. “Let’s go.”
Dick had fallen asleep on the drive home, and Bruce couldn’t blame him. It had been a long day, and the obsession driving Dick since his parents’ death was finally resolved. Hopefully his sound sleep was a measure of peace.

Bruce drove home more slowly than he ever had, careful not to jolt Dick awake. When they pulled into the Cave, he changed before returning to the car and then gently scooped the boy up in his arms. He adjusted his elbow so that Dick’s head rolled against his shoulder, breathing the slow breath of sleep into his shirt. Confident in his hold, he passed the the computer and headed up the stairs.

No, not the computer. The Bat-Computer. Bruce smiled.

Dick brought a different kind of energy to the mission. It had started with Bruce’s fierce obsession and Alfred’s protective anxiety, and then came Jim’s jaded grit, and Harvey’s single-minded rigor—though that last was gone now. But Dick was full of optimism and joy… Dick had laughed at Zucco. You can’t not have fun, he’d said.

How could such a bright light shine out in so much darkness? And yet, it seemed so easy for Dick, so natural to find the good in everything. And it helped Bruce do the same. Setting aside the godawful puns and the occasionally near-suicidal antics, Dick had made his work almost enjoyable.

And as much as he hated to admit it, Dick’s reckless display had helped him sneak up on Zucco. Not that he could ever tell that to Dick, since the kid would probably demand on coming out every night sporting neon colors if he knew he’d been helpful.

But it wouldn’t matter. Now Zucco was in jail, and Gordon was sure the evidence would be enough to land him in Blackgate. Dick would go back to the circus.

Bruce pushed Dick’s door open with his toe and shifted his burden to free one hand enough to pull down the blankets. He set the boy gently down, tugged off his sneakers, and covered him back with the blanket.

Dick stretched in his sleep, sprawling across the bed. Like he was safe.

Bruce sank into a chair opposite the bed. He was tired, but more than that, he was overwhelmed. Not by the usual—grief or stress or anger or the sheer scope of his mission—but by a protective affection. He’d come to care so, so much for this boy that he could barely stand it. He held a fist to his mouth and took a deep breath, in and out, centering himself. Was this what it was like to have a brother? A son?

He knew that some of his concern for Dick was due to some kind of complex psychology, displaced feelings about his own childhood and so forth. There was some element of that, but Dick wasn’t really like him. Bruce was resilient, but Dick was hopeful. And light-hearted. And warm. Things Bruce wasn’t sure he ever could be.

Bruce had always seen himself as doomed to a life of pessimism and hardened realism. When he’d met Clark, he’d been able to write off the alien’s happy-go-lucky optimism as the result of a sheltered childhood. Clark had only experienced loss as a retroactive oh by the way, your entire race is gone, but you never knew them, and that news had been coupled with the power to lift an entire car with
one hand. Who wouldn’t be able to see silver linings, with a life like that? But Dick had been through everything Bruce had, and he still acted like that damn cornfed boy-scout. He had faced the worst of humanity and come out with a smile.

Was it possible, in the face of such cruelty, to not only survive, but to thrive? Every time Dick’s face lit up with joy, it challenged Bruce with that question.

And even if Dick *did* have to leave the next day, that question, that possibility that Dick had shown him… *that* gave Bruce hope.
Chapter Summary

All he wanted was to go back three weeks, to turn in Zucco before anything happened, to check the ropes and replace them before the show. His dad would catch his mom and they wouldn’t fall. They’d swing together; his mom would half turn to the next bar and then return to his father, building up the energy in the crowd. And then the call would go out, like it always did: and now, the youngest of the Flying Graysons, in a record-breaking feat, will turn not just three times, but four, at a speed faster than an expressway car, before being caught by his father! The drums would roll and the crowd would cheer with excitement, and then he’d do it, the trick only he could do, and fly into his father’s hands. And Gotham would love them, and they’d leave, all in one piece. One family.

Chapter Notes

Content warning: fleeting suicidal ideation.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dick felt nothing but despair as he watched his parents’ coffins lower into Gotham soil.

Technically, it was Bristol soil. Wayne Manor soil. Bruce had paid for the whole thing and lent land of his own for the burial, next to the graves of his own ancestors. Mister Haly had objected at first, but Dick had pushed for it. He was all too happy to have an excuse to come back to see Bruce after he left.

After he left.

He’d never expected to feel conflicted about that, but there they were. Dick was finally able to go home, and instead of being thrilled, he was sad to have to leave Bruce, and Alfred, and the Bat-Computer.

Some of that regret had diminished as the trailers from Haly’s had rolled up, reminding him of the family he did still have. Everyone had come, from the roustabouts and clowns to his fellow acrobats and Mister Haly.

Even Paco was there. Bruce must have invited him, knowing they had become friends, but Dick was just glad for Paco to have a chance to run away. To find a real family. Dick had introduced him to everyone, and Paco had fit in at once.

Other than that glimmer of satisfaction, Dick felt worse than he had since the very beginning. Seeing everyone else’s tears and grief made the loss so much more real. Ever since the accident (no, the murder), he’d been out of his old world. He’d only seen people who pitied him, not people who’d
shared the experience. But some of the circus family were just as devastated as Dick. John and Mary Grayson weren’t anyone else’s parents, but they were close to it for the other young flyers, and they’d been part of Haly’s Circus for longer than Dick had been alive—and in John Grayson’s case, for another twenty years before that.

So Dick had not been prepared at all when, after the service, Mister Haly took him by the shoulder, leaned in close, and said, “You should stay with Mister Wayne. You’re safer here.”

Dick shook his head, not sure what to make of what Mister Haly was saying. Zucco was finally locked up. Dick was safe. He was ready to go home. He’d already packed his bags. “But—”

“Dickie, this is your chance for a normal life.”

“I don’t want a normal life!” As if living with a billionaire vigilante was a normal life. “I want my life. At the circus!”

“This is best for everyone.”

It didn’t make sense. None of it made sense. He was Haly’s best talent. The star of the show. “You won’t be able to sell tickets without me!”

“It’s not about the tickets.” Haly grimaced. “It’s about you.”

Another blow. Dick shook it off. “What? You think I’m cursed or something? People won’t come see the Last Flying Grayson?” Dick set his jaw and threw his shoulders back. “Well, you’re wrong. They want me more now than ever.”

“Dickie… The circus… we just need a fresh start.”

A fresh start with a new trapeze act. A new family. Pride flamed in his heart and his face pinched in an unbecoming sneer. If Dick’s mother were there, she’d probably tell Dick to lose some of the ego. But she wasn’t. Not anymore. And if his ego was the only thing that would save him, that would let him keep his home and his family, he’d brag to the moon.

“I’m the best,” he said. “And you know it. If I stay in Gotham, you’ll regret it.”

But Haly just shook his head. “No, I won’t.”

Dick stumbled back. He thought someone had cut out his heart and told Zitka to stomp on it. His chest hurt. He couldn’t breathe.

How could Haly be doing this to him? He’d worked so hard to bring Zucco to justice, so that he could go home. And now he couldn’t. It had all been for nothing.

“You—you want to leave me here? Pretend I fell that night too?” Dick’s voice wavered, but he refused to show just how hurt he was. “Fine. I hope it helps you feel better.”

“This will be better for you, too. Please, Dickie, trust me,” said Haly, but Dick didn’t hear it.

He turned away, hiding his face as he pressed his eyes tight against threatening tears. “Just go, Mister Haly. Get your fresh start.”
Dick wasn’t sure how long he stared out across the small graveyard, lost in a daze of hurt and confusion. He was shaken out of his thoughts by a forceful hug bounding in from his left and wavy hair, cinnamon in color and smell, flying in his face.

*Raya.*

“It’s so awful, Dick,” she said, holding him close. “Are you really not coming back?”

So Haly had already told everyone, even before the funeral. And he’d thought Haly had respected him, seen him like a grandson.

“Not yet,” he muttered. Her shoulders slumped with disappointment. If Raya, who was always so strong, broke down, he wouldn’t be able to hold himself up any longer.

“Soon?” she asked, drawing away.

“Yeah, soon,” he lied.

“Come back as—soon—as—possible,” she commanded, punching him in the arm with each word. “Who else is gonna correct my form? Zane?”

A breathy bitter laugh shook his chest. “Sorry for being such a jerk to you guys all those times.”

She waved her hand. “Old news. Listen, the other kids and I… we got you something.” She caught sight of someone out of Dick’s sightline and jerked her head. Raymond came over and handed him a plastic bag, the glossy kind that came from nice stores. “We had time to kill,” she continued. “I know you’re too old for stuffed animals, but little Cal was so excited to find it, and, well…”

Dick pushed away the plastic and the tissue paper inside to pull out a stuffed elephant, muted blue-grey with black beady eyes that shone back at him.

“She looks just like Zitka,” he said with a smile, rubbing the velvet-soft ears between his fingers.

“I know you like to talk to her when you’re down, and since…” Raya’s green eyes turned glossy with tears. “Since you’re not with us right now…”

“It’s perfect,” he said. “Thank you.”

She wiped tears from her eyes. “So. This is it.”

The look on her face broke his heart all over. He couldn’t take it any more.

“I’ll see you down the road,” he said. Circus for *goodbye.*

“Don’t get used to this mansion and turn into some rich *gadjo* bastard,” she said, stealing her heartache to bitterness. “Don’t forget who you are, Dick Grayson.”

Her voice strained on his name, and she ran off to their other friends before he could see her break into wild tears. He heard the crying, though, as he stood helplessly holding the stuffed elephant and the shattered pieces of his heart.

At a loss, he went back over to the new headstones and knelt at the foot of the fresh graves. The grass was wet from earlier rain, and he could feel the water seeping into his fancy new black suit. He put the elephant back in its bag and tucked it onto his lap.

He began to cry himself. He’d lost everything he’d ever loved. No one, not even Bruce, could
understand that. Even the one friend he’d made in Gotham was leaving without him.

All he wanted was to go back three weeks, to turn in Zucco before anything happened, to check the ropes and replace them before the show. His dad would catch his mom and they wouldn’t fall. They’d swing together; his mom would half turn to the next bar and then return to his father, building up the energy in the crowd. And then the call would go out, like it always did: *and now, the youngest of the Flying Graysons, in a record-breaking feat, will turn not just three times, but four, at a speed faster than an expressway car, before being caught by his father!* The drums would roll and the crowd would cheer with excitement, and then he’d do it, the trick only he could do, and fly into his father’s hands. And Gotham would love them, and they’d leave, all in one piece. One family.

He opened his eyes and his fantasy died away. His face was soaking, not just from tears but from more drizzling rain. The silence around him told him that everyone from Haly’s had left. Onto the next stop, as always. Except they had left the Graysons behind this time. Two in the dirt and one kneeling in it. He dug his fingers into the wet earth, the earth that separated him from his parents, and balled his fists tight around it.

“No one should have to go through this,” said Bruce’s voice, from somewhere several feet above him. It was a voice soaked in pain and grief, not money and camera flashes. Everyone definitely had left, then.

Bruce’s shoes stepped into the corner of Dick’s vision, and the rain stopped falling in an umbrella-sized ring around them. “I don’t want to rush you, but Alfred’s worried about you catching a cold.”

Dick shivered, suddenly aware of the unseasonal chill from the rain. The wet had soaked right through to his legs, and the new black wool was coated in mud. “Sorry about ruining the suit,” he said. It hadn’t been cheap.

“No, Suits are replaceable.”

Unlike so much else. A lump formed in Dick’s throat.

“You talked to Haly?” he asked.

“He said you wanted to stay.”

Dick’s mouth filled with a bitter tang, but he swallowed it back. Bruce didn’t need to know that he hadn’t chosen this. After all, he hadn’t fought Haly as hard as he should have. He’d given in too easily. And why? For Bruce? Dick glanced up at the looming figure and then back at the headstones.

They would’ve liked him, if they had known him. He was sure of that. His mom had always said to help people who had no one else to help them, and that’s what Bruce did. And his dad always said to judge people by the size of their heart, not the skill of their act or the numbers in their bank. And even if Bruce had plenty of skills and plenty of money, he did have a big heart.

Dick didn’t have a family. He didn’t have a home. But he had a purpose, here. There were still eight names on that crime family diagram, after Zucco. Eight others that Batman needed help putting away.

It was his choice, in the end.

He nodded. “Being there without them is too hard. Maybe someday…” He shrugged. “We should go inside.”

“If you’re ready.”
“Yeah.” He unclenched his fists and wiped the muddy remnants on his already-ruined pants before reaching out a hand. He felt too weak to get himself up, but it didn’t matter, because Bruce lifted him easily onto his feet and pulled him into a one-armed hug. Dick let himself collapse into the embrace, too tired and numb to even cry anymore.

After a long moment, he drew away and slipped his hand in Bruce’s free one.

“Thanks,” he whispered.

Bruce answered with a squeeze of his hand, and the two walked back to the house in silence.

Dick had gone to lie down early, but woke up some time in the evening. He wasn’t sure what time it was when he came back downstairs, but it was very quiet. Alfred was still up, reading in the study.

“Hey Alfred,” he said. “Did Bruce leave?”

Alfred grimaced. “He waited quite a while, but I sent him along. I thought you’d turned in for good. I’m sorry, my boy.”

“No, that’s okay. Can I…” Dick nodded toward the study and the grandfather-clock secret door.

Alfred sighed. “I thought you were only working the Zucco case.”

“I know. I just… want to talk to him. And maybe train a little.”

Alfred nodded. “Not for long, I hope.”

“Just a few minutes.” Dick forced himself to give Alfred a weak smile.

He turned the clock hands as Bruce had showed him. *Time of death*. His heart sunk with guilt. He didn’t even know when his own parents had died. He could figure it out, if he tried: their show was routine, timed to the minute. But he didn’t want to know.

He wasn’t even sad, anymore. Just empty.

The Batcave was quiet and cold without Batman there. This late at night, even the bats were all out. Eerie lights automatically flickered on as Dick made his way down. They shone in the stillness, reflecting off the waterways that fell around the edges of the underground headquarters.

The sound of static filled the cave.

“Batcave, report,” Batman ordered through the speaker.

Dick sprinted to the Bat-computer. Batman had seen unexpected activity, and if Dick didn’t respond, he’d probably think they were under attack.

“It’s just me,” he said over the comm system.

“Hn.” The sound of impact, and then… silence. The computer had gone black, and Dick couldn’t monitor Batman’s actions. The blindness made him feel itchy. Finally, Batman’s extra-gruff Bat-voice came back over the speaker. “I’d heard you were asleep.”
“I was.”

“You have school tomorrow.”

“Yeah, I just thought… Can I help you?”

Quiet. Then, in a softer voice: “You’ve had a long day. You need to sleep.”

Dick sighed. He didn’t need to sleep. He needed something to do. “I guess.”

He left the Bat-computer, but not the Batcave. Instead, he wandered over to the rack of suits and costumes and began flipping through them. He pulled down an old half-shredded cape and cowl and tried it on, making a fierce Batman-face in the glass reflection.

He’d never taken off something so quickly as the cowl. On Bruce, it was one thing. He’d sort of come to see it as a friendly face. But on him… he shuddered. It was like an evil, twisted spirit.

He played around with the cape for a bit, trying to trigger the fancy glider effect he’d seen that first night, but this one apparently pre-dated that invention, so Dick had to resort to holding it open like a vampire and swooping around.

His swooping brought him to a cabinet, and he began to pull open drawers and sort through the contents. Plates of various hard armor-like materials. False mustaches. Stage makeup.

Stuffed in the back were the black masks, the small ones like Batman-Bruce had given him the previous night, when Zucco was arrested. Except that one had been smaller, like it had been made for him. These must have been from Bruce’s early days, before he’d committed to a full Bat theme, maybe. Dick affixed one, pinching the nose together to account for his smaller face, and looked back in the mirror.

Much better.

He resumed his caper, running to the edge of one of the cave cliffs and then posing in what he was sure was a dramatic pose. A wave of guilt hit him square in the chest. Today was set aside for grieving, not playing.

He tried to step back, but his foot caught in the long cape.

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion: the tug of the cape, the loss of his ever-sure balance, his free foot slipping on the slick stone, the jutting cliff scraping against his legs.

The blackness stretched below. His heart raced as he reached out, above his head, hoping for a handle.

Dick’s hand grabbed the ledge just in time, as his feet scrambled at the wet stone. He knew better than to look down, but he could hear small rocks falling under his feet. They tumbled down and down and down. And down. He reached his other hand up as well, grasping for a hold. His fingers strained, hanging off the sharp edge, without anything to wrap around.

He was not going to fall.

He was not going to fall. But he couldn’t hold on much longer.

He was not going to fall.

Unless.
If he wanted to, it would be so easy. Just lose his grip, let go. There was no reason he hadn’t fallen that night, when his parents had. Maybe this was fate’s way of fixing that. He’d already lost everything else anyway. He could just let go. Stop fighting. Share his parents’ end and be with them again.

But he couldn’t do that to Bruce.

He held his breath and shifted his grip, finding a better hold on drier, rougher rock, and then freed a hand to unclasp the cape. He wasn’t about to trip on that again. It tumbled below with a fluttering noise that lasted far too long for Dick’s peace of mind. It was a long drop. A really long drop.

He didn’t want to die. He knew that now.

Dick took a deep breath, set his eyes on a point, and hoisted himself up with all his skill. He tumbled over, safe onto the level, and rolled. He came to a stop, his arms and legs spread on the cold stone floor, and stared into the dimly lit cave ceiling while his heart pounded in his chest.

He was alive.

A smile pulled on his lips, and then his body shook with relieved laughter.

He was alive.

He was more alive than he’d ever felt, more than during the biggest show with the biggest audience. He’d made a living out of making people gasp for his safety, but he’d never been scared for himself. And since his parents’ deaths, he’d only worked with a net. That wasn’t real. That wasn’t like this, hanging over an abyss, using his only own strength and cleverness to save himself.

The rush rang through his body, and his laughter grew until it echoed hysterically across the cave.

The speakers came on again: “Batcave, report!”

Batman sounded actually concerned this time, but Dick was nowhere near the Bat-computer. Before he could even get to his feet, metal screeched in the distance and the lights shut off, making a darkness darker than anything Dick had ever experienced, a darkness where no light would ever exist again.

“Just me! It’s just me!” he shouted, hoping that Batman secretly had the whole thing hooked up to surveillance.

Hoping? Of course he did. The lights flickered back on.

“You were going to sleep,” came Batman’s voice, colder and harsher than Dick had ever heard from him.

It didn’t take a genius to realize that he was only avoiding a lecture because he’d just come in from burying his parents. He slunk over to the computer and pressed the button for the regular comms.

“Sorry,” he said. “Everything’s okay. I just was trying to get my mind off everything.”

Silence. But not fighting silence. That was driving silence. Or disappointed silence? Dick wasn’t sure.

“I’m coming home. I shouldn’t have left.”

“I’m fine, really,” Dick said. “I am sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.”
“I wasn’t scared. Just… go to bed.”

Dick smiled. He pulled off the mask and stuffed it in his pajama pocket. Bruce wouldn’t notice that was missing. Hopefully Bruce wouldn’t ask about the missing cape either.

He hurried back up the long stair into the manor, and then back up the manor stairway. Back in his bedroom, he dove under the covers and wrapped himself in them, staring out the window, too wired from his near-fall to sleep but too tired to have any real thoughts.

As the rush wore off and his eyes drooped, he felt the empty feeling returning, even emptier than before. Maybe he should have let himself fall, after all. He held the stuffed Zitka close, running his fingers over her trunk.

But then his door cracked open, and a sliver of light from the hallway shone across his room. He dropped his hands and closed his eyes tight, pretending to sleep while listening to Bruce’s steps coming closer. A hand brushed over his hair, and then lips touched his forehead. The emptiness gave way to overflowing feelings—grief and anger and gratitude and fear and guilt and relief and too many to name—and a hot tear beaded from his closed eye and streaked down his nose. When Bruce shifted the covers to tuck him in tightly, Dick grabbed his wrist. He clutched it tightly as he held back a sob that shook his chest. The bed shifted with the weight of Bruce sitting on its edge, and Dick curled himself around the hand he’d captured, holding onto it like an anchor as he finally drifted back to sleep.

When morning came, Dick brushed off the sun’s taunts. *Another day without his parents,* it reminded him, but Zucco wasn’t free anymore. *Another day away from the circus,* but Dick had a mission now. The sun was greeting him and he was alive, and that was enough.

He got out of bed and dressed before Alfred came by, ate a bowl of cereal and pocketed the banana that Alfred insisted he have for nutrition, and stuffed his backpack ready while Alfred pulled out the car. On the drive, Alfred told him stories of growing up in England and his countless adventures as an actor and spy, and then Dick walked the last block with Braydon, who was still a jerk, but the kind of jerk Dick could handle. School wasn’t so bad, all in all, and then Bruce was there to pick him up and ask about everything he’d learned. He breezed through his homework with time for conditioning before dinner, and then Bruce took him down to the Cave for two hours of martial arts training before sending him to bed. Dick had begged to be allowed to help over the comms, but Bruce had refused. *You can help me when you finish school,* Bruce promised. So Dick went and collapsed in bed.

And then the sun rose again.

It was odd to have a routine already, but it was the kind of routine that felt like a warm blanket, not a smothering one.

So on Thursday afternoon, when he saw the blue limo (the Mulliner, Bruce called it, like a total snob) waiting for him instead of the convertible, he knew something was wrong.

Dick opened the front door instead of the back and stuck his head in. “Alfred? Is Bruce okay?”

Alfred’s face was tight with worry, but he nodded. “Come in the car, lad.”
Dick slid into the front seat, for once avoiding protests from Alfred about it.

“Master Richard…” Alfred angled himself toward the passenger seat and placed a hand on Dick’s shoulder. “Tony Zucco has been released.”

Chapter End Notes

Act III ends here. One more to go!

The first chapters of Act IV should go up Sunday, with the last ones up Monday at the latest. Stay tuned!
Act IV: The Boy Wonder

“Zucco’s more than just some mobster,” Bruce said.

“You don’t think I know that?” Dick suddenly became very interested in the cracks in the cave floor. “But if we bring him back,” he mumbled, “they’ll just let him go again. We have to get everyone else. Everyone that’s helping him.”

Dick pushed past Bruce and opened the family tree that he’d been forced to study earlier. “Zucco’s in Chicago, with the Vitis. Fine. We deal with the guys backing him in Gotham, and then Lucia Viti, and then Tony Zucco will go away for good.”

“Hn.” Bruce didn’t smile, exactly, but Dick could have sworn that was a hn of approval.

“Master Richard…” Alfred turned and placed a hand on Dick’s shoulder. “Tony Zucco has been released.”

Released? How?! Dick’s hands balled into fists. “We had all the evidence!”

“Master Bruce went in as your guardian to lodge every objection, but this Zucco fellow has friends in high places.”

Higher places than the man whose name was on half the buildings in the city, apparently.

This couldn’t be happening. If Zucco was free, then everything they’d done would be for nothing. “Are we going to catch him? Where’s Bruce now?”

“He is out, tracking every lead to see if there’s anything he can do. You mustn’t go try to get Zucco yourself.”

Dick furrowed his brow, ready to argue, but he thought better of it. “Can I help, though? From the Cave?”

“Of course. There’s half a sandwich in the bag at your feet, if you’re hungry.”

“Thanks,” he said. “Maybe at home.”

Home. With Zucco legally set free, Dick would never be safe. Maybe the Manor was home now.

Dick leaned his head against the window, feeling the glass chill from the air conditioning.
What could Batman do, if the jails wouldn’t hold Zucco? If it came down to it, maybe Dick would have to break his promise to Bruce in the end. He couldn’t sit around, doing nothing while Zucco stayed free and alive. Dick would have to do something. And if the Gotham police and courts wouldn’t stop him, death would. A long fall, so he could know how it felt. Off the cliff in the Batcave, maybe. Dick smiled, but then his stomach turned with guilt. *Revenge isn’t justice*, his mom had said. *Justice is making the world right and good, not hurting someone just because they hurt you.*

But there was no way to make a murder right and good. There was no way to bring back his parents. The only thing to do was to make sure Zucco didn’t kill anyone else. The police weren’t able to do that. And what could Batman do, if Zucco had friends who would keep him out of jail?

The rest of the ride was silent, with Dick lost in the circle of his emotions: hopelessness, anger, shame, hopelessness, anger, shame.

After what felt like a year, they pulled up to the Manor. Dick ran inside, into Bruce’s study, and then down into the Cave to call Bruce.

“Back in eight,” came the curt reply. “We’ll talk then.”

While Dick waited, he turned his attention to the images on the screen. Eleven hangman puzzles, each with vaguely threatening messages.

“You left your school things and your sandwich, Master Dick,” Alfred called from across the Cave. He crossed to Dick and handed them over.

“Sorry, Alfred,” said Dick. He pulled the sandwich out of the bag, unwrapped the wax paper around it, and took a giant bite. “What’s all this?”

“Master Bruce was working on the Hangman case when he got the news, and he’s been out since. I’ll put together supper for the road, I suppose.”

“You think he’ll let me go out with him?” he asked, mouth full of home-baked bread and thin-sliced steak and Swiss cheese and whatever secret magic Alfred used in the kitchen.

“I certainly hope not.” Alfred sighed. “That first one there? That says, *None of you are safe.* I’d like to keep at least you safe, Master Dick.”

“Right,” said Dick, transfixed on the letters and words of the puzzle. “Thanks for the sandwich, Alfie.”

When he’d first heard about the killer leaving hangman puzzles with his hanged victims, he’d thought it was a joke. What killer could be *that* scary with a gimmick like that? The kids at school had wised him up fast enough. Calendar Man, the Riddler, Two-Face, Joker: the sillier the gimmick, the scarier the psycho.

A few minutes after Alfred left, the Batmobile’s engine roared from the far entrance of the Cave. Dick forgot about the puzzles and ran over to the car ramp, waiting as Batman pulled up and opened the doors.

“He ran,” said Batman from the driver’s seat. “To Chicago.”

“Are we going? You have a plane, right?”

Batman jumped out of the car and walked back into the heart of the Cave, gesturing for Dick to
follow. “Even at topspeed, by the time we fly there…” The cowl hid his expression, but Dick could imagine the frustration on it well enough. “If he has people harboring him, it’ll be difficult. Gordon’s working his Chicago connections, but that’ll take time.”

“Isn’t there anything we can do?” Dick grabbed a gauntleted wrist and blinked up with wide, pleading eyes.

Batman closed his eyes and sighed, like someone making a great sacrifice. He crossed back over to the work-station, peeled off his cowl, and punched a speed-dial number on the telephone system. Two rings, and then—

“Daily Planet!” rang out a cheerful voice. “Clark Kent speaking.”

“Kent.” Batman voice. “Are you busy?”

“As ever. But I’ve always got a second for a pal. What’s the scoop?”

Bruce grimaced, like the word pal had stung like salt on a cut. “I have a perp flying for O’Hare. I could follow, but he’ll be arriving in forty minutes. If there aren’t any kittens in trees—”

“There is an escalating situation in Egypt that I’ve been monitoring, but—”

“It’s not that important,” Dick blurted out. “Forget it.”

Bruce jerked his head and fixed Dick with a sharp Bat-glare. Dick held out his hands in a plea of innocence. If Bruce had meant for the call to be secret, he probably shouldn’t have put it over the speaker.

“Who’s that?” said the voice, suddenly tense and low. “Wait! Is that the boy?” Back to normal—cheerful, a little bit of a country accent, which made sense, since this was apparently Batman’s Chicago connection or something. “Dick, right?”

“Yeah, I’m Dick. Hi, sir.” The Daily Planet, Kent had said. Dick had heard of the Daily Planet before, hadn’t he? But that wasn’t in Chicago. But it couldn’t be… His mind raced, and his heart picked up the relay. “Um, Daily Planet’s the Metropolis newspaper, isn’t it?”

“It sure is! It’s—” Mister Kent cut himself off. “Drat, I gotta run. Back in a jiff. Send me the name and flight, and I’ll grab your guy.”

The phone clicked off, and Bruce slammed a hand down on the counter, leaning down closer to Dick’s level. “I don’t call in favors for not important,” he scolded, still in Batman voice.

Dick stared back, unintimidated. “I don’t want to cause a crisis in Egypt.”

“You wouldn’t cause anything.” Back to Bruce voice now. “He’s just… reporting on it.”

Dick blinked slowly at Bruce. “I’m a kid, not an idiot. Metropolis is as far from Chicago as Gotham. There are only two guys in Metropolis who could get there faster than you, and Lex Luthor wouldn’t call himself—.”

“Lex does not have a faster plane than me,” Bruce interrupted.

“What-ever, Bruce!” Dick threw his hands in the air. “I’m not having Superman stop some mobster when he could be saving a whole country. Oh, and hey, way to not tell me you’re friends with Superman.”
“Zucco’s more than just some mobster,” Bruce said, totally ignoring Dick’s second point.

“You don’t think I know that?” Dick suddenly became very interested in the cracks in the cave floor. “But if we bring him back,” he mumbled, “they’ll just let him go again. We have to get everyone else. Everyone that’s helping him.”

Dick pushed past Bruce and opened the family tree that he’d been forced to study earlier. “Zucco’s in Chicago, with the Vitis. Fine. We deal with the guys backing him in Gotham, and then Lucia Viti, and then Tony Zucco will go away for good.”

“Hn.” Bruce didn’t smile, exactly, but Dick could have sworn that was a _hn_ of approval.

Dick looked back at the list. His blood boiled at the thought of them all. How _dare_ they just go on, living free while leaving a trail of blood? Safe while so many others died from their actions. All nine of them… Safe…

“Bruce…”

“What?”

“Bruce, look.” Dick grabbed at Bruce’s elbow and pulled, using his free hand to point to the first puzzle: N_NE _F Y_ _RE S_FE

“They’re messages,” he said.

“I know that,” growled Bruce.

“No, not threats. Messages. Alfred said you thought that one was _None of you are safe_. But it’s not _none_. It’s _nine_. The three Falcones, the two Maronis, Viti, Skeever, Gazzo—“

“And Zucco.” Bruce leaned back, looking across the data with realization working across his face.

“Yeah. _Nine of you are safe_. I think—”

“That’s it, Dick. This changes everything.”

Dick grinned with pride in his own work. _He_ had done that. Done what Bruce hadn’t all these nights. _He did_ have a place here, at Batman’s side.

Bruce’s face hardened into a non-apology. “Dick, I know Zucco’s out there, but—”

But this message meant that there was a real lead on the Hangman killer for the first time in months. And whoever it was, they were on Zucco’s side. Keeping him safe.

“It’s okay, Bruce. This is more important. We’ll get Zucco later.”

Bruce nodded once and pulled his cowl back on. “Go upstairs.”

“But I just—”

“Stay with Alfred. You almost got yourself killed last time you were in the Cave alone.”

Dick’s jaw dropped. He almost started arguing, but what was the point? Bruce had clearly reviewed the tapes and seen everything. He snapped his mouth shut, realizing that that meant Bruce had also seen him go through his things and play at being Batman. Maybe the surveillance tapes were somewhere he could access and wipe from all of history.
“And Dick?”

“Yeah?” Dick hung on the word, waiting for the praise that he had earned.

“We will go after Zucco when this is over. I promise.”

Or that. Dick nodded and gave a lopsided grin. “I know, Bruce. Go get this Hangman.”

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After Bruce went out, Dick kept busy by helping Alfred with dinner. He wasn’t much of a cook, but he managed to cut vegetables on command and stir while Alfred did all the tricky work.

Just as they sat down to eat, the doorbell rang. Dick jumped to his feet, but Alfred pointed sternly to his chair.

“Stay here, Master Richard,” he said. Dick sat until Alfred was out of sight, and then peeked out into the foyer. Alfred had grabbed an old musket from a display, but relaxed as he looked at a security image. The door opened and Alfred set the musket down.

“Good evening. To what do we owe the pleasure?”

“Just following up a call. He’s not answering his phone. I thought I’d drop by before searching the city.”

“Well and good on that, Mister Kent.”

Dick froze. The man standing in the doorway was actually Superman. He sucked in a deep breath and spun to hide behind the lintel, but his sock-clad feet skidded on the newly polished floor and he slipped over the down into the foyer. At least he was good at taking falls: he rolled into a smooth recovery and stood up, holding out his hand in perfect form as if he’d intended the whole thing.

“Pleasetomeetyou, Mister Kent!” he shouted.

Mister Kent, to his credit, didn’t laugh. He just smiled wide and strode up to Dick, while Alfred shut the door behind him and then disappeared from the room.

“Call me Clark, please.” His handshake was firm, but not Superman firm. Not that Dick wanted to test that out. “So, you’re the famous Dick Grayson?”

Dick laughed nervously. “I’m not famous,” he said. Had he really just said that? Of course he was famous. But not Superman famous.

“I’ve sure heard a lot about you. Good things, I promise.”

Dick’s face lit up. Good things.

“Speaking of, is he around?” Clark looked around the room, like Bruce could be hiding behind some corner. Dick bit back a laugh at the thought of Bruce pulling a Batman maneuver like that on his guests. “Downstairs, maybe?”

“Why would he be downstairs?” Dick narrowed his eyes. He was about ninety-nine percent sure that this was Superman, but Superman wouldn’t need to ask a question like that. And Bruce hadn’t
actually confirmed Dick’s theory. He wasn’t about to compromise Bruce’s identity, and to a reporter at that.

“Are you… hiding something, Dick?”

Dick’s heart raced. He was signaling too much. Clark was a reporter—of course he’d pick up on all the little cues of body language showing Dick’s unease.

“No, sir,” he said, trying to imagine how he’d respond if he didn’t know anything about the giant Batcave downstairs. When Bruce got back, Dick was going to give him a piece of his mind over this Clark business. How hard would it been to say, *Yes, Clark Kent is Superman, and he knows my secret identity?*

“You sure? You were, uh…” Clark tapped his chest and started to smile. “A little fast, there, for a second.”

His heartbeat? That definitely went beyond a reporter’s skills. Dick burst into joyful laughter. “I was right! You’re Superman!”

Clark Kent rolled his shoulders back and ran a hand through his hair, smoothing it but freeing one curl. His glasses came off, and inhuman blue eyes shone out.

Dick jumped into the air with glee. Maybe he should’ve been annoyed at the charade, but it was well outweighed by witnessing the ordinary magic of the transformation. “You are!”

“Sure am. I figured you knew.”

Dick shrugged. “Sort of. But why ask me about Bruce? I thought you could see through walls.”

“Sure, when they haven’t been lined with lead.” Superman sighed. “So he isn’t downstairs?”

“No. He’s following a clue that I figured out,” Dick said, not too humble to take credit for piecing together something that even Bruce had missed.

“Wow, you must be some detective! So that’s why he didn’t follow up on the Chicago case?”

Dick nodded. “Just changed priorities. We had to take care of Gotham first.”

Superman raised his eyebrows. “Of course.”

Dick wasn’t sure if that was a good or bad of course, so he just let it go. “Is Egypt okay?”

“Our best correspondent is there. She’ll let me know if—” Superman’s face pinched in concentration and his head cocked slightly, ear to the sky like a dog at attention. “What case was that again? Maybe Batman could use help.”

“I don’t think that’s wise,” interrupted Alfred, reappearing with a brown bag.

Superman stepped forward to face Alfred while turning his back to Dick. Dick couldn’t hear or see his words, but Superman’s head shook slightly as he emphatically mouthed something. Something bad that he didn’t want Dick to know about.

“He’ll never forgive you if you do,” Alfred responded.

“All right,” said Superman, raising his hands in resignation. “I’ll go home. But I’m registering my formal protest.”
“Duly noted,” said Alfred. “Here, Mister Clark, something for the road.”

“You’re too kind, Alfred,” said Superman, taking the brown bag with reluctance. “I just wish it didn’t feel like you were paying me off.”

“Not at all. I’m sure your schedule doesn’t allow for much home cooking. Take it as thanks for your concern.”

“It’s not weakness to have help,” Superman grumbled.

“I’ll help him,” said Dick. “If someone’s gotta help him, it might as well be me.”

Superman turned back around with a bright smile. “He’s lucky to have a friend like you, Dick. I hope you know that.”

Dick shrugged, but the words filled him with a pride that hummed with energy and threatened to burst. Superman was the friend Bruce was lucky to have. But Superman had said that about him. He bit back the grin that wanted to stretch across his face. “Thanks, Superman, sir.”

“Clark’s just fine,” he said, winking. He replaced his glasses, ran a hand through his hair, and walked back to the door.

Dick didn’t wait to watch him say goodbye to Alfred. He knew what he had to do.

He sprinted up to his room, where he pulled out pieces of old costumes, throwing them onto his floor. Green leotard, his robin-red vest, a pair of tightrope boots (at least something had come of trying that dreadfully boring act), and one of his warm-up capes—lightweight and short, fit for flying like Superman’s, not heavy and awful like the Bat-cape that had almost killed him.

The vest would need some fixing, to keep it more securely fastened. And a belt, with tools like Batman’s. And probably some protection on the vest and lower leotard.

He laid out the pieces and grabbed a sketchbook to draw out his idea. After a few minutes, Alfred knocked.

“Did you forget about supper, Master Dick?”

“Oh!” In all the excitement, he had, but he thought he could eat an entire bear. “Coming!”

He tore out the page, folded it in quarters, and bit his lip as he labelled it: Robin.

After dinner, Dick talked Alfred into keeping watch in the Batcave, where he could take his nervous energy out on the practice dummies. He hadn’t liked how worried Superman had been. What if Bruce had been shouting for help? Or in pain? What if Superman had heard Bruce’s heart stopping?

Batman did need help. And Dick was determined to be ready.

But when Batman came back, he had no interest in listening to anything. He stormed from the Batmobile toward the computer and waved Dick out of his way.

Dick wasn’t easily dismissed. “I think I figured out how to help you—how Robin can help Batman, I
mean—"

“Go upstairs, Dick. Now.” Batman swept past again.

“Hey!” Dick clenched his fist. “Did you even hear me?”

Batman spun on his heel. “There’s no room for a child in this!”

“You said I could help!” Dick shouted. “I even—”

“No!” The word echoed through the cave, and for the first time since their initial meeting, Dick understood why Batman scared his enemies. There was something terrible and dark there that Dick hadn’t seen before, something in his spirit that matched the hellishness of the cowl. Something that had no room for bright-eyed supermen or little boys with big hearts. “I work alone.”

“You were failing alone!”

Maybe failing was a harsh word, but Batman needed harsh.

“You thought Batman could save kids from what you went through? Well, I’m standing right here, Bruce. What else do you need to see? You can’t do it alone.”

“Don’t—”

“You need me!” Dick puffed his chest and drummed his finger against it. “I solved the hangman game. I’m the one who—”

“This isn’t a game,” Batman snarled, pulling off his cowl and charging past Dick a third time. He rubbed his neck and began stripping off his cape and armor, leaving it trailing in his wake.

“You want fun and games?” He spun back, eyes blazing, lips snarling. “Go back to the circus.”

Dick staggered backward. They’d only been words, but they left him winded, shaky.

Bruce hadn’t really meant that. He was just stressed over the case and angry at what Dick had said. He was in Batman mode and hadn’t shifted back to Bruce. That was all. He didn’t really want Dick to leave.

Right?

Alfred sighed and bent down to gather the cape that had fallen by his feet.

“I can help!” Dick shouted after him.

Batman didn’t answer. He just left them there. Left Dick there.

“I just wanted to help,” Dick muttered to the darkness.

“He knows, Master Dick,” said Alfred, resting a hand on his shoulder. “But if you’re waiting for him to ask for help, you’ll be waiting a long time.”
Miss Plummer had said something about a honeymoon period wearing off, but Dick hadn’t actually thought that would apply to him and Bruce.

But it had. Dick had worn out his welcome. He kept thinking back through his actions and words, trying to pinpoint what he had done to push Bruce too far. Had he pried too much into the Batman part of Bruce’s life? Had Bruce just had a bad night, and Dick had ruined it with his comment about Batman being a failure? It had been mean. But mean enough to shut Dick out?

Dick didn’t see Bruce the next morning. That was normal enough—Bruce was rarely fit for human interaction before the first bell rang at school. But usually, if he hadn’t woken up to at least see him off, he’d left a note overnight, wishing Dick a good day.

There was no note on Friday. No recognition that it was the first day of summer break. Nothing.

It was too much to hope that Bruce would be there for pick-up at the end of the day, but Dick’s heart still dropped as the Mulliner rolled up outside his school.

He climbed in the backseat without a word. To his credit, Alfred seemed to pick up on his uncharacteristic lack of interest in conversation and didn’t prod too much, letting Dick instead turn up the radio and stare out the window as they drove home.

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Eventually, Dick’s thoughts melted into half-formed puddles and he bobbed his head to the music instead, too tired to think about anything anymore.

A beige car was waiting for them when they pulled up to the gates of Wayne Manor.


Captain Gordon.

In spite of Alfred’s orders, Dick threw open the door and nearly fell out of the car before rushing
over. “Is Bruce okay?” he shouted. Even if Bruce had been an absent jerk, Dick couldn’t bear another loss. Not yet.

Alfred cast a scolding look at Dick, and Gordon raised an eyebrow. “Is there any reason he wouldn’t be? I tried calling him, but—”

“He’s fine,” Alfred said. “Just taking a retreat.”

“Right,” said Gordon. He looked past Alfred to Dick, stepped forward and dropped one knee to meet Dick’s eye. “I got word about Zucco. I wanted to tell you in person.”

Dick swallowed, waiting for whatever terrible news had warranted an in-person visit from Gordon. “They’re saying he’s dead.”

That wasn’t at all what he’d expected. “How? What happened?”

Gordon shrugged. “Hard to say. The Vitis? Maronis? Someone else he crossed at any point? These guys, they live by the sword and die by it. But he can’t hurt you anymore.”

Zucco was dead.

Wasn’t that justice? It was exactly what he deserved. And yet, Dick didn’t feel like celebrating now that it was done.

“I know it’s not what you were expecting. A trial, a conviction…”

“It’s okay, Captain Gordon. It’s over.” He swallowed. It wasn’t really. The eight other bosses were alive and kicking. The Hangman that had protected Zucco was still out there. “Thanks for telling me.”

Gordon nodded and stood back up. He exchanged a few more words with Alfred while Dick leaned against the car, trying to process the news. Bruce should’ve been there to hear it, to help him know how to feel.

How could Bruce dare to not be there for this?

As soon as Gordon left, Dick spun on Alfred. “A retreat? Is that where he is?”

“Captain Gordon knows Master Bruce and the Bat. The entire project rests on Gordon having at least plausible deniability.”

Dick didn’t know what plausible deniability was, and he didn’t care. He didn’t care about Bruce’s entire project, either. He’d been used and tossed aside, and he was fed up.

Dick and Alfred had a quiet, awkward dinner, with Bruce notably absent. Retreat was a pretty good word for it after all, Dick thought as he pushed his green beans around on his plate.

The silver lining to Bruce’s absence was that Dick had no need to justify his own way of saying goodbye. After dinner, Dick asked Alfred to make a fire, and he dragged out the two boxes of his parents’ things that Haly had left him.
He rummaged through the one marked *Mary* and took out one golden necklace from her grandmother and a bracelet that he had made for her, only a month ago. From the box marked *John*, he grabbed two photographs of the family and a striking blue-and-yellow costume that had been worn by the first of his ancestors to fly. He put those in one of his drawers with his own circus things, and then carried the two boxes downstairs.

Alfred looked mildly concerned. “Master Dick, maybe you want to take some more time—”

Dick shook his head. “It’s what they’d want, especially with Zucco dead now. Mom always said it was bad luck to keep people’s things after they were gone.”

“I see,” said Alfred. Neither of them had to point out how Wayne Manor was stuffed floor to ceiling with dead people’s things.

One by one, Dick placed each of his parents’ minimal belongings into the fire, while Alfred hovered close enough to keep an eye but far enough to give him privacy. It would have horrified Bruce, to get rid of so much, but it was actually the most helpful thing he’d done since they’d died. He hadn’t gotten to say goodbye, that night in the circus, and now he could. He held his mother’s sweatshirt to his face, remembering how she smelled when she gave him hugs, and then dropped it into the flames, letting it go. Maybe Bruce would feel a little better if he tossed more things into the fire himself.

Then again, Bruce liked the ghosts looking over him, like the portraits of stern faces of old-time Gotham that lined every hall: generals, heroes, captains of industry, all reminding Bruce that he wasn’t totally alone.

Well, Bruce wasn’t alone. He had Alfred. He had Dick, sort of.

Dick pushed away the thoughts. It was his parents’ time, not Bruce’s. Raya’s last words to him weighed on his heart. Had he already become someone else, living here with Bruce in this mansion?

“I won’t forget who I am,” Dick said into the flames as he dropped in the boxes’ last item, a newspaper back from when his parents were first married, with a photograph of them. He’d ripped the photograph out of the rest of the rolled paper and set it on the hearth to save for himself. “I promise I’ll make you proud.”

As the flames crackled around the new fuel, Dick wrapped his arms around his knees and watched the firelight dance, casting the old photograph in light and then darkness and then light again.

“Oh, he floats through the air with the greatest of ease,” he sang softly, like his dad would every time Dick was hurt or couldn’t sleep, “this daring young man on the flying trapeze.”

He traced his fingers over the yellowed photograph. His dad always sang the song with a smile, probably because he was the one who’d stolen someone else’s love away. His dad said that Mary had always had a line of admirers, *long enough to line up across the Atlantic Ocean*, but he’d been the only one able to catch her.

Dick smiled at that. His dad had thought himself so clever. And he wasn’t wrong: he’d caught her, again and again. He’d caught her that last time, too, before they both fell.

A tear dropped on the picture, and he dabbed it with the corner of his shirt, trying to save it from damage. They were so happy in that picture, like in all of his memories. He’d never thought much about what happened after people died, but he was sure they were together somewhere. He hoped they were still happy.
“His actions are graceful, all girls he could please,” he whispered into his knees, rocking himself along with the rhythm. “And my love he’s stolen—” His voice broke and he felt the events of the day pulling on him, dragging him into sleep. “My love he’s stolen away.”

While Dick sought closure in the red flames, Bruce stared at the blue light of the Bat-Computer. Maybe he should have gone up, said something, but he didn’t know what to say. Dick probably had no interest in seeing Bruce anyway right now, especially after he’d missed afternoon pick-up. He’d just been so close to solving the Hangman case, and he couldn’t pull himself away from following the cryptic leads Selina had given him about Sofia Falcone.

Except he couldn’t concentrate on the Falcons. Dick had been right: Bruce had failed. He’d failed to prevent Dick becoming an orphan like him, and he’d failed to close the case himself. Letting Zucco escape to Chicago to get offed by some other mobster was sloppy. And there was nothing he could do to fix that now.

Instead, Bruce reread the files on Haly’s, hoping again that he’d find something new to explain the chain of deaths of so many promising young circus stars. He didn’t want to fail Dick again. He knew it was a dead end, but even as a dead end, even as a series of freak accidents with no meaning whatsoever, it had kept Bruce awake night after night.

This was the life Dick would go back to, now that Zucco was dead.

At least Haly would probably live a long life. Dick deserved a guardian who didn’t court death every night. Dick had said it himself, hadn’t he, that night when Zucco was arrested? Every night that Bruce went out as Batman, he left Dick at the mercy of the criminals of Gotham.

Bruce couldn’t keep Dick in Gotham forever, anyway. Wayne Manor was a cage for a full-flighted soul, born to move, destined for the center ring. Someday, and soon, Dick would go back. Someday, and soon, Bruce would be alone again. The Cave would be filled only with the sound of the bats and not the triumphant laughter of Dick mastering a new technique. Bruce would go back to quiet comm links instead of hearing Dick’s prattling in his cowl while keeping watch over Gotham. And Dick would go back, out of the reach of Bruce’s protection.

But what if Dick were next in the unpatterned pattern? What if Bruce opened the newspaper in three years to read about the untimely death of Dick Grayson, trapeze prodigy? How would he live with himself, knowing that he’d known the risks and let Dick go back anyway? How would he live at all, losing someone else?

He’d grown too attached in too short a time. It was foolish to have done that, to have let Dick become anything more than a mentee. Alfred had been right.

He was Batman. He had priorities.

And staring at ancient newspapers was not what he needed to be doing. He had an active case. Several cases. The Hangman killer was still killing—had almost killed him, if not for a recent addition to his armor and a timely reappearance by Selina. The Falcons and Maroni were still waging a war across Gotham. Joker was somewhere out there, free, working with Harvey.

He couldn’t focus on keeping his city safe from these monsters and on keeping Dick safe from the circus.
He’d made a promise to protect Dick.

But he’d made a vow to fight crime.

So Bruce, once again, steeled himself against the pain and the separation that were bound to come. When they did, he wouldn’t have the luxury of breaking.

Dick didn’t know how much later it was when he woke up, but he had slumped onto the rug in front of the hearth and someone had covered him with a soft blanket. He turned over and saw Alfred dozed off on one of the sofas.

He got up and put the blanket over the old butler-caretaker. At least Alfred had been good to him.

Dick retreated to his room and fell on top of the perfectly-made queen-size bed. It still felt too big. He belonged at the circus. He knew it. Bruce knew it.

And with Zucco gone, he’d be safe at Haly’s again. He’d wait for Bruce to come home, and then he’d figure out a way to go home.

Saturday came, with still no appearance from Bruce, so Alfred drove Dick back to the trapeze school. There, Dick could almost forget about how his old life had been ripped away, and the instructors at Gotham City Aerial Arts, unlike Bruce, appreciated his help. He only left when the last students had trickled out and the school closed down for the evening. He passed out in the back of the car on the ride back home and didn’t wake up until they pulled into the Manor driveway.

Bruce still wasn’t inside. Dick flipped on the television, checking for any news to justify his absence. After a half hour, coverage of an averted riot in Cairo switched to local news: apparently Two-Face had done in the rest of the mafia that morning. None of them had been safe, after all. Dick smirked. Maybe it was wrong to be grateful to a psycho-killer like Two-Face, but Zucco was dead, and all the rest of the dirty lot. They’d all got what they deserved, in the end, and there was no doubt that Gotham was safer for it. And Haly’s was safer. But Batman was probably out there, tracking down Two-Face.

Dick had no more reason to stay, except for Bruce. And if Bruce wasn’t even going to come back, wasn’t even going to acknowledge him anymore? That made his decision easy.

He went up to his room and began to pack his bags without even stopping to change.

Haly had tried to push him away, too. But that had been because of Zucco, hadn’t it? He’d said all those things about a fresh start, a new trapeze act. But Haly knew better than to turn away the last Flying Grayson. And anyway, the circus was his family. He belonged with them. He belonged with Raya and Raymond and Zane. He’d convince Haly. He’d have to.

He reached for his miniature Zitka but then hesitated. He wouldn’t need a stuffed elephant where he was going. He placed the toy in the center of the bed, propped against the pillow for Bruce.
Alfred appeared in the doorway. “Going somewhere?”

Dick looked down at his packed duffel. There on the top was the red vest that he’d started altering for crime-fighting. He pulled the drawstring of the bag shut, closing it away. “I’m going back. Back to Haly’s.”

Alfred’s face knit in concern. “Now?”

Dick shrugged. “I was going to wait for Bruce, but… where is he?”

“Master Bruce keeps all hours, as you know. Sometimes his work keeps him away for—”

“You don’t even know,” Dick snapped, “do you?”

Alfred exhaled a shaky breath. “This is the way of things, Master Dick. If he were in trouble, he’d alert me.”

It would have been better if he had been in trouble. At least there would have been a reason for Bruce to have gone completely missing without so much as a word.

“Can’t this wait one more night? He’d want to say goodbye.”

Dick slumped. “He doesn’t want me here.”

“Oh, my lad, you couldn’t be more wrong. He wants you here more than anything, even if he won’t say it. For my sake, stay one more night?”

“I want to go, Alfred. I just need a ride.”

Alfred sighed. “As you wish.”

The truth was that Dick sort of hoped Bruce would come home and not know what had happened, to feel the same worry and hurt that Dick felt now, to feel left and alone.

But that was wrong. That was revenge. That wouldn’t make anything any better.

“I’ll leave a note,” he said. “Is that okay?”

“That’s a fine idea.”

Dick slung his bag around his shoulder and walked down to Bruce’s study, circling around to the desk. Spreading a blank page on the writing pad, he took a final look at the room, from Bruce’s point of view for once. On the desk, right in front of him, was a photograph. He leaned across for a closer look.

It was from the gala, from the first weekend Dick had stayed at Wayne Manor. But it wasn’t a posed formal shot from the red carpet. It was a candid from dinner, of the two of them at the table with the guests of honor. The camera had caught a private moment in the middle of the public event: Dick, leaning over, his mouth open in the middle of speaking, lips upturned, face angled down but eyes on Bruce, as if sharing some inside joke; and Bruce, head back, eyes closed, laughing. Dick touched the glass of the frame, where the skin around Bruce’s eyes had crinkled in his otherwise youthful face. It had taken a masterful photographer to capture that: the real Bruce, really happy.

Dick swallowed over a lump in his throat, holding back tears.

There was only one other photograph on the desk. The outfits and decor looked like another party,
but the fashion was a little dated and the colors faded. There were three people in this one: a boy younger than Dick, looking up with vision in his eyes and hands outstretched as if saying, *There are no limits to what we can do*; a man that looked like Bruce—if Bruce grew a mustache and gained ten years—wearing an impressed smile; and a woman with a soft expression of adoration, delicate fingers touching a pearl necklace that lay on her breastbone.

They were the same couple that stared down at him from the formal portrait above the mantle across the desk. Thomas and Martha Wayne. And Bruce, back before everything was lost. Dick looked between the two photos, the only ones Bruce had seen fit to frame. One of his parents. And one of Dick.

He blinked, and tears dragged wet streaks along his cheek and nose before falling on the desk and empty paper.

He couldn’t leave. He wasn’t just a project, a charity case, a asset in solving a crime. Bruce was family.

He wiped his eyes with the sleeve of his sweatshirt. As he turned, a light in the gloomy Gotham skyline caught his eye. Batman was being called. And smoke was rising over the city. Lots of it.

“All Alfred!” he called, his eyes fixed on the dark omens. “How long has the Bat-Signal been on?”

“The Bat-Signal?” Alfred leaned to glance out the side window. “Oh. About halfway into our drive home, I’d say.” His voice wavered, thin and more concerned than he was letting on.

“And the fire?”

“I’m not sure, Master Dick.”

They’d been home at least an hour. Maybe Bruce wasn’t okay. Images flashed through Dick’s mind: the way Bruce had reflexively touched his neck after returning Thursday night, the shakiness in Bruce’s step coming out of the Batmobile, the photographs of the wounds on hanged cops and lawyers who’d fought the Falcones, the face Superman had made mid-sentence and his silent exchange with Alfred.

Bruce hadn’t just been hurt. He’d almost died out there.

He’d pushed Dick away to protect him from knowing how close Batman’s enemies had come to succeeding. To protect either of them from losing more family.

Dick gritted his teeth. Bruce had made a big mistake if he thought Dick was going to stand aside and ignore warning signs. He’d done that once. Never again. He pushed himself out of the desk chair.

“Abandoning your note?”

“You were right. I can’t go without saying goodbye.”

Dick picked up his bag, walked up to the grandfather clock, and turned the hands to 10:47. How many years had it been since the Waynes had been killed? Fifteen? And every day Bruce turned the clock to remind himself of how they were gunned down.

It sent a chill down Dick’s spine every time, separate from the cold draft coming up from the Batcave. But this time, he understood that it wasn’t just a reminder of the past. It was motivation for the future, a reminder of why the cave existed like it did. A reminder of why Batman had to keep existing. A reminder to not give up. To keep going, even on the hardest days.
For once, he took the steps one at a time, slowed by the weight of the mission. Dick would never be able to go back to the circus like nothing had happened. Gotham had changed him. Zucco dying wasn’t enough—the problem went deeper than Zucco. Deeper than nine mafia bosses or the Falcone family. Dick needed to make sure what happened to his parents, to his circus, to him, wouldn’t happen again to anyone else.

That was why Bruce needed him, the only one who could really understand why he did this. Even Alfred didn’t really understand, even though he accepted it. But Dick understood. He wanted the same things.

He knew how the two of them looked to strangers, the sad orphan club. He’d heard the pity and the snide comments, or worse. From the outside, they weren’t wrong: Bruce and Dick, children of murdered parents, no brothers or sisters, no kindly grandparents, all alone in the world except each other, hiding their sorrows in fancy parties.

But Dick knew better. That wasn’t the whole story.

None of them knew the real Bruce. There was Batman, of course, the most talented and most travelled person Dick had ever met (and from the circus life, that was saying something), who could take down six bad guys at once and defeated the Joker himself. But Dick also knew the Bruce who wanted to do everything in his power to right the wrongs of the world. The Bruce who got personally offended at insults to Gotham and dragged Dick on a tour of all the best parts of the city. The Bruce who pushed Dick back onto the trapeze to separate his passion from his grief. The Bruce who carried him all the way from the Batmobile up to his third-floor bedroom after a late night and watched over him in his sleep.

The Bruce who made every decision based on what would make the world better, even when the world didn’t deserve it. Despite everything, Bruce didn’t want to ruin the city that had ruined everything for him. He wanted to save it.

But he couldn’t do it alone.

Gotham was burning. Batman was missing. It was time to help, and Dick wasn’t going to wait to be asked.

He took the final steps, heading toward the Bat-Computer to call for Bruce, but he stopped short. There were voices in the Batcave. And none of them were Bruce’s.

Chapter End Notes

WHO HAS INVADED THE BATCAVE??

WILL THE BOY WONDER BE ABLE TO DEFEND WAYNE MANOR ALONE??

WILL BRUCE LET DOWN HIS ICY EMOTIONAL DEFENSES TO LET DICK IN HIS LIFE FOR GOOD??

TUNE IN TOMORROW! SAME BAT-TIME, SAME BAT-CHANNEL.
He understood what Bruce had meant, now. He had to accept the fear, like he had at the trapeze school. He was afraid. But he was more than his fear. Fear was just an emotion. It wasn’t an enemy, needing to be fought. It wasn’t a reason to give up. Right now, the only thing he could do was protect the Batcave and protect the Manor. So he took a deep breath, set aside the panicking thoughts, and made an action plan.

There were voices in the Batcave. And none of them were Bruce’s.

Dick lifted his hood, ducked down, and tried to spot the intruders. The voices were muddled, as if coming from another room. But there were no other rooms, only levels and caverns and tunnels of the Cave. And he couldn’t see them. He’d need some kind of binoculars or something. He scanned the ramps and levels and cliffs of the Batcave, to find a path that would get him to the supplies he’d need.

What if they’d found Batman? What if they’d hurt him—or killed him?

Waves of catastrophe crashed into him, getting worse and worse with every thought. Batman hanging from a noose. The evil Owls, crawling up through the Cave to steal him away. The last surviving Gotham mafiosi, kidnapping Dick and torturing him to find out Batman’s identity. The Joker, standing over Batman’s body, broken and bleeding.

The fear whelmed up to his neck, his mouth, choking him.

It threatened to overwhelm him, throwing him under and tossing him in its force, but Bruce’s words rang in his ears: Fear is just an emotion. It’s only dangerous when you let it control you.

He understood what Bruce had meant, now. He had to accept the fear, like he had at the trapeze school. He was afraid. But he was more than his fear. Fear was just an emotion. It wasn’t an enemy, needing to be fought. It wasn’t a reason to give up. Right now, the only thing he could do was protect the Batcave and protect the Manor. So he took a deep breath, set aside the panicking thoughts, and made an action plan.

Step one: *stay hidden*. He took off his shoes and carefully slunk out of his warm-up pants. Luckily, their *swish swish* hadn’t already given him away. He ran silently in his socks, down the stairs and across to the supply cabinet that held the black domino masks, and affixed one. His costume, before
anything else, was not Bruce Wayne’s ward.

Step two: *gear up*. He loosened the cord on his duffel bag and dug out pieces for the fastest costume change in history. If he was going to take out these guys, he was going to do it as Robin. Thankfully, his anger and laziness meant he was still wearing his leotard from trapeze practice. He pulled on his tightrope shoes and vest, which he’d lined with leather before Bruce had thrown his tantrum. His yellow warm-up cape came next. He didn’t have a utility belt like Batman, but he gathered a few key tools: binoculars, a pair of night-vision goggles, and one of Batman’s grapple-guns. As he fastened his leather grips around his palms and wrists, he listened down to the increasingly clear voices.

They sounded lost, like they hadn’t meant to come here. That was a good sign, at least.

Step three: *assess his targets*. He picked up the binoculars and looked down. There were four of them. All weirdos: a red-haired woman dressed all in green, a tall man in gear and a helmet like some kind of robot, a dashing man in a two-tone suit—that was Harvey Dent, Two-Face—carrying two guns, and… Dick shuddered. The killer clown.

It was okay to be afraid. He was more than his fear.

“Well, well!” The Joker’s sing-song voice carried through the Cave now. “It looks like we’ve found the Bat’s little lair!” He broke into an eerie, high-pitched laugh that raised goosebumps across Dick’s legs.

There was no call for Batcave to report this time, but Dick knew the screeching metal of a Batcave lockdown. He switched the binoculars out for his night-vision goggles just in time for the lights to turn off.

The darkness, total as it was, wasn’t scary this time. It was an ally: he had the advantage now. It was a relief: Bruce was alive, enough to respond to a security breach.

“He knows we’re here!” the woman yelled out.

Step four: *take them out*. The intruders stood temporarily blinded, turning in the dark, below a narrow stalactite. Dick grabbed a grapple gun and shot toward the formation, jumping simultaneously so that the anchor twisted around. After landing on the next level below, he pulled hard on the line. The shattering sound fill the cave, and he released the line, letting the rocks fall. Two-Face, Joker, and the woman jumped out of the way, but Robot Guy wasn’t fast. He shot his gun, sending a spray of—what was that? Ice?—but fell hard to the ground with the impact.

That had been half luck, Dick knew, and he didn’t have the ability to keep jumping levels. If only he’d spent less time on the computer and in the wardrobe and more time finding his way around Batman’s stash of weapons… There were tasers and freeze-bombs and all sorts of useful things somewhere, but Dick definitely didn’t know where. Batman had never been keen to show him around that part of the Cave.

A new sound grew, a strange sound like trees in the wind. Dick squinted. Some kind of branches had begun to grow under the woman, raising her off the cave floor. Poison Ivy, then.

Desperate, Dick ran for the fire extinguisher and wrestled it free. He hoped the foam suffocated plants as much as fire. He didn’t have time to find out if it did. After spraying the foam, he took account of the canister’s weight and threw it with all his might at Ivy. It hit true, knocking her off the tree and out of commission.

Two down. Two to go.
“Come out, come out, little Bat!” the Joker cooed.

A spray of bullets came at Dick, but he flipped out of the way. His cape flew behind him, giving a false target for Two-Face’s guns.

“It’s not the Bat,” growled Two-Face. “I don’t know who it is, but it’s not him.”

Dick grabbed a staff from the practice area and hustled over to a cliffside right over the two remaining intruders. He bent over for a quick stretch, shaking his shoulders. Seeing through nightgoggles over an oversized domino mask wasn’t the best, but he could do this. He stepped back from the cliff face and took a deep breath before running forward and using the staff as a pole-vault to give him momentum. As he hit the air, he pulled it in and spun, landing to kick into Two-Face, whose chest became a rebound board to drive into the Joker with the staff.

Bruce had been training him two hours a day for emergency self-defense. He could do this. He twisted the staff into the fake clown once more.

“It’s just a kid!” shouted Two-Face, who had gotten back to his feet.

That was bad. If Two-Face could see him, Two-Face could shoot him. One gun seemed to have fallen from the first hit, but he still had another. Dick turned his focus to a quick flurry of staff-assisted kicks, wrapping his ankles around the weapon and sending it flying.

“He’s alone!”

“No,” boomed the Batman’s voice over the speaker system. “He’s not alone.”

It was the first Dick had heard of Bruce’s voice since the fight, and the words washed away any lingering hurt. Maybe he should’ve been angry still, but his heart leapt as the roar of the Batmobile engine came from the distance and the lights suddenly blazed back on, blinding them all.

Dick shook off his night goggles in time to see Two-Face stumbling back in shock. He spun his staff back, but it got stuck behind him: the Joker had the other end.

“What’s this? Too colorful for a Baby Bat.”

“I’m not a bat.” He thrust his knee into the middle of the staff, breaking it in half. He swung at the Joker, who jumped away from the swing. “I’m Robin.”

Dick cartwheeled to the side and kicked into the Joker’s shoulder, trying to dislodge the other half-staff out of his grip.

Suddenly, Batman swooped down and landed on their level. The support was welcome, but the distraction cost Dick his focus. Something blunt and heavy crashed into him, and he found himself skidding across the floor.

The Joker didn’t look like a brawler, but apparently looks were deceiving. Dick had been hit, and hard. His pride didn’t hurt much less. He hadn’t even seen the hit coming, and now Bruce was going to think he wasn’t able to handle himself. Dick’s head spun, and his eyes fluttered open and shut.

He couldn’t let himself sleep. He knew that much. He had to stay awake. Was he dizzy? Yes. Confused? He didn’t think so. His head hurt, though, a terrible dull ache on top of the sharp pain from the impact on one side. He touched his head gingerly and felt the sting of it. And wet. He looked at his fingers and the bright red glistening on them. Probably just a shallow cut. Nothing worse than he’d had before, but this time the sensation brought on memories: his hands red from
clinging to his parents, their hair wet with blood from the fall. His head felt heavy, but he shook himself awake. No sleeping.

Bruce, meanwhile, had somehow got them talking instead of fighting. So that was the trick: keep them talking. Play to their egos.

Two-Face was yelling something about the mafia, about killing the Falcons. Maybe Two-Face had done in Zucco, too. He didn’t seem any happier for it. He seemed pretty angry, all in all.

Two-Face pivoted, showing his better half to Bruce while turning the burned half to Dick. Dick shuddered. There was too much of his reflection in it, the skin burned with the same acid as the ropes at Haly’s. Bruce’s old friend and partner, fallen from justice to revenge.

If Dick had found and killed Zucco, would he have ended up that way? Broken in two, raving, as much a killer as his enemies?

Bruce had saved him from that. And now, Dick had to save Bruce.

He looked up at the cliff in front of him. If he could get height again, he could help. He couldn’t climb or grapple up without being shot, but he could sneak around it. He moved quietly out of sight, while Batman and the Joker had all their focus on Two-Face.

But then Two-Face looked in Dick’s direction, catching him in his sight. Dick’s heart stopped. Maybe he should’ve kept still, played possum.

Before Two-Face could say anything, before Dick could react, two gunshots rang out. Two-Face fell forward, tumbling onto a ledge below. Dick gasped, but the sound he made was covered by Batman shouting “Harvey!” and Joker laughing wildly.

Batman ran toward the Joker, tackling him. The gun flew to the ground and off the cliff-face. “You monster! Why?”

Dick had to stay focused. Keep moving. The Joker hadn’t seen him, and he wouldn’t now, not with Batman on him. He disappeared behind the cliff.

“He was a big phony, Bats,” the Joker whined. “Talking a big game, but he never really changed. Fixing Gotham, getting revenge, blah blah blah. It got old. Boring.”

“You didn’t have a problem with that when you were massacring the Falcone family hours ago,” Batman growled. “Why now?”

The Joker burst into new laughter, as if that had been the funniest joke of all.

Dick reached for the grapple gun and aimed it for the cliff above.

“All fun and games,” the Joker explained. “But Harvey never understood Gotham. Not like you and I do.” The Joker chuckled to himself now, quiet and foreboding. “Gotham can’t be washed clean in the blood of the Falcons. There’s no black and white, good and evil, in this city. Is there, Bats?”

Batman didn’t answer.

“Harvey was still playing hero and villain. But there’s no such thing as heroes and villains, only the freaks who embrace the chaos and the crazies still telling themselves they can control it. There’s only me and you.”
Dick cringed. Maybe murder wasn’t the Joker’s worst fault: the pretentious speech deserved a life sentence of its own. Dick launched the grapple and flew up, releasing it just in time to fly higher and land on a ledge above.

“Take this little predicament: you’re either going to let me go, or you’re going to let poor Harvey die.”

“You did this, Joker. Not me.”

“Tell yourself whatever you like, Batsy. You’re the one letting him bleed out all over your nice cave floor. I’d be angry if I weren’t so flattered. You can see it: I did you a fa-a-vor.” The Joker broke back into his awful shrill laughter, which the cave made even worse with its echoes. “O-oh! I know!” He’d dropped to a false whisper. “Let’s say we killed him together!”

Dick caught himself frozen, watching the action below from his new vantage point. Bruce wouldn’t let Two-Face die like that. But letting the Joker go could mean far worse than one bad guy dying.

Batman’s grip tightened around the Joker’s throat.

“There’s a third option,” Batman said with a snarl. He flashed his gaze to Dick while the Joker was blinking back in pain. A cue. Batman saw what he was doing. Dick slipped back into the darkness and shot the grapple again, gaining height while Batman provided a distraction.

The Joker’s chortle turned into a wheeze. “Then do it!” he shouted, his voice suddenly low and sharp. “End it all!”

But then Two-Face groaned, and Batman threw the Joker against the wall. Batman ran to Two-Face, ripping out gauze with one hand and checking his pulse with the other.

It took one final shot of the grapple: Dick didn’t retract this one, and instead swung.

“Look at you! He makes you weak,” hissed the Joker, pushing himself up yet again. “You can’t even kill me!”

Batman looked up from the tourniquet work with a knowing smile. Unnerving. “I wasn’t trying to kill you. I was buying time.”

The third option. Dick swung back and forth, building momentum. This was it. He’d just have to land right. No net.

“Buying time for whom? You wouldn’t bring the GCPD to your secret hidey-hole and let them crash our little party, would you?”

“Forget about me already?” Dick began to laugh, building one more swing. “I’m offended!”

“You?!” Joker looked up at him in surprise and confusion, double-taking with the empty spot where Dick had earlier landed in a crumpled pile. “Remind me to give you a few extra hits next time!”

Batman fired a line into the air, and Dick prayed he knew what he was doing. He had no choice. Once he started, he’d just have to trust that Bruce could catch him.

Dick released from his swing. He pulled into the turn—once, twice, three times, and four—reaching the mind-numbing speed that could black him out or end his life if done wrong.

He reached out and found the armored gauntlets of Batman’s arms grabbing him. They swung him
down while Batman hung upside down on his wire. Dick broke rule number one and flexed his feet to kick his heels—right into the Joker’s head.

As they swung out, Batman flipped back to the ground and Dick released his grip. He used the force to deliver a second somersault onto the chest of the fallen Joker.

“You know,” Dick said, “I must not understand Gotham either, because I believe in good and evil. Here’s a hint: you? Aren’t good. You aren’t even a good clown.”

“Funny, Birdboy,” Joker wheezed.

“The name’s Robin.” Dick dug one heel against a chalk-white wrist, keeping it down. He pressed the rest of his weight into the bruised ribcage until the Joker yelped in pain. “And don’t forget it.”

“Batman and Robin?!” The Joker’s whimpers turned into maniacal laughter. Oh, you can’t be serious, Bats.”

“You should know by now, Joker,” Batman growled. “I’m always serious.”

Dick mirrored the Joker’s wide grin as he looked down at the grotesque face, even more horrifying now, bloodied from the fight.

“Looks like the joke’s on you, Joker.” He raised his foot from the Joker’s wrist and slammed it down into his jaw. The laughing finally stopped.

Chapter End Notes

This scene draws heavily from Dark Victory, with some small adjustments and adaptations as well as the obvious one of being written from Dick’s point of view. Fun fact: it is the only chapter without a scene break! Hopefully it wasn’t boring. :)

One more chapter and an epilogue after this, which should go up Wednesday and Thursday, respectively!
the dynamic duo

Chapter Summary

He’d stayed to protect Bruce, but he’d discovered something new, out fighting demented Dent and that… definitely-not-a-clown. He hated admitting it, but the thrill of the trapeze and the admiration of the crowds didn’t compare to the thrill of the fight. He was still coasting on the feeling of being so alive. It was like he had felt after nearly falling in the cave, but without any sadness to it. He had risked everything and won. And they had saved how many lives? It was hard to go back to normal life after that, even circus-normal. And then there was the matter of Bruce himself, and the photograph on the desk. Dick wanted to be there, to keep making Bruce smile, to help build something new together in the ashes of their twin tragedies. But Zucco’s death was a good excuse to send Dick away, if that was still how Bruce felt.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

With Joker out cold, Bruce felt himself start to relax, but he bit the urge back. He needed to ride the adrenaline just a little longer before he could process what had happened beyond the cold facts.


Dick didn’t seem bothered, though. He jumped off the bony body of Joker and gave a thumbs-up. “Nice catch, Batman!”

“Hn.” Bruce couldn’t talk right now. He was too busy scanning each of the four bodies. All unconscious, but not for long. And Harvey—no, Two-Face—needed urgent medical help.

His gaze finally landed back on Dick, who was decked in bright red and green with a startlingly yellow cape.

“What are you wearing?”

“My costume! Pretty cool, huh?”

Cool wasn’t the word he’d have chosen. Garish, maybe. Conspicuous. A little like a traffic light had vomited out a child. And that didn’t address the lack of pants.

“We’ll talk about it later,” Bruce said. “After we get these four back where they belong.”

Together, they secured and sedated the four intruders. Harvey was set in the passenger seat of the Batmobile, where Bruce could monitor him until they reached the doctors. Joker they placed handcuffed into the car’s rear compartment.

But Bruce wasn’t about to leave the other two alone with Dick, though the boy offered. Bruce gritted his teeth and called for Alfred through his cowl.
“My goodness, are you all right? Is the boy? I heard the gunshots, but the doors to the Cave locked and—”

“We’re both fine. I need you to help keep an eye on a couple Arkham escapees.”

“Understood. I’ll be right there.”

Alfred came down and Bruce gave Dick a nod of confidence before speeding off for the nearest hospital.

Even with Alfred’s triage in the Cave, Bruce was afraid Harvey wouldn’t make it. He’d lost so much blood. Then again, if this were Harvey’s end… maybe it wouldn’t be for the worst. Still, Bruce held on to hope. Joker was right: even as Two-Face, Harvey still believed in something.

After dropping off Harvey and Joker, Bruce raced back for Ivy and Freeze. As he ferried the last rogues back, he focused only on the drive, ignoring the flashing yellow light on his dashboard reminding him of missed calls and messages from his personal line. He’d seen the barrage of missed calls from Clark and summarily ignored them for two days. No need to stop now.

With everyone safely returned, he began to think through the events of the night. But the yellow light blinked and blinked.

He gave up and clicked to play.

Thursday, 4:45 PM. “Hey, Bruce.” Clark, as expected. “Just following up about your Chicago man. Sorry for running—I hope you don’t think I was bailing. I wasn’t. I, ah, actually found the flight and am waiting in Chicago now, but you never gave a name. Just let me know.”

Thursday, 5:03 PM. “Bruce? I do keep trying your other line first, but you aren’t answering. The flight’s landing now. What’s the word? Let me know before he slips away.”

Thursday, 5:15 PM. “Seriously, Bruce. They’re about to de-plane.” Silence. “Call me.”

Thursday, 5:38 PM. “Well, your perp’s somewhere in Chicago now, whoever he is. Where are you? If you don’t call me back in the next five minutes, I’m coming to Gotham. Fair warning. Don’t be angry.”

Thursday, 6:22 PM. “Now I’m angry. Alfred made me promise to leave. But if you die out there, I’m gonna…” Clark made a weird choked-up sound. “You better not die. I’m keeping an ear out. Call me back.”

Thursday, 6:24 PM. “Forgot to mention that I ran into Dick. He’s a good kid. A real good kid. Tried to cover for you and everything. I told him about me—he said you hadn’t confirmed. So I thought you should know. That’s all. Um. Bye.”

Thursday, 10:11 PM. “Alfred says you’re alive. So, that’s good. Thought I’d reach you, but I, uh, I guess I’ll hear from you when I hear from you. See you ’round.”

Friday, 9:34 AM. “Bruce, it’s me.” Lucius. “Missed you at the nine o’clock. The, uh, new prototypes came in overnight, in case you’re interested. The kids are dragging me out of town for the weekend, so, um, if I don’t see you this afternoon, we can take a look on Monday. No rush.”

Friday, 2:01 PM. “Hi Bruce. It’s Jim Gordon. I have some news about Tony Zucco. Give me a call when you can.”
Friday, 4:06 PM. “Bruce, it’s Jim again. Listen, uh… Word on the street is Zucco died in Chicago. I’m sorry I wasn’t able to bring him to justice. I’m really sorry. I swung by your house to tell you, but you weren’t there. The boy was, though. I, uh… I told him. I hope I didn’t overstep. Your butler said you were away, so, uh, just call at your convenience.”

Jim would be busy now, and it was easy enough for Bruce Wayne to make up some excuse about subpar reception at the lake he’d supposedly gone to. That could wait until morning.

And Clark… well. He would probably know by now that he was fine. Maybe he didn’t need a call. But he’d gone out of his way to help Dick, flew to Chicago and back. That deserved a thanks, at least.

“Batmobile, call Clark Kent.”

Clark picked up after half a ring. “Hello?”

“It’s me,” Bruce said.

“I thought so. I… you’re okay?”

“I’m okay.”

A sigh of relief. “You weren’t before. What did they do to you?”

Bruce wasn’t interested in rehashing that. “I was okay,” he insisted.

“Thanks for letting me know.”

“I was just calling to thank you. For Chicago.”

“Hey, no problem. Though—“

“I should’ve followed up,” Bruce said, sparing themselves the awkwardness of Clark tiptoeing around it. “I know. We had a breakthrough on a case and priorities changed, and—”

“Dick told me.”

“Oh. Good.” Bruce tightened the grip of his wheel as he crossed back to Bristol. “I’m. I’m sorry you went all the way out there. I thought you wouldn’t go if you didn’t hear back.”

“I hoped I’d hear in time, I guess.”

Of course he did. Ever the optimist.

“Who was it, anyway?”

“The man who killed Dick’s parents.”

“Jeez. Do you still need me to track him down? I can help, if—”

“No.”

“You sure? I can scan the place faster, if you—”

“He’s dead, Clark.”

That shut him up. “Oh. Gosh, Bruce, I…”
Great. Super-guilt. Damn Clark, making this all about him.

“I should’ve looked at the manifest, guessed who it was. I could’ve brought him in. I didn’t want to infringe—”

“He was never your responsibility. He was mine.” The misstep, the guilt, was on Bruce. For Zucco’s death. For Dick’s lack of closure. For all of it.

“I don’t…” Clark hesitated. “Does this mean the boy’s going back?”

That was the million-dollar question, wasn’t it? Bruce’s heart tightened. “I guess. I can’t take care of a kid forever.”

“I thought… since you’d told him…”

“Yeah. I thought so, too. But it’s not much of a life.”

Clark hummed. “Seems to me that that should be up to him to decide. Assuming you want him there.”

“Hnn.” Bruce pulled onto the back of his property, down the lane into the Batcave. He did want Dick there, but that was selfish. And after how he’d acted, he was surprised Dick had even stayed as long as he had. He wouldn’t have faulted Dick for never wanting to speak to him again. He had no reason to be there, to have put on that costume, to have stood against Gotham’s very worst, and yet, he had. But that had been Dick’s way since the beginning, at every step defying his expectations.

“Can I tell you what I think?”

“I’m sure you will.”

“This life gets lonely. If you have someone to share that with… someone you trust, someone who has your back? Seems a sad thing to turn down. I think it’d be good for you, being a father.”

“I’d never be his father. His father died.”

Clark sighed, loud and exasperated. “You know Bruce, I do know something about that.”

Bruce grunted. He didn’t want to be insensitive, but Clark knew nothing about it. A hologram space father didn’t count. “The Kents were the only family you knew,” he said, settling on that as a tactful compromise. “You were an infant.”

Apparently that was still too harsh. The injury came through in Clark’s voice as he said, “And I’m not saying he’ll call you Pa. But that doesn’t mean you wouldn’t be one.”

“I have to go.”

“What? Seriously, just because I—”

“Pulling back into the Cave. Thanks for Chicago.”

He hung up, not waiting for a goodbye or extra unsolicited advice. He took a moment to himself as he parked and turned the car off. His mind raced with all the new information the past day had brought, all the new ramifications, all the new action items that resulted. Part of him just wanted to collapse under the strain of it all, but he wasn’t finished. He still needed to log a report. Apologize to Dick. A short meditation—inhale, exhale—stilled his busy mind for a few seconds, at least.
When Bruce got out of the car, he found Dick sitting on the table-top by the Bat-Computer, still in costume.

“I thought you’d need help,” Dick said. “With the report.”

Bruce nodded and pulled off his cowl. Fighting against Dick’s help was clearly a losing battle. And it was a battle, he was starting to realize, that he didn’t really want to win.

“All right,” he said. “Walk me through the night.”

Dick waited patiently while Bruce finished putting in notes from the evening into the Bat-Computer, helping however he could to clean up and fill in the gaps in what had happened. Bruce didn’t let on much in a big way, but Dick could see in the rapid blinking of his eyes and the stress in his jaw how much the events of the night had shaken him. The explosion and fire, the chase with Sofia Falcone and Two-Face, the security breach, finding Dick in danger, Two-Face almost dying, the Joker’s mind-games… Dick had never really understood the extent of what Bruce dealt with as Batman until now. It was so much. No wonder he kept himself so held together so tightly. Dick was pretty sure that he would fall apart after one day, if it were him.

Finally, Bruce put the Bat-Computer to sleep and turned around in his chair.

“Dick… I heard about Zucco.”

Oh. Dick swallowed. Back to that.

He’d stayed to protect Bruce, but he’d discovered something new, out fighting demented Dent and that… definitely-not-a-clown. He hated admitting it, but the thrill of the trapeze and the admiration of the crowds didn’t compare to the thrill of the fight. He was still coasting on the feeling of being so alive. It was like he had felt after nearly falling in the cave, but without any sadness to it. He had risked everything and won. And they had saved how many lives? It was hard to go back to normal life after that, even circus-normal. And then there was the matter of Bruce himself, and the photograph on the desk. Dick wanted to be there, to keep making Bruce smile, to help build something new together in the ashes of their twin tragedies. But Zucco’s death was a good excuse to send Dick away, if that was still how Bruce felt.

“Yeah,” Dick said. “Good news.”

“So,” Bruce said, visibly steeling himself against any oncoming display of emotion, “now that your parents’ killer’s met his end, I expect that, um, you’ll be wanting to go back to the circus life.”

“Actually…” Dick bit his lip. The one word alone grabbed Bruce’s attention. His expression softened, his shoulders relaxed, and he leaned ever-so-slightly toward Dick, to hear the rest of his answer. Dick looked away. It was easier to say the truth without meeting Bruce’s pale eyes. “I think my parents would be proud of what you’re doing here. Fighting crime. Making the world better. I love the trapeze, but I’d rather do this. Here. With you.” Dick looked back up. "Honestly, I was just afraid Gotham would be boring. Boy, was I wrong about that!”

He grinned, as if having your house invaded by mass-murderers was a pro to living in Gotham. Bruce answered with an apprehensive smile.
“You’re sure?” Bruce looked wary, almost afraid, like Dick was going to take it all back and leave him in the dust as cruel revenge. “I know you have a life there. You’re the star of the show. You won’t miss that?”

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t miss it,” admitted Dick. “But I have you and Alfred. I don’t need to be a star—I just want to help people. And I think I can do that here. If—if you’d be okay with having me stay and help?”

Dick found himself being pulled into Bruce’s arms and lifted off the ground. His feet dangled in the air. Fine by him.

“Of course you can stay.” Bruce let out a shaky sigh. “Dick… about the other night… I’m—”

“It’s okay, Bruce. I get it.”

He wrapped his arms around Bruce’s neck and hung there, finally able to relax. He hadn’t realized how exhausting the uncertainty of the past three weeks had been until now, with his decision made and approved.

Bruce took a deep breath, as if getting ready to say more, but Dick dropped to the ground and gave him a lopsided smile.

“Really. We’re good.”

Bruce furrowed his brow in disbelief.

“I was right, though,” Dick added. “I did say I could help.”

“I never doubted your ability. It’s just not your responsibility. It’s not a risk you should need to take.”

“I’m good at it, though.” Dick looked up with a twinkling eye. “Did you see me with the Joker? I was like, Bam!” He replayed the staff moves. “Pow!”

“I saw. It was, honestly, quite impressive. But Dick…” Bruce shook his head and took a sharp intake of breath, as if from sudden pain, and then exhaled all at once. Fear and relief. “That was incredibly reckless, taking those four on by yourself. What if something had happened to you?”

Dick shrugged. “If you were back in Crime Alley that night… if you knew you could jump out and tear the gun away, even if it was risky, even reckless, you’d do it. Wouldn’t you?”

Bruce tightened his jaw. That meant yes. Dick knew enough of the pain to know that Bruce had imagined just that, again and again, just as Dick had imagined stopping Zucco or warning someone before the show.

“You’re my family now,” Dick said, digging in his heels. “And I’m not ever going to apologize for protecting you.”

Dick readied himself for a fight—I didn’t need protecting, or something—but Bruce reached out and drew Dick into another hug. He left Dick on the ground this time, though, and rustled his hair, holding him tight.

“We made quite the team, didn’t we?”

A team. Dick looked up and beamed. “We did! A dynamic duo.”

“Hh.” Bruce pushed Dick back away, resting his hands on his shoulders. “To be clear: this doesn’t...
mean you’re ready to join me on the streets.”

“But—”

“I trained for *nine years*, Dick. You’re well ahead of me when I was your age—you can do *incredible* things—but you have a lot to learn.”

“My dad always said, *Best way to learn is to do.*”

Bruce crossed his arms. Dick took that as a sign that he was about to be *really* annoying. “How did you learn to do that quadruple somersault of yours? Was that the first trick you tried?”

Dick saw exactly where this was going, and he didn’t like it one bit. He rolled his eyes and looked away. “No, I did the triple first.”

“And when you decided to try something new, was that just in a show one day, no net?”

“No,” Dick grumbled. “You always do the trick to the net first. And then to the catcher, with a net and lines.”

“There’s never a net out there. It’s life and death.” Bruce knelt to see him face to face. “You don’t have to apologize for protecting me. But that means I get to protect you, too. And I’m not going to put you in danger and lose you. So you’ll train here, in the Cave, until you’re ready.”

It was hard to argue with that. Still… “How long?”

“Until you’re ready.”

Dick scrunched his face at the vagueness of the answer. It had taken Bruce nine years… Dick could hardly think of spending *one* year impatiently waiting. If he had to wait nine? That was almost a lifetime.

“Then let’s start now,” he said, reaching over to the Computer. “I’ll learn fast! I learned all the mafia families, didn’t I? And Gotham’s history. *And* how to work the Bat-Computer, and everything else you’ve taught me. And that was all *after school*. It’s summer now.”

“*Now,*” Bruce said, blocking the computer’s controls with his gauntleted arm, “you’re going to get some sleep. We can start Monday.”

Dick chewed on that proposal. Monday. It was Saturday night. One day of waiting wouldn’t be so bad.

“*Fine,*” he said, with a dramatic sigh.

“There is *one* thing we can start with tonight, though,” Bruce said, standing.

“Yeah?”

Bruce turned and swept into a dark—darker—corner of the Batcave, and Dick followed behind him. It was a small place, with nothing but a desk and a candle and a bell. Bruce drew a match out, lit the candle, and set it between them.

“When I took all of this on,” Bruce explained, “I swore that I would dedicate my life to warring on criminals and restoring justice to Gotham. No one made me take that vow. And no one can make you do this, either. Taking on this fight can’t be something you do to impress me or to earn my approval. You have a home and family here—no matter what, you understand? No conditions. My
war doesn’t have to be yours. Honestly, Alfred would be happier if it weren’t. So I need you to think about this. Don’t take it lightly. Are you sure this is what you want to do?”

Dick knotted his brow together. Of course it was. He had no doubt of that at all. He raised a hand. “I swear it, with all my heart. I will help you and follow you, however I can, as long as I can.”

“Then I swear,” Bruce said, raising his own right hand, “to guide you and protect you in your quest for justice, however I can, as long as I can. Do you swear that we two will fight together against crime and corruption and never swerve from the path of righteousness?”

“I swear it.”

Batman lowered his hand and held it out to Dick. “Batman and Robin, huh?”

Dick took the black glove in his green grip and shook. “Batman and Robin. Forever.”

Chapter End Notes

Here ends Act IV. <3

The epilogue will go up tomorrow!
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Epilogue: Time to Fly

Bruce always slept poorly, but he usually had the luxury of sleeping in. At least he did on Sundays, when no one from Wayne Enterprises was calling.

He’d never been woken up just after dawn by a child jumping on his bed.

Chapter Notes

Dick's wake-up song is a line from "The Red, Red Robin" (a very cute, very Dick song and Dark Victory's explanation for his nickname), though his later manipulative line is sort of a dig at part of Dark Victory, as that's exactly what happens on Father's Day in that story. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bruce always slept poorly, but he usually had the luxury of sleeping in. At least he did on Sundays, when no one from Wayne Enterprises was calling.

He’d never been woken up just after dawn by a child jumping on his bed.

“Wake up, wake up, you sleepyhead,” Dick sang along with the jumping rhythm, “Get up, get up, get out of bed! Cheer up, cheer up, the sun is red—”

Bruce squeezed his eyes shut from the brightness of the morning and swiped a hand out to catch Dick’s ankle.

“Hey!” Dick shouted, toppling to the mattress with a thump.

“Hey yourself,” Bruce grumbled. He squinted his eyes open. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Dick scrambled up and pointed to Bruce’s side table, which had breakfast laid out on a tray.

“You have to eat fast,” Dick said. “Alfred says we have to leave in twenty minutes.”

“Leave?” Bruce had hoped that landing Joker back in Arkham had earned him a day’s rest. A morning’s, at least.

“If we want to get to the top of the mountain in time for lunch, we have to leave by seven. It’s already six-forty.”

Six-forty. Bruce pushed himself up in the bed and rubbed his hand across his forehead. “Mountain?”
Dick’s enthusiasm suddenly turned to uncharacteristic shyness. “Well. I know it’s not the same, but… Alfred said you always used to have a mountaintop picnic every Father’s Day.”

Father’s Day. Bruce’s whole body tightened. He swallowed hard and said, “That was… a long time ago, Dick.”

“Allfred said you might say that. But we’re going.” Dick got over his shyness and beamed with pride in his idea. “Maybe your dad isn’t here, but I am. And my dad isn’t here either. So I’m taking you.”

“I don’t really have a choice, do I?”

“Nope!” Dick grinned. “What, like you’re gonna make me spend my first Father’s Day without my dad moping around the house?”

Low blow. Bruce folded his arms. “You can’t manipulate me into having fun.”

Dick leaned forward with a conspiratorial gleam in his eye. “Wanna bet?” he whispered. “I’ll bet you a thousand dollars. It’s gonna be great.”

Before Bruce could respond, Dick vaulted off the footboard and threw an undershirt at Bruce. “Nineteen minutes.”

Elsewhere in Gotham, the Court is in session.

“It seems that Wayne identified all the same traits we saw. The Gray Son has become the Bat’s protegé.”

Bony fingers curl around crystal. “So it would seem. No matter. Tell Haly we will take the other acrobat in his place.”

“He is hardly of the same caliber.”

“True, but Haly cannot think he can play us for fools. He let the boy go, knowing our instructions full well.”

The mink fur wraps around a murderous neck. “He should pay.”

“His family has history with the Court. He will live. But he will give us what we asked.”

Another Owl speaks: “And if this other boy, this Raymond, is not qualified?”

“We will dispose of him and demand another. The Court does not give up.”

A masked head tilts. “And yet, we have given up on the child we were owed.”

“No. We have not given up. We will have the Gray Son of Gotham, in time.” Morning light streams in to the dark room, ushering the Owls away. “All in due time.”
On a hot summer evening, one year later, the two caped crusaders crouched on the high reaches of Wayne Tower, watching and listening and waiting against the twilight.

Bruce hadn’t been joking about the training. Dick had trained intensely through the summer and then after school all year, learning judo, aikido, escrima, capoeira… and those were only martial arts, and only some of the many. He probably could’ve passed a college exam in criminology by the time Bruce judged him well-educated enough for the field, and soon he was juggling four languages on top of all of it. Every so often, Bruce had let him come along in the Batmobile or keep watch on a rooftop at close quarters, but mostly he’d worked from the Cave, sparring and running evidence and assisting Batman on the comms.

It would’ve been a lot to do, but Dick preferred it that way. It was fun, learning from Bruce. And adjusting to life in Gotham was an ongoing process; the busier he was, the less restless he felt staying in one place, week in, week out. In time, he even got used to the rattling emptiness of the Manor, in part because he doggedly filled it with noise and laughter as much as he could. In time, it felt like home, and he found himself missing the circus less and less.

And eventually, he’d proved to Bruce that he was ready to risk the streets of Gotham. Their city.

After what felt like hours of waiting, Batman stirred. “Got an address on Penguin’s location,” he announced. “In the Bowery.”

He stood and drew his grapple gun, and Dick followed suit.

The wind picked up his yellow cape, flapping it behind him, about ten miles per hour. South-southwest. He’d account for that in the fall. “Time to fly?”

A smile spread below the line of the Bat’s cowl. “Time to fly, Robin.”

And together they took off, flying into the night.

THE END

Chapter End Notes

And that's that (I do actually have a couple deleted scenes, including Bruce and Clark first discussing Dick, which I'll probably post. Separately, I assume?). The canon story continues in The Gauntlet and Robin: Year One, while the Owls plotlines resolve in Robin War and Nightwing Rebirth.

Thank you so much for reading this labor of love and sharing in this journey. It's weird to set it down, but I don't think I'm done with Dick: I have portions of a Dick-meets-Jason dysfunctional-family holiday visit fic worked out, but I'm also toying with ideas of something World's Finest-ish with Dick and Bruce and Uncle Clark and/or Dick's early interactions with Talia. Not sure if this story extends into a series of all Dick-Robin stories or of all stories of the Batfamily growing. Happy to take feedback there! Either
way, this is the one closest to my heart, and it's meant so much to be able to share it. Thanks again for your reading, your kudos, your comments, and your bookmarks/recs. I live on tumblr at novangla. Keep your toes pointed, trust your catcher, and always smile for the crowd. <3

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