Robins and Other Flightless Birds

by Ionaperidot

Summary

It begins with another Bruce, looking around his cave and asking, “So where are the kids?”

Bruce has never thought about having a family before. But once the idea occurs to him, it’s hard to think about anything else.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
It begins with another Bruce, looking around his cave and asking, “So where are the kids?”

When he sends the other Bruce home, three days later, he knows all about the daughter and four sons he has in at least a dozen alternate universes.

It’s a bad idea. He can’t even imagine the kind of havoc it would wreak on his cover.

But in other universes, these are his kids. What if they need him?

It can’t hurt, Bruce reasons, to do some research.

Richard John Grayson is still with Haly’s Circus, having been adopted by fellow performers after the death of his parents. He is, by all accounts, happy, healthy, and an incredibly talented acrobat.

Jason Peter Todd doesn’t exist. The person does, but not the name. He was born prematurely while his mother was in Spain, and given up for adoption there; he’s never met his biological father, and is doing much better with a loving family in Europe than he would be on the streets of Gotham.

Timothy Jackson Drake graduated high school a year early and is currently taking a break to accompany his parents on an archeological dig. Their relationship has improved significantly in the last few years, and he seems happy to be spending time with them before pursuing his business degree.

Cassandra Cain’s father died a decade before she should have been conceived, and Bruce, of course, has never slept with Talia al Ghul. Knowing what he does now, he’ll put extra effort into avoiding it. No need to bring a child into that mess.

It’s settled then, Bruce tells himself. He isn’t needed for this, not in this universe. And it’s a relief, Bruce tells himself, because children would only be a complication.

Scarecrow breaks out of Arkham, and a newcomer commits a string of bank robberies. Bruce sets aside all thoughts of alternate realities and gets to work. But when things die down again—well. He and the other Batman developed technology to research and travel between different universes.

There is no way he’s not going to play with that.

Bruce finds himself thinking about those kids again. It can’t hurt to check, right? He sets his search parameters for worlds without a Batman, and starts at the beginning.

Sometimes Richard Grayson stays with the circus. Sometimes he’s adopted. Occasionally his parents are never even killed, and there are at least two worlds where his parents were never even in the circus. Then there are the worlds where, at some point, he disappears into thin air, and despite all his best efforts, Bruce can’t find a single trace. That’s…concerning, but there’s not much Bruce can do about it.

Tim and Jason tend to be doing all right, at least—things aren’t always great, but there’s nothing he feels justified in interfering with. Cassandra proves incredibly difficult to track down in a world where his usual resources don’t exist. On the rare occasions when he finds her, she’s either doing well or deep enough in the assassination game there’s not much he can do. For the most part, Damian Wayne is never born without Batman. There is one notable universe in which Bruce and Talia are happily married and raising Damian together in a completely normal life; this fills him with a sort of longing he doesn’t want to think about, and he moves on quickly.
Clearly, none of those kids need him. Time to forget about it. Focus on that new gang gaining traction in the East End.

Three weeks later Bruce finds himself studying worlds where he was Batman but isn’t anymore. That’s where he finds his Tim.

Timothy Jackson Drake, age 16, ward of state. Kidnapped, tortured, and brainwashed by the Joker at 13. When Batman came to rescue him, Tim killed first Batman, then the Joker, before Harley Quinn grabbed him and ran. Nothing for ten months. Then Poison Ivy broke out, and a week later an unconscious Tim Drake was left on the front steps of Arkham. He’s been there ever since.

Tim’s parents flew back from Haiti to see him when he was left at Arkham; they both died when the plane crashed. After it was revealed that his guardian and foster brother were Batman and Robin, Dick Grayson had vanished from the public eye, though Nightwing was still very active with the Titans. Jason had been resurrected, but hadn’t been able to confront Bruce before he died. He’d eventually teamed up with Cassandra, who was working as Black Bat in Hong Kong. Damian is still with Talia, who is currently in the States running Luthor’s company. They seem to be doing well, and no suspicious deaths have been reported.

Tim has not received a single visitor since his incarceration. Not even a fellow vigilante, not even a brother, sneaking over in the middle of the night.

Bruce barely thinks about it. This kid is his, and he’s suffering and alone. Bruce sends himself to the alternate reality, and he breaks into Arkham Asylum.

Tim has been in solitary confinement for the last 21 months, which at least makes him easy to find. He bears very little resemblance to the photos Bruce has seen in various worlds—skeleton thin and skeleton pale, with the slightly distorted features that come with exposure to Joker venom, though he shouldn’t have had exposure for nearly three years. His eyes are glassy and unfocused. Drugged, and given what Bruce knows about Arkham, likely drugged more heavily than is safe for a still-developing teenage body.

“Tim,” he says quietly.

The boy focuses, with some difficulty, on his face. “You’re dead,” he points out calmly, voice a little slurred.

“It’s okay,” Bruce says. “I’m here now, and I’m taking you home.”

As soon as Bruce touches him, Tim screams. Bruce clamps a hand over his mouth, and Tim responds by biting it. Bruce grits his teeth and holds on, using his free hand to restrain thrashing limbs.

It doesn’t take long for Tim to wear himself out. When he goes limp, that glassy look returning to his eyes, Bruce picks him up and returns to the cave.

It all seems like a great idea until he finds Alfred waiting at home.
“We are not equipped to care for this boy,” Alfred points out a few hours later.

Bruce doesn’t answer, because he doesn’t want to have to agree. He’d met Tim once—his universe’s Tim—at a gala about ten years ago, and helped him find his mom. Those five minutes were his only experience taking care of another person.

“You broke him out of Arkham,” Alfred says.

“Yes.”

“Where he was being kept because he murdered you.”

“Yes.”

“In an alternate reality.”

“Yes, Alfred,” Bruce says, exasperated. They have had this conversation four times in the last half hour. Alfred is probably hoping Bruce will see the error of his ways and take Tim back, but Bruce is pretty sure he can’t enter the same universe twice.

They’ve put Tim on a cot in the med bay. Ten minutes, a bruised rib, and a shallow head wound later, he’s moved into one of the containment units set up in case of exposure to unfamiliar drugs and poisons.

Bruce tries to speak to Tim three more times before realizing that he’s having a completely reasonable response to the sudden reappearance of a man that he, personally, killed years ago.

“You try.”

Alfred sighs. “What is the boy’s name?”

“Timothy Drake.”

“Our neighbor. Of course.”

He enters the cell with a bowl of soup. “Timothy?”

The boy looks up.

“Do you know who I am?”

“Alfred?”

“That’s right.”

“You’re not real,” Tim says. Bruce decides this is probably an improvement over “You’re dead.”
“Never mind about that now. Would you like some supper?”

Tim accepts the bowl. Then he throws it at the wall. Alfred leaves the mess; clean-up would require turning his back on Tim, who has, over the last three hours, proven himself dangerous and volatile.

They listen to Tim’s largely incomprehensible shouting for about ten minutes before Bruce gives up and activates the soundproofing. He’s made a copy of the records he stole from Arkham, so he and Alfred can review them together.

When Tim first arrived at Arkham, they’d tried to medicate for psychosis, since he seemed to be hallucinating. He’d become increasingly violent in his refusal to take the medicine, so they’d tried different medications, then different categories of medications, then different diagnoses. There was not, apparently, a single medication he would take without a struggle that left him, the nurses, or usually both injured.

He’d started having more injuries than could be explained by holding him down and forcing pills down his throat. They’d remembered that he was Robin, public enemy #2 for Gotham criminals, and moved him to solitary. They’d given up on giving him medication straightforwardly, and started drugging his food. He’d responded by refusing to eat.

“Well,” Bruce says, “at least now we know why he didn’t want the soup.”

Alfred doesn’t answer. Bruce checks on the boy, who is staring blankly at the wall, then goes back to reading.

“We are not equipped to care for this boy,” Alfred points out a few hours later.

Bruce doesn’t answer, because he doesn’t want to have to agree. He’d met Tim once—his universe’s Tim—at a gala about ten years ago, and helped him find his mom. Those five minutes were his only experience taking care of another person.

Arkham had stopped drugging his food. Tim had continued refusing to eat. After a guard broke Tim’s arm restraining him for the second time, the staff had given up on forcing Tim to eat or take medicine. He was still a minor, and social workers stopped by occasionally. Broken bones did not look good.

The most recent method of dealing with Tim had involved waiting, since he didn’t eat or sleep, however many days it took him to pass out from exhaustion or starvation, or occasionally dehydration, though the records indicated he was usually willing to drink water.

When he had passed out, they would strap him down, force feed him, hook him up to IV fluids, and inject any indicated drugs into his bloodstream. They’d return him to his room and the cycle would begin again.

“We can handle it,” Bruce says firmly, mostly to himself.

He adds, a few minutes later, “I’m going to donate a billion dollars to Arkham. Earmark it for personalized patient care. This is not acceptable.”

“I’ll call your lawyers in the morning,” Alfred says.

Bruce chooses to interpret this as forgiveness for spontaneously bringing a traumatized mini-Joker into their lives.

It may be a stretch.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

“Tim,” says someone outside the cell. Someone who sounds exactly like Bruce Wayne. Tim very carefully does not look up at him. It isn't fair. He feels more lucid than he has in ages, and yet this cannot possibly be happening.

Tim wakes up, and the room is brighter and more open than it should be. He closes his eyes and rolls over in case anyone is watching.

They’ve messed up. He feels good. Weak, but he’s always weak now. He doesn’t feel fuzzy and lost in his head, but he doesn’t feel about to collapse, either. The drugs have worn off too soon after his last “treatment,” so he’s not yet completely incapacitated by hunger and sleep deprivation.

He sorts through his memories for the clearest moments, looking for the last time he was lucid. Instead, he keeps pulling up nightmares. Alfred trying to trick him into taking drugs like the nurses do, so warm and real and Alfred it hurts. Bruce coming back, offering to take him home. Hurting Alfred.

He pushes all that aside, going back farther. Sore and sick and almost too weak to move, everything blurry, room spinning. Nurses talking. Vacation plans. What are you doing for the holidays? Just once, couldn’t Gotham get a nutjob who thought he was Santa instead of Satan?

Christmas. Last time Tim was lucid, it had been nearly Christmas. He probably won’t know how long it’s been until they drag him off again.

“Timothy. Do you know who I am?”

No. Don’t think about the past, and especially don’t think about dreams about the past. Murderers don’t get to go around feeling sorry for themselves because they can’t be with the people they murdered anymore.

He feels a lot better than he usually does lucid, but he’s still so tired. He falls asleep again, hoping not to dream about Bruce.

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Next time Tim wakes up, he’s hungry, less tired than he’s been in years, and very aware that he’s not in his cell. He opens his eyes slowly, hoping he’s not being monitored. Small room, well-lit and airy. Small cot in the corner—that’s where he is. Two white walls, meeting in the corner with the cot. Two glass walls. Not normal glass. One wall seems to have a drop-down behind the glass to create a normal wall. The other, he suspects, can be turned into a one-way mirror.

The room is terrifyingly familiar. He’d bet anything the glass is bulletproof, and built from that strange material the R&D department developed so throwing yourself against it won’t hurt as much. Glass with just a little bit of bounce. The solid walls aren’t padded, but he knows there’s a button outside that can change that.

Tim is in the Cave. Three years after everything, he’s in the Bat-cave.
He sits up abruptly—too abruptly, because the dizziness is overwhelming, and he has to put his head between his knees before he throws up.

“Tim,” says someone outside the cell. Someone who sounds exactly like Bruce Wayne. Tim very carefully does not look up at him. It isn’t fair. He feels more lucid than he has in ages, and yet this cannot possibly be happening.

“You’re up,” Not-Bruce continues. “You look like shit. We were waiting for the drugs to wear off before explaining everything, but we haven’t been able to get you to eat at all. It’s been about three days.”

Three days is nothing for Tim, but he feels hungry for the first time in at least five or six lucid periods.

“Do you think you could eat something?” Bruce—not Bruce—the voice asks, sounding hopeful.

Reluctantly, Tim opens his eyes and raises his head. Bruce, and a few steps behind him, Alfred, with a small bandage on his forehead. Hurting Alfred, Tim remembers. The nightmares were real. That’s why he couldn’t shake them when he was looking for lucidity. They were real.

He throws up after all, nothing but stomach bile that makes his throat burn.

“Perhaps some water first,” Alfred suggests.

“Um. Okay. Water.”

Bruce walks in slowly, holding a sealed water bottle. Alfred wouldn’t come that close to him, of course. Tim hurt Alfred. But why would Bruce risk it? Tim killed Bruce.

“I killed you,” he says when Bruce hands him the bottle. His voice is hoarse and painful from the vomit, and also from not speaking except to scream for years.

“Yeah, it’s a long story.”

Tim tries and fails to open the water bottle, hands shaking, even the muscles in his fingers atrophied. He hands it back to Bruce.

“I’ll explain everything, but do you think you could eat something first?”

He unscrews the bottle cap and hands it back to Tim. He’s different, Tim thinks. More awkward than he remembers, but lighter somehow, too.

“Laced?” he asks.

Bruce looks horrified. “I promise, Tim, as long as you’re here you’ll never be given any medication without your consent.”

Tim risks a drink of the water. It tastes clean.

“Unless you’re dying,” Bruce adds. “If you’re unconscious and you’re dying and you need medicine to survive but I can’t wait for you to wake up and give consent because if I do you might never wake up at all.”

He’s rambling, definitely nervous, and not handling his nerves like he usually does at all.

“Oh, I’m actually really hungry.”
Alfred must not be avoiding him after all, because he brings in the broth himself, and sits there until Tim is finished.

Tim falls asleep again before Bruce can explain anything.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Bruce spends a lot of time in the cave, guilty about leaving Tim alone, even though Tim doesn’t seem to want his company. When there’s no Bat-work to do, he plays with his multiverse tech. This is how he finds his Jason.

(When in doubt, do the exact same thing but more so.)

Bruce gives up and goes to work, leaving Tim alone in the cave.

He had alternated between unconscious and delirious for most of a week, woken up lucid, eaten a little, and then slept for the next day.

It was when he woke up again that things got difficult.

Bruce had explained that he was from a different universe, that he had found Tim and brought him home, that he had never had kids before. Tim had reacted…poorly. There had been the devastated “My parents love me in this world?” There had been the blank, cold, “You don’t even know me.” Then there had been the crying. Then the yelling.

Bruce had left when the migraine reached unprecedented levels. Tim will have calmed down by the time he gets home, and they can discuss this properly.

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Tim has not calmed down when Bruce gets home. Not enough to discuss anything, at least. Over the last eight hours he’s progressed from shouting to the silent treatment.

He was right—Bruce doesn’t even know him. He has no idea how to handle this. He’s fairly certain being ignored by an angry teenager is a standard part of being a parent. Keeping an angry teenager locked in a cage in the basement, however, is not.

When Tim is lucid, he’s mean. When he’s not, he’s either blank or violent. He hasn’t hurt Alfred, beyond that cut on the forehead the first night, but Bruce isn’t willing to take chances, and Tim isn’t willing to talk about it. So he stays in the cave.

He eats about half the food provided, ignores Alfred completely, and only says bitter, cruel, sarcastic things to Bruce, most of which he has no context for.

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This is, Alfred thinks, beginning to be a problem. It was one thing, keeping the boy locked up when he was violent and not quite lucid, but he’s been here for three weeks now. No wonder he’s angry with Bruce; he’s only traded one prison for another.

“I offer to let him out almost every day,” Bruce says when confronted. “He just has to agree to behave himself.”
“And what does he say when you offer?”

Bruce grimaces. “He talks about killing me.”

“I see. Perhaps I should try?”

But Tim refuses to so much as acknowledge Alfred’s presence.

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“The first time I pulled the trigger, a dumb little flag that said “bang!” shot out, so I had to go again. That time a spear came out. Went right into your chest. Little flag came straight through, popped out your back. All covered in blood and guts.”

As usual, Bruce takes the description of his counterpart’s murder stoically. Tim decides to up the ante.

“Not sure how brainwashed I really was at that point. Mostly I was pissed at you for letting it happen. Don’t think I would have hurt Dick or Babs.”

He looks up at Bruce’s face. Still calm. It doesn’t make sense. Bruce is supposed to hate him now.

“Of course,” he adds, “they never came for me at all. Probably would kill them now if I had the chance.”

“What about Alfred?”

This Bruce isn't quite like Tim’s, but he’s close enough for Tim to read. This is a test, and it’s a test he can’t afford to pass. Tim wants to say he’d never hurt Alfred, but he already has. Bruce rescued him, and the first thing he did was give Alfred a head wound.

He can’t let Bruce let him out of the cell. It isn't safe.

“I don’t know about Alfred,” he says finally, “but I’d do a much better job if I got a second chance at killing you. See, I’ve been thinking about it.”

He has been, though not the way he makes it sound. Ever since it happened he’s been seeing it happen again, his brain running away into nightmares constantly, worse and worse ways he could have killed his father.

It’s weirdly gratifying, how Bruce’s face goes a little white when he starts listing them.

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Bruce spends a lot of time in the cave, guilty about leaving Tim alone, even though Tim doesn’t seem to want his company. When there’s no Bat-work to do, he plays with his multiverse tech. This is how he finds his Jason.

In this world, after the Joker killed Jason, Bruce—as himself, not Batman—killed the Joker. He’s in Arkham now. Jason came back to life, but Talia never found him. He’s been alone, catatonic, on the streets to Gotham for two years.

He needs help.
Bruce approaches Jason carefully, remembering his first encounter with Tim.

He’s smaller than most Jasons at 17—two extra years of malnourishment. His clothes are falling apart, his hair is far too long, and the letter J is branded into his cheek. He walks with a slight limp and holds his left wrist oddly. As soon as Bruce catches his attention, Jason throws himself into his arms.

Immediately, Bruce feels a surge of protectiveness and affection. He’s never met this boy in his life, but Jason trusts and adores him.

“He’s dead too,” Tim says when Bruce returns to the cave and sets Jason on his feet. “Huh. Maybe we’re in hell.”

“Jason usually comes back,” Bruce tells him, distracted. Alfred is looking disapprovingly at the newest person in the cave.

Jason releases his grip on Bruce and goes to hug Alfred.

“Oh. Well. Hello, then.” Alfred looks to Bruce.

“Jason,” he mouths.

Alfred returns the hug gently. “Hello, Jason. It’s lovely to see you.”

He leads Jason over to the medical bay, and Bruce joins them there. Nothing pressing, but Bruce is concerned about that limp.

“Do we have clothes he can wear?”

“He should be able to share the outfits we ordered for Timothy.”

“Get something ready for him? We’re going to try and get cleaned up.”

Jason follows Bruce into the bathroom easily, and strips when told. He stands in the spray of the shower for a few minutes, staring blankly ahead, until Bruce helps him with soap and shampoo. He cuts Jason’s hair before helping him get dressed; the boy doesn’t even flinch at the scissors, and has no trouble with being manhandled into the clothing provided. Bruce does flinch, when he sees the autopsy scar, and when he realizes Jason’s ribs are slightly misshapen.

No Lazarus Pit to heal his mind after his resurrection. No Lazarus Pit to heal his body after the beating and explosion, either.

And Tim is still skin and bones. It might be time to bring in a professional.

After he puts Jason to bed—in a cot pulled into his room because otherwise Jason follows when he leaves—he calls Leslie.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

“He likes chili dogs,” Tim tells Bruce in a rare good mood, “and reading. Dick told me once.”

They go back to the park and get chili dogs. Bruce brings back a smoothie for Tim, since Leslie still has him on a liquid diet.

Chapter Notes

Quick, mid-week chapter. Bruce hangs with his kids. The author realizes Jason Todd is the only Batkid in this story who’s never killed someone.

“I’ve taken in a couple of boys,” Bruce had said. “I just need someone to look them over.”

He hadn’t, Leslie admits, technically been lying. But he certainly hadn’t prepared her for the situation.

The boy clinging to Bruce’s hand is half-starved and empty-eyed, and likely needs a psychiatrist, not a medical doctor. The boy Bruce is keeping locked in a cell looks like a famine victim who’s been exposed to Joker toxin. He’s laughing. It’s unsettling, and Leslie knows Bruce has the antidote.

“He isn’t usually like this,” Bruce says.

“I think you’re setting him off,” Bruce says.

“He hasn’t actually been exposed to it in three years,” Bruce says.

“I can’t give him an antidote because I promised I wouldn’t medicate him without his consent,” Bruce says.

“This is ridiculous,” Leslie says. “Give him the damn antidote. I don’t care what you promised.”

“He spent two years getting drugged by Arkham staff. I’m not breaking my promise.”

Leslie sighs, pinching the bridge of her nose. Bruce can be so stubborn.

“Fine. You can explain to me why you kidnapped a kid from Arkham while I look at the other one. What’s his name?”

“Jason,” Bruce says.

Jason lets himself be herded to a bed where Leslie can examine him, but the moment she touches him he jumps up and backs away, eyes wide and panicked.
Bruce approaches him slowly, speaking softly. “It’s all right, Jason. Leslie won’t hurt you. Don’t you remember Leslie? She’s a friend. No one’s going to hurt you, okay? You’re safe, Jason. I promise. You’re safe.”

Jason wraps his arms around Bruce, and Bruce hugs back, gently stroking his hair.

“You’ve only known him for a day?” Leslie asks.

“Yes,” he says without looking up, “but he’s known me for years.”

Leslie takes a few seconds to process this. “Sit down and tell me everything. We’ll try again when I understand exactly what you’ve dragged me into.”

Jason eventually lets himself be examined, though he clutches Bruce’s hand the entire time.

There’s not much she can do about the limp. She could re-break and properly set his wrist, but Bruce agrees it’s not worth the pain and fear it would cause, the hassle of it even under general anesthesia in his current condition. The poorly-healed ribs aren’t harming or hindering him in any way, which is frankly a miracle—it amazes her that he doesn’t have a punctured lung. She and Alfred work out a meal plan.

Tim, once he stops laughing, speaks to her with a familiarity that lends credence to Bruce’s ridiculous story. He will not, however, let her anywhere near him. He is given a scale, and calls out the number while she stands at a safe distance. He marks his height on the wall with a pencil, then retreats while she measures. He won’t let her do anything else.

Leslie and Alfred develop another meal plan. Leslie fails to talk Bruce and Tim into a Joker antidote. The whole thing is a terrible mess.

It takes Bruce three weeks and a set of fake prints to get custody of Jason Todd. The social workers are hesitant at first, but Jason’s refusal to be separated from Bruce for even a moment is helpful.

He can’t do anything about Tim—not until he can be trusted to cooperate with a cover story.

It’s nice to be able to take Jason out in public. They go shopping. They go to the park.

“He likes chili dogs,” Tim tells Bruce in a rare good mood, “and reading. Dick told me once.”

They go back to the park and get chili dogs. Bruce brings back a smoothie for Tim, since Leslie still has him on a liquid diet.

(“His stomach isn't used to food anymore, Bruce. We have to take it slow, or he’ll just make himself sick.”

“Sick?”

“Well, more sick.”)

They go to the library. They go to the bookstore. A newspaper runs the headline “Wayne Takes in Retarded Teen—Possible Tax Benefits?” and Bruce sues.

Jason’s head still feels like that shimmer on the horizon on a too-hot day (that’s a good metaphor—he
should tell Dad), and everything still hurts, and the thoughts still refuse to stay in his head (he lets go of the idea “nice metaphor,” not quite sure what it means). But it’s okay. His dad came for him. He’s home.

He has the big pink book in his lap, and he’s telling Jason a story. Jason can’t really focus on the story, but he likes listening to his dad’s voice. Everything’s okay now. He’s home.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Bruce is suddenly reminded that he’s dealing with a traumatized sixteen year old boy who hasn’t had meaningful human interaction in over three years and has lost everyone he ever loved.

Bruce has been feeling guilty, lately, that he doesn’t love Tim the way he does Jason. It’s difficult, because Jason is sweet and affectionate and trusting, while Tim is angry and violent and enjoys providing itemized lists of all the most horrific things he did with Harley. (Bruce never thought he’d be grateful to Poison Ivy, of all people, but he’s pretty sure she’s the one who got Tim away from Harley.) Tim’s new favorite thing to do is wait until Jason, who has fairly terrible spatial awareness, comes close to his cell, then shout and bang on the walls to startle him.

Still, Bruce grabbed this kid and pulled him clear into another dimension, and now it’s his job to take care of him. So he’s set up a system where he and Alfred each spend an hour of one-on-one time with Tim daily.

It isn’t going great, exactly. Unmedicated, Tim spends a lot of time laughing hysterically, talking to himself, and generally acting like the lunatic he technically is. Bruce really wishes he hadn’t promised not to medicate him. The quantity may have been excessive, but clearly the drugs Arkham used were helping with something.

Lucid, Tim steadfastly ignores Alfred, and works hard to upset Bruce as much as possible.

He’s mercifully quiet today, working at a piece of loose thread at his sleeve with a singleminded focus. Bruce sits near the glass walls, reviewing a financial report. He knows he should probably be trying to connect with Tim, but he doesn’t want to deal with more yelling and insults and graphic details of his own death.

“Why don’t you just put me back where you found me?” Tim asks abruptly.

“I can’t go back to the same world twice.”

“Oh.”

Bruce is suddenly reminded that he’s dealing with a traumatized sixteen year old boy who hasn’t had meaningful human interaction in over three years and has lost everyone he ever loved.

He didn’t even mean it like that. Not that he hasn’t wished, some days, that he could just send Tim home and be done with it. But he hadn’t meant—he hadn’t thought. He’d just answered the question. And now he has to fix this.

Bruce sets aside his paperwork and goes to the door.

“Can I come in?”

“It’s your cage,” Tim points out sullenly, eyes fixed firmly on the loose thread. Bruce lets himself in, sitting carefully at the opposite end of the cot.
“Tim.”

“It’s stupid enough,” he says slowly, “keeping me here in the first place. You aren’t obligated to pretend you don’t hate me.”

“Tim,” Bruce says again.

“I murdered you, Bruce.”

“If that Bruce was here right now, he would forgive you in a heartbeat.”

Tim finally looks up at him, eyes shining, and Bruce knows that, for once in his life, he’s said the right thing.

“But I’m not that Bruce. I don’t know you. I don’t hate you. I just wish you would let me help you.”

“How?” Tim asks warily.

Bruce considers the many possible answers to this question before choosing a priority. “You’ve never been given an antidote for the Joker venom. That doesn’t just wear off, Tim. It needs to be treated. You’ve had it in your system, doing things, for three years.”

“Okay,” Tim says.

“Okay?” Bruce repeats. He really didn’t expect it to be that easy.

“I want to watch. Not from in here. Out there, where I can see you’re doing exactly what you say you’re doing.”

“That’s very reasonable. Would you like to start now?”

“No. You won’t have time to finish tonight. It has to be all in one day. So I know you’re not doing anything when I’m asleep. You can draw the blood right away in the morning; your equipment is the same as ours, so it should only take about an hour to run whatever tests you need. And you have to keep Alfred and Jason out of the cave while I’m not locked up. I don’t want to hurt them.”

Bruce decides not to question his sudden concern for the wellbeing of others. “All right. We’ll start in the morning.”

“Yeah. Look, I know you’re still supposed to stay with me for sixteen minutes, but can you go away now?”

“Okay, Tim,” Bruce says, feeling oddly fond. He thinks there might be a good kid somewhere beneath all that chaos. They just have to dig him out.

-Alfred is in charge of Jason for the day. He’s often in charge of Jason while Bruce is at work, at his day job and his night job. He doesn’t mind this; Jason is, at the very least, an easier child than Bruce was—quiet, cooperative, and openly affectionate. The problem is that today, Bruce is in the house, and Jason seems to know this. He is not pleased to be locked out of the cave while Bruce is down there.

He looks up from his work to find that Jason has wandered off, for the sixth time today. He goes to the grandfather clock to collect him, grateful that Jason doesn’t seem able to open it. Tim isn’t locked away today, and Tim makes a sport of frightening Jason.
“Would you like to read a book?” Alfred offers.

Jason looks longingly back at the clock.

“A puzzle, perhaps. Or would you like to watch something?”

Jason tugs his hand away from Alfred and walks toward the clock again. Alfred sighs.

“Your father is busy right now, and it isn’t safe for you downstairs.”

Jason looks back at him imploringly, and Alfred abandons all hope of a productive day.

“Very well then. We’ll sit here and wait.”

Jason drops himself happily onto the carpet. Alfred sighs again.

- 

Tim sticks close to Bruce throughout the process of testing his blood and mixing the appropriate antidote.

Bruce is amazed at how sane Tim is, considering the percentage of his bloodstream made up of Joker venom. When the stuff is airborne, it can take months to dissipate, and the victim often doesn’t live that long. Injections are less frequent, at least in this reality, but have no discernible half life. Unlike the airborne version, it’s never been officially listed as a cause of death, but victims usually commit suicide within eighteen months. Bruce had once administered an antidote two years out; the patient had spent the next six years fully catatonic before dying of natural causes. And he had a much lower blood-venom content than Tim.

Bruce feels another swell of fondness at the strength, the determination of this kid. He also plans a much more thorough examination of the drugs administered at Arkham, which apparently were actually good for something; maybe the alarmingly high doses were working to neutralize the toxin in his system.

He’s going to be so much more careful with Tim than he was with that two-year victim a decade ago. He’s not going to lose the kid over this, not when he had to talk him into an antidote in the first place. Briefly, he wonders if it’s worth the risk, but he knows he can make Tim better, as long as he’s smart about it.

They’ve developed the antidote very carefully for Tim’s specific blood work. They’ll inject several small doses of it over a period of weeks.

Tim is lucid and engaged and there’s almost no tension between them. Everything is going well. Then Bruce administers the antidote, after eight and a half hours of hard work, and Tim screams.

He screams like someone drove hot pokers into his eyes. He screams like someone is pulling his heart from his chest. He screams like he’s dying, and Bruce is killing him.

Bruce realizes he’s about to have a seizure, and runs to the cell for a pillow to put beneath his head. When he gets back, Alfred and Jason are in the cave, where Jason was very specifically not supposed to come today.

He’ll worry about that later. Tim.

When the seizure ends, he picks Tim up, repressing a shudder at the feeling that always comes with
holding something near death. It’s not any worse than it usually is for Tim—he is three inches taller and fifty pounds lighter than he was when first taken by the Joker, and touching him is always like touching a corpse.

Tim is only barely conscious, but he clings to Bruce’s neck when Bruce tries to set him down on a cot, so Bruce lies down with him, stroking his hair until he passes out completely.

Alfred leads a reluctant Jason away. When he’s sure Tim is out, Bruce joins them on the other side of the cave.

“He wasn’t supposed to be down here,” Bruce says, watching as Jason plays with a pile of Batarangs. Those are sharp, and he wants to make him stop.

“It turns out,” Alfred says, “that Jason does, in fact, know how to enter the cave. He moved very quickly when Timothy screamed.”

“Oh,” Bruce says. Since Jason’s habit, whenever he wants to enter the cave, has been to stand at the clock and wait to be let in, they had assumed Jason could not let himself in.

“This is going to be a problem, isn't it?”

He tries to take the Batarang from Jason’s hand, and Jason steps back, pulling the extremely sharp weapon close.

“Jason,” he says, “that’s dangerous. It’s not a toy. We can’t play with that.”

Jason glares up at him, and Bruce, who has spent so much time in the last two days remembering how much of a child Tim is, remembers suddenly how much of child Jason isn’t. He’s seventeen years old, and he’s spent several of those years taking care of himself on the streets of Gotham. He is, because a great many versions of Bruce are idiots, a well-trained, highly competent vigilante.

Bruce still wants him to put down the damn Batarang before he cuts himself on it.

“Are you hungry, Jason?” he tries. “Have you had dinner yet?”

Jason looks up, interested, and Alfred takes the opportunity to snatch the weapon away.

“Come on, let’s go find something to eat while Alfred looks after Tim.”

Jason takes Bruce’s hand and lets himself be led back into the manor. He’s been doing much better than Tim on the dietary front. If his weight gain stays on track, Leslie says, he might actually be healthy enough to get in a small growth spurt before his body finishes developing. Tim, on the other hand, is still so weak he’d had to stop working and sit down about three times an hour today.

Bruce doesn’t know how he’s going to live with himself if Tim doesn’t wake up.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Tim wakes up.

Tim does wake up, hours later, when Jason is in bed and Bruce is in the cave, unwilling to go on patrol until he knows Tim is all right.

“B?” Tim calls from across the cave. Bruce rushes over.

“Hey, Tim. How are you feeling?”

“Like I died. Why aren’t I in the cell?”

“You had a seizure.”

“Oh. I don’t think the antidote worked.”

“I am so sorry, Tim.”

“Can I go to bed now?”

“Sure, Tim.”

He’s even shakier than usual, and Bruce half-carries him to his cell.

“We’ll try again in the morning,” Tim mumbles, and then he’s out again.

Bruce is absolutely not going to try again in the morning. Not after that. He needs to do so much more research.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

“You’re so stupid, Bruce. You get jealous that all the other Bruces have families, so you go and adopt two insane murderers and a braindead Jason.”

Bruce is absolutely not even looking this time. He’s using the multiverse tech to learn everything he can about every version of Joker venom that’s ever existed. This whole Court of Owls business is a completely accidental discovery. But it’s a discovery he’s made, and now he has to deal with it.

All of those universes where Bruce lost track of Dick Grayson after a certain age—all of those universes contain a Dick who was taken by the Court of Owls. That’s dozens of tortured children who should have been his sons. He wants to save them all but knows that he can’t—more than two versions of the same person in the same universe for an extended period of time risks serious multiverse destabilization.

He chooses one mostly at random, a fourteen year old Talon from a world where young Bruce Wayne was killed in the alley with his parents.

Richard John Grayson, Talon, Gray Son of Gotham, has been with the Court for six years. He is small, with the white-gray skin of a corpse, slitted yellow eyes, and prominent vessels on every visible patch of skin. He leads Brue on a chase all over Gotham, and struggles furiously when finally caught.

“Richard Grayson!” Bruce snaps when he bites, because somehow he’s become a dad.

Dick stops struggling instantly. Gray Son of Gotham, Bruce remembers. Knowing to call him that probably indicates to Dick that a person should be regarded as an authority figure.

Bruce releases his grip slowly, and instead offers a hand, which Dick takes after only a moment of hesitation.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” Bruce promises.

Dick doesn’t react.

-“Great,” says Tim when Bruce returns to the cave. “What’s wrong with this one?”

Bruce turns to give Tim a better view.

“Dick?”

“Yes,” Bruce says.

“You are deeply stupid, B.”

Jason comes forward when he hears Dick’s name, then backs up hastily when he sees Dick’s face,
putting him inches from the wall of Tim’s cell. Tim, for once, doesn’t take advantage of the opportunity to startle him.

Bruce takes Dick to the medbay, where he sits, tense but cooperative, while Alfred helps to look him over. Bruce takes a blood sample; he wants to know exactly how undead the kid is. Dick showers efficiently when taken to the bathroom, and dresses in the too-large pajamas provided. They put him in a cell a few feet from Tim for now, because he’s an assassin, and not a terribly communicative one.

Tim has been laughing for twenty minutes; Jason fled the cave the moment he started. Bruce convinces Alfred to go to bed early, then takes Jason upstairs. After the usual ordeal—let Jason undress himself, help Jason shower, redress, and brush his teeth, then stay in his own bed a few feet away until he’s sure Jason is asleep—he goes back to the cave. Tim, as expected, has worn himself out, and is now sitting at his glass wall, watching Dick intently.

“Tim?”

“I want an antidote.”

“I’m working on it,” Bruce promises. “Dick was…an unexpected detour.”

“You’re so stupid, Bruce,” Tim says. “You get jealous that all the other Bruces have families, so you go and adopt two insane murderers and a braindead Jason.”

“That’s not really how it happened.”

“Whatever. You said you’d find me an antidote, and instead you ran off to find a baby zombie version of my big brother. You owe me.”

Bruce sighs. Tim is always doing this. It’s never “can I have something,” or even “I want something.” Anything he asks for is preceded by a failure of Bruce’s, as if he has to earn everything he has by virtue of having been hurt in the past. There are clearly serious parental failures in his history, many of them likely Bruce’s.

“What do you want, Tim?”

“I want to read your cool research on the multiverse.”

“You could have just asked.”

He prints off the first file he sees on the computer, which happens to be a compilation of information about Talons and the Court of Owls, and drops it in Tim’s cell before going to check on his newest kid.

Dick is curled beneath his cot with an arm thrown over his face. When Bruce approaches, he looks up at him through narrowed yellow eyes, and Bruce remembers reading about a light sensitivity. He switches off all the lights in the cell, and Dick ventures slowly out of his hiding place. By the time Bruce leaves for patrol, Dick has roamed across the entire cell at least six times, and shows no sign of stopping. When Bruce returns, he’s sprawled across the floor in the exact center of the room, fast asleep.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Bruce watches in horror as Tim lines up at least a triple dose of the antidote they’d developed together and stabs the needle into his neck.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tim watches Dick as he walks the walls of his cell, always stopping and turning around a few feet from the door. He’s not sure it is Dick, really—Tim’s not as optimistic as Bruce about these things. It might just be a Talon that used to be Dick. It probably doesn’t matter. Bruce is new at this. He doesn’t have to miss Dick the way Tim does.

Some days he hates himself for killing Bruce. Some days he hates Bruce for not finding him before he reached that point. Most days he knows he’s a monster, but some days he lets himself believe he could be a part of this weird little family that someone else’s Bruce is building.

He doesn’t trust this Bruce, not really, but he knows he wouldn’t hurt him on purpose. Bruce’s life is just so different from Tim’s, Tim can’t count on him not to make stupid mistakes because he doesn’t understand.

Tim hates feeling like this. It’s new—he was too drugged at Arkham to feel much of anything, and he was getting more Joker venom pumped into his system so frequently, before, that he never had a chance to be freaked out by what it was doing to him.

He needs an antidote. So he trusted Bruce to do that, as long as he did it under careful supervision. And it worked, he thinks, only now Bruce is chickening out, and Tim shouldn’t have trusted him with this after all. He’s going to have to take matters into his own hands. As usual.

Bruce doesn’t know how other versions of himself manage to take care of five children. These three are completely overwhelming. Granted, most versions of these three children don’t have these special needs.

He’s trying to develop an antidote for Tim, but it has to be perfect, and he’s terrified of hurting the kid again.

Every time he thinks he might be making progress, he gets distracted by Jason, who needs attention, which reminds him that children in general need attention, even when they don’t seek it out like Jason does.

So he goes to check on Dick, who has not yet communicated with any of them except to hiss when someone comes too close, and who won’t leave the cell even when the door is left open for hours on end. At least he’s eating.

Bruce knows he should call Leslie again, but he doesn’t want to deal with her judgment. He knows he should do more evaluation of Dick’s blood (not fully human, according to preliminary testing),
but he doesn’t have time, not when Tim needs him and Jason needs him and there’s an entire city to save.

He’s taking a break today, and focusing on an old case instead. Alfred has gone shopping, and Jason is occupying himself quietly at a safe distance from Dick and Tim.

Bruce is so caught up in his work, it takes a few minutes to realize Tim has started screaming. Dick is under his cot again, hands clamped over his ears. Jason is wearing Bruce’s noise-cancelling cowl, which he found last week and has been carrying around ever since. Bruce gets a picture of Jason in the cowl before activating the soundproofing in Tim’s cell—there’s no point in doing anything else. He won’t respond, or won’t respond well, when he’s in the middle of an episode. Bruce has tried plenty of times before.

Jason is fine, adorable in the too-large bat ears. Bruce goes to check on Dick, who’s displayed a strong aversion to loud noises since arriving, similar to his aversion to bright lights. Dick uncovers his ears after a few minutes, but cannot be coaxed out from under the bed. After a while, Dick’s gaze fixes on something behind Bruce’s shoulder, and he turns around to investigate.

Tim is pounding on the glass and shouting, if Bruce is reading his lips correctly, “Unmute me, you asshole!”

The episode is over, then. Bruce turns the sound back on and goes to the glass wall.

“I want the antidote,” he says.

“Tim, I’m doing everything I can to—”

“I’m crazy, Bruce, not stupid. No one has ever lived this long like this. All of my energy goes to my immune system for fighting off the worst effects of the venom, which is the only reason I haven’t killed myself like the others, but it’s also the reason I can’t put on any weight and am probably going to die of starvation within the year.”

He looks small and pathetic and Bruce opens the door, intending to comfort him, to make promises he really hopes he can keep.

Tim ducks around him, slams the door, and locks Bruce in. Then he goes to the work station. Bruce watches in horror as Tim lines up at least a triple dose of the antidote they’d developed together and stabs the needle into his neck.

“I’d rather not die at all,” he tells Bruce, “but I will not die with the Joker in my blood.”

Then he passes out.

There’s no way to open the cell from the inside—Bruce had very specifically avoided designing a loophole for himself, for Alfred’s safety. Dick is locked up too, and Tim is unconscious. (Bruce can’t actually see him breathing; he hopes he’s unconscious.) Jason is still wearing the noise cancelling cowl, and despite all his best efforts, Bruce is unable to catch his attention. He’s locked in Tim’s cell for three hours, growing increasingly frantic, before Alfred returns home and lets him out.

Tim is unconscious, not dead, but twenty four hours later he still hasn’t woken up.

Bruce throws all his energy into Jason, the one kid he has some idea how to take care of. They go to the library, where they’re becoming something of a fixture—Jason lacks the awareness to actually read, but enjoys taking books off the shelf and putting them back, occasionally bringing something to show Bruce. He seems comfortable with the librarians, which probably means he knew them in his
own world.

After the library they go to the park for a while, and then get ice cream. Bruce brings back hot chocolate for Dick, who hates the cold.

When they get home, Tim is still asleep, small and pale, hooked up to his IV. Dick accepts his hot chocolate happily, and retreats into a corner clutching the cup. Bruce grabs him another quilt before taking Jason upstairs to watch a movie.

Bruce returns to the cave when Jason is asleep. Dick, who is at least semi-nocturnal, is walking the borders of his cell, as he does every night, with the new quilt draped over his shoulders. He doesn’t think the kid is looking for a way out; Tim, reading the data Bruce collected, had reported Dick probably spent most of his time not assassinating locked in a coffin. A fucking coffin.

He seems to enjoy having the space to roam.

Tim’s Joker-twisted face looks very slightly different than it did a few hours ago—maybe a sign that the antidote is working, or maybe just wishful thinking. Bruce suits up for a quick drug dust before continuing his current line of research.

Chapter End Notes

Extra mid-week update because I had an awesome night!
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Leslie thinks she knows what to expect this time. Of course, Bruce couldn’t have bothered to mention a third boy.

Jason is in the cave. He’s wearing one of Dad’s dumb hats, the one that makes the noises go away. It makes his head hurt a little less, and it makes it a little easier to think. The thoughts still go running out of his head as soon as he notices them, but it helps.

The weird little monster that looks like Dickie is sleeping on the floor in the middle of his box. Dad and Alfred are upstairs. The scary boy, he notices suddenly, is staring at him. His mouth is moving. Slowly, Jason takes off the quiet hat.

“Get Bruce, Jason,” the scary boy says. “Get Bruce.”

He means Dad, Jason realizes. Jason used to call Dad Bruce too, but not since he was little. He puts the hat back on and goes upstairs.

- 

Everything hurts. Everything hurts even more than usual, except for a completely pain-free area radiating from his neck on the right side. Tim stays in bed with his eyes shut, gathering his thoughts. Last time he was lucid—shouting at Bruce, escaping into the cave, administering a faulty antidote.

The spot that doesn’t hurt, he realizes, is where he injected. He wonders for a moment if the rest of the pain is actually worse than usual, or if the small relief is just making it feel that way. It’s impossible to tell for sure.

He opens his eyes slowly. The only other person in sight is Jason, wearing Bruce’s cowl. Tim shouts at him a few times, but Jason ignores him. Maybe Bruce soundproofed the cell again?

No. They’ve got him hooked up to an IV line. That means he’s been out for a while. They’ll want to know when he wakes up.

Tim sits up slowly, painfully, careful not to disturb the IV, and settles in to wait. Eventually Jason will notice him, or someone else will come down to the cave.

- 

Bruce is in his office, working, when Jason starts tugging on his sleeve.

“Hi, Jason.”

He’s still wearing that cowl. It’s still adorable. Bruce pulls it off anyway, to make himself heard.

“I can’t play right now. I have work to do. Later, all right?”

Jason tugs again.
“Should we go find Alfred? I’m sure he has something fun for you to do.”

Bruce is busy, and stressed, in a state of near panic for Tim. He intends to hand Jason off as soon as possible, and is somewhat irritated to find himself dragged down to the cave.

“Hey, B.”

Tim. Tim’s awake. Bruce forgets all about Jason and the company. He throws open the door and goes to check on his son.

Talon takes his favorite blanket and goes to hide under the bed. The people are yelling again. He’s pretty sure he isn’t going to be told to kill either one of them, so it’s okay to wrap the blanket around his eyes and ears and be warm and alone.

He’s never had a blanket before. In this place he has six. Sometimes they give him a new one for no reason at all, and they’ve never taken one away. His coffin is see-through, and big enough to walk around in, and they give him food like he’s a person. He never gets ordered to fight or kill people here, only to take a shower sometimes. Talon loves showers, but he’s careful not to enjoy them too much, in case they don’t let him anymore.

It’s too nice here. Sometimes Talon thinks he shouldn’t have come, but no one has taken him back and punished him yet, and the man called him Gray Son, so he must be an Owl. (Now that he is here the man calls him Dick and gives him blankets and tries to trick him into coming out of the coffin when he doesn’t have a job to do.)

There’s only one other Talon here. At least, he thinks he’s a Talon, because he lives in a big glass coffin too, but he’s very loud, and he yells at the Owls all the time, and he never gets punished. (When the Owls are gone he calls Talon Dickie and tells him stories about things that never happened, and looks at him with sad, sad eyes and a smiling face.)

So maybe he’s not a Talon. Maybe he’s an Owl who was so bad, they had to lock him up like a Talon. Or maybe he’s a new Talon they haven’t Trained yet.

There are two Owls—the old one and the one in charge. And there’s the boy. The boy is even more confusing than the other Talon. He’s quiet and good like a Talon, but he never goes into a coffin, and he wears the same mask as the head Owl, but he never goes outside wearing it like the Owl. The Owls are careful and nice to him. Of course, sometimes the Owls are careful and nice to Talon and the other maybe-Talon, too.

Talon looks out from under his blanket when the yelling stops. The old Owl and the boy are gone. The maybe-Talon is out of his coffin, and the Owl is injecting him with something. He collapses.

Definitely a new Talon, he decides. They haven’t finished turning him into a Talon yet, and that’s why he’s so loud. The Owl carries him back to the coffin and sticks another needle into his arm. This one he leaves there.

Talon returns to the safety of his blanket, glad that things are finally starting to make sense again.

Bruce leaves work early when he gets the call from Alfred that Tim is awake again. They’d had a huge fight when he’d woken up a few days ago, one that sent Dick under his cot and Jason upstairs despite the noise-cancelling cowl.
Tim had insisted that he felt better, and that the antidote had only knocked him out, so there was no reason not to keep using it. And Bruce had to admit his features were slightly less distorted. In the end Bruce had drawn some blood to test and administered another half dose. Tim had still passed out.

When Bruce gets home, Tim is groggy but pleased. The blood test has finished, and his toxin levels have dropped by about three percent since the first antidote several weeks ago.

“Half a dose once a week,” Bruce offers, “with Leslie’s permission.”

“A full dose once a week,” Tim counters.

Bruce sighs. “We’ll ask Leslie.”

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Leslie thinks she knows what to expect this time. Of course, Bruce couldn’t have bothered to mention a third boy.

This one looks desperately ill, though he acts fairly healthy, with none of the unsteadiness the other two have exhibited. He will not, however, let anyone approach. Bruce calls him Dick, but he doesn’t react to the name at all. He doesn’t speak.

Leslie has to settle for looking at the blood Bruce has drawn. No wonder the boy looks ill—it’s a miracle he’s alive at all. No one has blood like this.

“Call me as soon as he warms up to you, Bruce. I want to do a full examination. For now we’ll have to let him be; I have no idea what to do with this blood.”

Jason she pronounces physically healthy, finally. Tim…well. He’s gained less than ten pounds since being rescued from Arkham. On the bright side, he allows her to actually examine him this time.

“You’re doing very well,” she says.

Tim shudders when she touches his ribs. They’re much, much too close to the surface. They feel like they’ll burst out of his skin at any moment.

“Are you all right?” she checks.

Tim nods, face white.

“We’re almost done here. I want you to avoid solid food until you’ve gained at least ten more pounds, all right?”

He nods again and she steps back, satisfied she’s checked everything important enough to cause Tim this much discomfort.

“I’m going to increase your daily calorie intake, all right? Just do the best you can on that. And the IV line is a good idea. I want that running constantly when you’re unconscious.”

“So I can keep taking the antidote?”

It’s the first time he’s spoken since agreeing to let her examine him.

“Half a dose once a week. You can increase to a full dose when you’ve gained twenty pounds. Okay?”
He nods. She turns to Bruce.

“Do not even think about bringing another child into this house until Dick trusts you and Tim is healthy.”

Bruce promises. Leslie doesn’t trust him for a moment.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

“Do you know who I am, Talon?”

“Grandmaster,” Dick whispers. It’s the first time Bruce has heard his voice.

“I hate that stupid cowl,” Tim says.

Jason doesn’t answer, not that he would even if he wasn’t wearing Bruce’s weird and probably completely pointless soundproof cowl. Tim can’t get his attention at all, no matter what he tries.

He knows Bruce thinks he’s being mean. Like he would ever pick on Jason Todd without an ulterior motive. But Bruce doesn’t know him. Bruce doesn’t know either of them, and he doesn’t care, which is why he’s not even trying to fix Jason’s brain. Someone has to do the dirty work, and the dirty work starts with research.

Tim is asking the important questions. What stimuli does Jason respond to? How does he process information? How much information can he retain, and for how long? Being separated from Jason by a wall of bulletproof glass can make this research difficult.

Jason reacts to loud noises. It doesn’t matter what the noises are—he jumps the same way if Tim yells something nice, yells something really mean, or just bangs on the wall. So. Reaction: okay.

Processing: not so much. Retention is a little tricky. Every time he comes down to the cave, he starts out by staying far away from Tim’s cell, but he almost always forgets and comes too close eventually.

But now Tim can’t run any more tests because he never sees Jason without the stupid noise-cancelling cowl. Sound and touch are the only stimuli Jason responds to reliably, and Tim is in no position to touch him.

It’s not about being lonely, he tells himself firmly, or about wanting Jason’s attention like when he was little and Jason was Robin, or anything dumb like that. He just wants to keep doing his research. So he can fix Jason’s brain. Because Jason deserves to have his brain fixed and be normal again. He’s not a murderer like Tim. He’s supposed to be okay.

“You could fix him,” Tim says idly, watching as Jason arranges a stack of batarangs on the floor, cowl in place.

He’s woken up only six hours after his last injection of antidote, and Bruce is running his latest blood work. He sets it aside for a moment.

“‘I’m not putting anyone in a Lazarus Pit.’”

“Like that’s the only way. You got a Justice League in this world?”

“Yes.”
“But you’re not a part of it.”

“Why would I be a part of it?” Bruce asks.

“Never mind. The point is, the Martian Manhunter could fix Jason’s brain.”

“No,” Bruce says flatly. He goes back to examining Tim’s blood. Tim goes back to watching Jason. Jason continues spreading the batarangs in some indiscernible pattern.

Almost as soon as Leslie pronounced him at a healthy weight, Jason shot up six inches practically overnight. He’s too thin again now, but in the safe, gangly way that teenagers often are. He’s fine. Bruce has other problems to solve.

Such as Dick’s new tendency to sit inches from his open cell door, watching them all intently, but never actually crossing the threshold. He’s not a prisoner; why won’t he just come out?

Tim has gained the ten pounds necessary to begin on gentle solids. He’s living primarily on rice at the moment, and the Joker Venom in his system has come down by a total of nine percent. Jason is doing well, as he always is, and there is no pressing criminal activity. It’s time to work with Dick in earnest.

Bruce enters the cell, closing the door behind him. He’s careful not to lock it. He sits on the floor several feet away, waiting to see what Dick will do.

Dick is buried beneath several quilts under the cot, as he usually is when sleeping during the day. (At night he likes to be spread out across the floor, every limb stretched out but none touching the wall—a response to the coffin, Bruce assumes.) The lights are off and the cave is quiet, so he should feel safe to come out, Bruce’s presence aside.

He emerges slowly, a mass of tangled black hair above narrowed yellow eyes.

“Hello, Dick,” Bruce says.

He doesn’t react at all. It’s like he hasn’t even heard him, though Bruce knows he has incredibly sensitive ears.

“Dick, could you come out please?”

He blinks slowly.

“Talon!” Tim snaps from across the room.

Dick scrambles out from under the cot and stands at attention. Bruce moves forward slowly, and he doesn’t shy away. Bruce risks picking him up; he’ll deal with Tim and whatever he just did later. Dick allows himself to be lifted and carried out of the cell, though he remains tense and shaky.

“It’s okay, Dick,” Bruce says. “Relax.”

“Talon,” Tim says again, and Bruce can feel Dick releasing his tension, one muscle at a time. The trembling continues.

Maybe he shouldn’t leave the two of them alone so often. Maybe he shouldn’t have given Tim all that data about Talons that he hadn’t even finished reading himself. Still, Bruce can take a hint.
“Do you know who I am, Talon?”

“Grandmaster,” Dick whispers. It’s the first time Bruce has heard his voice.

“My name is Bruce, Talon. I want you to call me Bruce. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Bruce.”

“Good boy. Can you tell me who you are?”

“Talon,” he says.

“Your name is Dick, Talon. I’m not going to call you Talon anymore. I’m going to call you Dick. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Bruce.”

“Who are you?”

“Dick,” he whispers.

“Very good. You’re safe here, Dick. Do you understand? Safe.”

“Safe,” he repeats, not sounding terribly confident. They’ll work on that. Bruce carries him over to the next cell.

“This is Tim. Can you say hello to Tim, Dick?”

“Hello, Tim.”

“Hi, Dickie,” Tim says, sounding soft and fond and completely unlike the boy barking orders a minute ago.

“Tim is your brother, Dick. But he isn’t in charge of you, and you don’t have to do what he says, no matter what name he calls you. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Bruce.”

“Good job. Would you like me to put you down?”

“No,” Dick says. His fingers are curled tightly into Bruce’s sleeves, and the shaking has finally stopped. Touch-starved, Bruce thinks, and probably also just cold. He carries him out of the cave.

They find Alfred in the kitchen.

“Dick, this is Alfred. Can you say hello to Alfred?”

“Hello, Alfred,” Dick says. His voice is steadier, stronger, than it was a quarter hour ago. A half hour ago, Bruce hadn’t been certain he could speak at all.

“Alfred is the butler. You need to listen when he tells you what to do. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Bruce.”

Bruce carries him away. They find Jason in Bruce’s office, and he carefully lifts the cowl from his head.
“Jason, do you remember Dick?”

Jason doesn’t answer, of course.

“Dick, this is Jason. Jason is also your brother. Jason is sick, and you need to be gentle with him. Do you understand?”

There’s a slight pause this time before Dick says, “Yes, Bruce.”

Talons, he supposes, aren’t allowed (or maybe not able?) to be sick. “Tell me how you need to be with Jason,” he pushes.

“Gentle.”

“Good. Now say hello.”

“Hello, Jason,” Dick says.

Jason stares at them for a moment, then takes back his cowl and wanders away.

If Bruce had known calling him Talon a few times was all it took to make Dick responsive and cooperative, he could have had him out of the cell weeks ago. He sets Dick on the ground and gathers things to keep him occupied—a book Jason had been carrying around, a half-finished puzzle, a deck of cards with the jokers carefully removed, and a collection of random chess pieces.

(Jason lacks the focus to play much simpler games than chess, but has lately taken to playing his own games with the pieces. The last one Bruce had witnessed involved a fight between two kings that ended with a pawn being flung across the room, denting the plaster where it landed. Bruce is trying not to read too much into it.)

“I am going to work now, Dick,” he says, turning on the computer. “I want you to stay in this room and play. Okay?”

“Yes, Bruce,” Dick says.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

He stays in the bed and holds very, very still, because he’s a good Talon, even if he’s Dick now. He has to stay in bed until Alfred comes.

Talon is Dick now. He’s trying to be Dick in his head, too, but sometimes he forgets. He doesn’t understand what’s happening. Bruce took him out of the coffin, and he isn’t giving him work to do, and he isn’t sending him back to the coffin. Talon—Dick—has a bedroom now, like a person.

(“This is your bed, Dick. I want you to stay in the bed until Alfred comes to get you. Do you understand?”)

Dick follows Bruce, unless Bruce tells him not to. Then he follows Alfred. He doesn’t go downstairs unless he’s following someone, because that’s where the coffins are. He tries to stay away from Jason, because he’s supposed to be gentle with Jason, and that means if Jason attacks him he’s not allowed to defend himself.

One night he gets cold. Really, really cold, colder than he’s been since before he went with Bruce, and it scares him. He still has all his blankets. There are nine now, but it isn’t enough. He’s so cold.

He knows he’s being punished, but he doesn’t know why. He’s done everything Bruce said. There must be something else, something he should have been able to figure out on his own. But he can’t. He’s not here to think, that’s what they kept telling him, over and over again, when he was little and loud and new. He’s trying so hard to be good, and all the rules are different. It’s not fair. He doesn’t even know what he did wrong.

He stays in the bed and holds very, very still, because he’s a good Talon, even if he’s Dick now. He has to stay in bed until Alfred comes.

Alfred doesn’t come. Bruce comes, much earlier than Alfred usually does, when the sky is still dark. He’s wearing his mask.

“Dick? You all right in here?”

“Yes, Bruce.”

“The heater got switched off somehow. You must be freezing.”

Oh. Dick was supposed to find the heater and turn it on. But he doesn’t know how to do that.

“Please,” he says, then again, when Bruce comes closer, “please.”

“Please what? You gotta use your words, buddy. I can’t read your mind.”

But you should be able to read mine, he doesn’t say.

“Please,” Dick says, one last, desperate time. Then he stays quiet and still like a good Talon when Bruce picks him up and takes him away from the blankets.
Bruce returns to the cave, shaking snow from his boots. It’s almost as cold inside as it was out there, and Tim, still asleep after his last round of antidote, is shaking. Bruce covers him in blankets and pulls in a couple space heaters before going to investigate.

The heater is turned off. Alfred is out of town, and it’s Bruce’s job to take care of these things. It’s December, and there are three mostly helpless children in the house. He turns the heat on, but it will take hours for it to reach the whole manor.

There’s a fireplace in his room. He’ll make a fire while they’re waiting for it to kick in.

Dick is unsurprisingly awake, and ice cold when Bruce picks him up. Jason is poking listless at the fireplace with a poker, cowl on and blanket around his shoulders. Clearly, he and Bruce are on the same page.

Bruce sets Dick on the ground next to Jason and piles a few blankets over him. Then he goes to check on Tim again. His cell full of space heaters is probably the warmest part of the manor, but it feels wrong to leave him alone, so he carries him upstairs. Tim mumbles something as Bruce tucks him into Jason’s cot, but doesn’t wake up fully. Bruce starts the fire.

He has to bat Jason’s hand away from the flame a few times, but after that it only takes him ten or fifteen minutes to fall asleep, head on Bruce’s shoulder. Bruce removes the cowl and smooths out his hair, then moves him onto the master bed, tucking him in carefully. Dick is still sitting in front of the fire, leaning closer and closer until Bruce has to pull him back.

“Please,” Dick says for the fourth time tonight. Bruce still doesn’t know what he’s asking for.

“It’s all right, Dick. Go to sleep.”

Immediately, Dick lies down on the floor, burrowing beneath his pile of blankets. It’s a worrying response, but honestly, most of Dick’s responses are worrying. Eventually they’ll have to work on that.

“Are you refusing to talk to the Martian Manhunter because you don’t trust him, or because you don’t want Jason to get better?” Tim asks.

Bruce ignores him. Tim’s clearly in a bad mood, and they’ve had this conversation several times already.

“Because you know he’s not really like this, B. He’s not gonna be all sweet and cuddly when he understands what happened. He only loves you because he thinks you’re someone else.”

Bruce soundproofs his cell and gets back to work.

It takes a fake name, fake prints, heavy makeup, and several hours of careful coaching to get legal custody of Dick. He remembers his lines perfectly, and the social workers are charmed. Bruce officially has two sons, just in time for Christmas. The third is a work in progress. Things are getting better, definitely. Mostly.
Tim is clearly exhausted by the time he makes his way out of the cave and into the parlor, but he’s smiling a smile that’s only barely Joker-induced, and he allows Alfred to pat him on the shoulder.

Jason is in fine form, wearing a Santa hat over his cowl and rearranging the ornaments on the tree.

Dick obviously has no idea what’s going on. They’ve been figuring out, slowly, that he has almost no memory of the time before the Court of Owls. Christmas appears to be an unfamiliar concept; he’ll probably think the presents are a reward for successfully lying to the social workers. He regards the boxes with deep suspicion, poking at them and then backing away.

Tim helps ease the tension by opening his own presents, and after slight prodding Jason does the same. But when Jason is happily sorting his opened presents by color, and Tim is flipping through a new book, Dick remains wary.

“Open your presents, Dick,” Bruce says, finally.

“Yes, Bruce.”

Encouraged by the discovery of a weighted blanket, Dick goes on to find specially tinted sunglasses and noise cancelling headphones before abandoning the task ahead to burrow beneath his new blanket and shut himself off from the rest of the world.

“All right,” Bruce says softly. “We’ll finish later.”
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

She knocks on the glass, looking at Bruce inquiringly, and he opens the door. Tim takes a few steps back as she examines him.

“Little brother,” she says decisively. And then Tim is crying, and Cassandra is hugging him.

Chapter Notes

Extra chapter because I turned 25 this week and got a surprise day off work today and everything is awesome! Today we get to meet the girl characters.

Kate lets herself into the manor. It’s weird that Alfred isn’t here to intercept her, but he must be busy in whole new ways lately. Apparently, Bruce has been through significant lifestyle changes while she’s been travelling.

The first person she encounters is a gangly teenager with unfocused eyes and a Bat cowl.

“Hey,” she says. “Jason, right?”

The kid doesn’t respond.

“My name is Kate. I’m Bruce’s cousin. Do you know where he is?”

He tilts his head, studying her, then wanders off. She continues her search for Bruce and Alfred.

She finds them in the kitchen, with three teenagers instead of the expected two. Jason and Alfred are at one end of the table polishing silver. Bruce is at the other end with a stack of paperwork, and next to him is a boy with his head down on the table. On top of the fridge, wearing tinted glasses and large headphones, is someone who looks a little like the boy Bruce adopted before Christmas, and a little like a zombie.

When Bruce notices her, he reaches out to tap Jason on the hand, then stands to tap Dick on the knee. The boys remove their cowl and headphones respectively, and the third lifts his head.

“Jason,” Bruce says, “do you remember Kate?”

Jason stares at here for a moment, then pulls the cowl back on and continues polishing the silver.

“Dick,” Bruce says, “this is my cousin Kate. Can you say hello to Kate?”

“Hello, Kate,” he says.

“Good job.”
Dick pulls his headphones back on. The third boy holds out a hand to shake, and Kate takes it, glad for a normal introduction.

“Hey, I’m Tim. I killed Bruce in another universe, and you didn’t even visit me in prison.”

“Oh,” she says.

Bruce sighs deeply. “Ignore him. How was your trip?”

They make idle small talk for a few minutes before Bruce says, finally, “There’s a new case I didn’t want to start without a partner on hand.”

They both stand to head for the cave.

“Tim,” Bruce says.

“Coming.” The kid stands up slowly, explaining as they head down, “I’m not allowed to be around the others alone, in case I go crazy and kill them.”

Bruce doesn’t react to this, so Kate doesn’t either. She’s not surprised Bruce hasn’t introduced this one to the public yet.

“What do you know about the Court of Owls, Kate?”

This is going to be so much fun.

- 

When the silver is done, Alfred brings out the cookies. The scary boy went downstairs with Dad and Batwoman, so it’s safe for Jason to walk around to the other side of the table. He offers a cookie to the mini Dick-monster on top of the fridge.

He takes the cookie, but doesn’t eat it. Just holds it and stares at it for a long time.

Jason doesn’t know what the Dick-monster is or why he’s here. He knows he doesn’t like him, runs away whenever he and Jason are alone in a room together. It doesn’t make sense, because Jason is always nice to him.

Jason misses the real Dick, but he always forgets before he can ask Dad where he is.

- 

Bruce has been looking, casually, in his spare time, for Damians and Cassandras. Chances are slim, all things considered, but he likes the idea of having a normal kid.

Dick continues to behave perfectly, and it continues to make Bruce and Alfred uncomfortable. He won’t do much of anything without being told to, and orders have to be worded correctly or he’ll think they’re a trap. Early on, Bruce had told him “Tell me or Alfred when you’re hungry,” and he’d barely eaten for three days. Bruce had switched to “I need to know when you’re hungry so I can feed you and keep you healthy and strong,” and half an hour later Dick was tugging at Alfred’s sleeve and asking for a snack.

Bruce can’t take him out in public, even with good makeup, because Dick’s behavior is the kind of red flag that could cost Bruce custody.

It’s not his fault; he doesn’t know what to do except trick Dick into doing what he wants. “Stay in
the shower as long as you like,” had made him shower faster. “Stay in the shower for at least twenty minutes” had gotten him out at twenty minutes exactly. When Bruce said “Stay in the shower for more than twenty minutes,” Dick had finally splashed around and turned the water to scalding like he’d clearly wanted to for weeks.

Jason is fine, as he usually is. The problem, of course, is Tim. His blood-venom content is down by 26%. Bruce has refused, with Leslie’s support, to double his weekly dose of antidote.

Tim has retaliated by becoming as obnoxious as humanly possible. Bruce hasn’t dared to let him out of the cell in over a week. He’d activated the soundproofing about six hours ago, when Tim had stopped planning his murder out loud and started accusing him of being selfish and not really caring about Jason, just because he refused to let an alien poke around in his son’s brain.

With Tim silenced, it’s a good day to get work done. Alfred and Jason have gone shopping, and Dick won’t come into the cave unless he thinks he’s supposed to.

After a few hours, Bruce stumbles across a Cassandra by accident, which has never happened before; she’s much too careful, in all her forms. She needs help.

This Cassandra is about twenty, on the run. David Cain is chasing her, and he’s almost as good as she is. The reason she’s on Bruce’s radar is that she’s on the Justice League’s. A fellow assassin called Cheshire had helped her escape her father. She’d also introduced her to a man named Roy Harper, who had once been a ward of Oliver Queen. Who was, in this world and Bruce’s own, Green Arrow.

But as David Cain begins closing in, Cassandra isn’t accepting the Justice League’s help. She is, in fact, avoiding the League with the same determination she avoids her father and the growing number of police on her trail.

She’s an assassin, but she wants out. For some reason, she just doesn’t want the out the League is offering. Bruce intends to find out why.

This is the ideal time to leave, when Alfred, who would certainly disapprove, is out, and when Cassandra, who excels at evading attention, is sitting on a fire escape in Chicago.

Unfortunately, there are two kids in the house.

After a moment of consideration, he finds Dick and brings him downstairs.

“Dick, I have to go away for a few hours. Alfred will be back soon. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Bruce.”

“Good. You need to stay down here unless something bad happens. If there’s an accident or a disaster or someone breaks in, I want you to let Tim out and do what he says. Okay?”

“I don’t go back in the coffin?”

“The coffin?”

Dick points to the cells.

“Oh, Oh, no, Dick. That’s not a coffin, and you don’t have to go in there. I just want you to stay downstairs so you and Tim aren’t alone while I’m out. Do you understand?”
“Yes, Bruce.”

Bruce doesn’t believe him, but he moves on anyway. Cassandra won’t stay in one place for long.

“Good. You can play with the training equipment while I’m gone. There are blankets in the cubby over there; you can do whatever you want with those.”

“How many blankets?” Dick asks.

“Um, fourteen, I think.”

Dick runs to investigate the blankets immediately, and Bruce steps through his portal.

It’s the first time he’s travelled somewhere other than alternate Gotham, and the journey is bumpy and unpleasant. He lands only inches from Cassandra, who jumps immediately to her feet.

Bruce stares at Cassandra. Cassandra stares at Bruce. This seems to go on for several minutes. Finally, Cassandra sits down again, legs dangling off the edge of the fire escape. Bruce follows suit.

“There are people after you,” he says.


“Why are you running from the heroes?”

“They want to save me,” she says, in the precise, stilted manner of someone who didn’t grow up speaking English and is determined to do it correctly, “so that I can fight with them instead. I do not want to fight for anyone. I do not want to be a weapon for good people or for bad people.”

“What kind of person am I?” Bruce asks her.

“Good,” she answers promptly.

“I’m glad to hear that. My name’s Bruce.”

She nods, humming thoughtfully. “Cassandra. But I think you already know that.”

“I do. Would you like to come home with me, Cassandra? Your father will never find you; he’s dead where I come from.”

Cassandra turns around to study him. “Good,” she repeats quietly. Then, “What do you want from me?”

“I want to be your dad.”

She stares at him for a long moment, then nods, apparently satisfied with the truthfulness of this statement.

“There is other family.”

“Yes. My, um—my sort of father, Alfred. And I have three sons with special needs. They’re all a bit younger than you.”

Cassandra stands abruptly. “I will go with you. Now. They will find us soon.”

Bruce hesitates. “I won’t be able to bring you back if you change your mind.”
“I have nothing. Go now.”

Jason and Alfred are still gone when they return to the cave—Bruce can just see the top of Dick’s head beneath his mountain of blankets, and Tim begins pounding silently on the walls of his cell as soon as Bruce appears.

Right. Bruce disables the soundproofing.

“It’s been over two hours, Bruce, you assho—Cass?”

“Cassandra,” Bruce says, “this is Timothy Drake.”

She knocks on the glass, looking at Bruce inquiringly, and he opens the door. Tim takes a few steps back as she examines him.

“Little brother,” she says decisively. And then Tim is crying, and Cassandra is hugging him.

Bruce hurries away, leaving them together on the cot—Tim looks like a boy in desperate need of privacy.

Dick raises his head briefly when Bruce sits beside his blanket pile, then pulls his headphones back into place and burrows down again.

Bruce was prepared for Cassandra to be nonverbal; he’s glad she’s not, but it’s astounding, after all the worlds he’s spied on, that so far Cassandra is looking like she’ll be the easiest of his children to hold a conversation with. Jason doesn’t speak at all, and Dick speaks only when he thinks he’s supposed to, or to say “please” again and again, with no indication as to what he wants. Both boys love their noise-cancelling devices, shutting out the rest of the world whenever possible, although Jason does seem to enjoy listening to Bruce read or tell stories, at least. Tim…Tim is just difficult.

Eventually Cassandra joins them at the blanket pile.

“Sleeping,” she reports, then pokes delicately at the blankets with her foot.

Dick emerges again, and pulls off the headphones when Bruce taps his cheek.

“Dick, this is Cassandra. She’s your sister.”

Dick’s eyes widen. “Oh. You’re a Talon.”

You, he emphasizes, and Bruce wonders—has Dick been trying, all this time, to identify family members as Talons and Owls? (Bruce knows what he is, unfortunately.)

“What is a Talon?” Cassandra asks. She has crouched down on the ground now, and is clearly speaking to Dick, not Bruce.

“Us,” Dick says. “A Talon is us.”

“But what does a Talon do?” she asks.

“Whatever the Owls say.” He hesitates, glancing at Bruce. “Usually kill people. But not here. Bruce is a strange grandmaster. He says “call me Bruce,” and “stay in bed,” and “say hello to people.” He never says to kill people.”
“Do you like Bruce?”

He glances over at Bruce again, then says in a rush, “Yes, yes, Bruce is the best. Of course. I love Bruce.”

“Dick,” Bruce says.

He shrinks back. “Please. Please.”

“I’m not going to hurt you, Dick. No matter what happens, I will never hurt you. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Bruce,” he says, tearful and completely lacking in sincerity.

“Go,” Cassandra says, and Bruce flees the scene before he can make things worse. He’s pretty sure, now, that Dick’s frequent “please” is actually “please don’t hurt me.” He feels sick.

He also feels guilty—after assuring Cassandra he didn’t want to use her, he’s immediately set her to comforting multiple crying teenagers. He closes and locks Tim’s door, then goes to his computer to wait. He’s not going anywhere near Dick right now.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

"You fight crime dressed like a bat. It’s ridiculous."

“Hey! You fight crime dressed like a bat, too.”

“Yes, but mine is a pity bat theme. So you don’t have to be a dork on the streets of Gotham alone.”

“There is a young woman in the cave,” Alfred says.

Bruce looks up from the computer, surprised. It’s been over two hours.

“Her name is Cassandra. She’s my daughter.”

“I had gathered as much. Your multiverse equipment, you will find, has been confiscated. You may have it back when Dick is no longer afraid of you, and Tim is free to walk about the manor.”

Bruce has to admit this is a reasonable decision, given his recent rate of spontaneous child acquisition. He doesn’t have to be happy about it.

He stands and looks around the cave. Cassandra is asleep, sprawled in the remains of Dick’s blanket pile, his tinted glasses crooked on her nose. Considering what Bruce knows of the last few months, it’s probably the first time in a long time she’s really felt safe to sleep.

They’ve spent only a few hours together, and already she trusts him. It gives him the same warm feeling as his first meeting with Jason, who is currently standing a few steps behind Alfred.

Bruce smiles. “Hi, Jason. Have fun shopping?”

He nods slightly, stepping forward, and Bruce wraps an arm around his shoulders. He’s getting so tall—another two and a half inches since his initial, six inch growth spurt in Bruce’s custody.

“Let’s go upstairs, Jason. I’ll introduce you to your new sister later.”

Riddler, Joker, Killer Croc, and Poison Ivy break out of Arkham.

“Can you believe,” Bruce says, when he and Kate meet on a rooftop after rounding them up, “that this is one of the best worlds around?”

Kate takes the time to think this over, even though it’s obviously a rhetorical question. “Yeah,” she says after a moment, “yeah. I’ve got a serious girlfriend, you’ve got a ragtag band of orphans—what more could you want? Half of them even like you.”

“I don’t know; I think Jason might be coming around.”

“Jason?” Kate laughs. “You’re such a dork, Bruce. How are people afraid of you?”
“It’s the suit,” Bruce says.

“The suit is the dorkiest thing about you. You fight crime dressed like a bat. It’s ridiculous.”

“Hey! You fight crime dressed like a bat, too.”

“Yes, but mine is a pity bat theme. So you don’t have to be a dork on the streets of Gotham alone.”

Cassandra sits on the ground in front of Jason. She likes Jason—he is quiet inside and outside. Tim is loud all over the place, and Dick is quiet on the outside, but inside he is always screaming.

She still likes Dick and Tim too, though. Dick is a little scared of her, but not as much as he is of Bruce and Alfred and Jason. He’s really scared of Jason, but she hasn’t figured out why yet. Everything about Jason is Safe.

Tim is good, even though he’s loud. He understands her better than anyone here, maybe better than anyone she’s ever met. And he loves her—she could see it in every line of his body as soon as they met. It’s because she’s his sister in his old world; he explained it all to her. Dick was his brother, too, but he was very different, and having Dick here isn’t the same as having her, Tim says. Dick is like a stranger, but Cass is still Cass, even if Tim’s a stranger to her.

She doesn’t mind that he’s a stranger, and she likes that he calls her Cass. No one’s ever used a nickname, except for Jade a couple times, and once Roy. (They were nice, but she doesn’t miss them. She and Cheshire were never close.)

Today, though, Cassandra is with Jason. They are sitting on the floor together. Bruce says Jason is sick, and Tim says Jason used to be a lot different. Sometimes, Cassandra can almost see more Jason inside of Jason, hiding. But she doesn’t know how to bring it out, and she isn’t sure if she should, even though it upsets Tim how much of him is hiding. She thinks maybe he’s hiding for a reason, and he’ll come out when he’s ready.

Cassandra likes her brothers. She likes Bruce, and she likes Alfred. She isn’t sure about the rest of it—she hasn’t seen much of this universe yet—but the people are nice.

Jason tilts his head, narrowing his eyes. Cassandra mirrors the movement. Speaking is not…bad, but she enjoys not having to do it. Jason never speaks, and mostly cuts off his hearing, so she is free to use her preferred method of communication.

Bruce enters the room, pulling off Jason’s Bat-ears to ruffle his hair. “Cassandra, I need you to figure out why Dick is upset. He won’t talk to me.”

“No.”

“No?” Bruce repeats. His face is confused.

“I am here to be your daughter. Not for—for translating?” She pauses. Yes, that was the right word. “Not translating. You said no using me. Be my dad.”

She watches Bruce’s body answer (surprise, embarrassment, regret) before his voice does. “I’m sorry. Would you like to come into the city with me tomorrow?”

“Yes,” Cassandra says. “Send Dick here. I will listen to him.”
“Thank you, Cassandra.”

Dick comes in a few minutes later, dragging his heavy blanket, and sits down at a safe distance. Cassandra watches them both. Jason is indifferent to Dick; he’s gone farther away again, looking at the wall behind her but not seeing it. Cassandra puts the Bat-ears back on his head.

“You have to be gentle with Jason,” Dick says quietly.

“I am gentle.”

Dick shakes his head. “You have to be gentle.”

That’s why he’s afraid of Jason. “Who told you to be gentle?”

“Bruce,” Dick says.

“Did he tell Jason to be gentle, too?”

He shakes his head, and Cassandra sighs. She thinks about it for a minute.

“If you tell Bruce to come talk to me now, I will keep you safe from Jason.”

- 

Bruce listens to Cassandra’s explanation with growing confusion. Everything about his youngest child baffles him.

“Dick,” he says slowly, “do you think Jason is going to hurt you?”

Dick’s face scrunches up the way it always does just before a panicked meltdown when he doesn’t know the right answer to a question.

“Never mind,” Bruce says. “It doesn’t matter. Do you remember when I told you Jason was sick?”

“Yes, Bruce.”

“Good. That’s why you have to be careful with him. Because he isn’t healthy enough to protect himself. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Bruce,” Dick says. Cassandra, standing behind him, shakes her head. Bruce gives up on the explanation tactic.

He tugs the cowl off of Jason’s head, and the boy turns to look at him, eyes struggling to focus. Bruce gives him a minute to do the best he can.

“Jason, I need you to be gentle with Dick. Okay?”

Jason blinks a few times. He’s still clearly not focused on Bruce or what he’s saying. And Dick isn’t going to stop being afraid until he shows some sign of agreement.

Bruce cups Jason’s face carefully. “I need you to look at me, okay, Jason? I need you to listen to what I’m saying.”

It doesn’t take Cassandra’s special skill-set to see that Jason is trying, pulling his eyes to Bruce’s then drifting away again and again. Bruce is deeply uncomfortable with the reminder that Jason is not okay.
“Jason,” Bruce says again.

He makes a small sound that might almost be a word, if it was a little clearer, a little louder (it’s the most noise Bruce has ever heard from Jason, who, when having nightmares, both screams and cries silently) and his eyes lock on Bruce’s.

“Don’t hurt Dick.”

Jason nods, though he looks confused. He leans into Bruce’s side, and Bruce wraps an arm around him. He looks up at the others; Cassandra looks pleased, and Dick looks even more confused than Jason.

“Ask your question, Dick,” he prompts.

“Is Jason a Talon or an Owl?”

“Neither.”

“Then what is he?”

“He’s my son. Just like you.”

“But I’m a Talon. So he’s a Talon too?”

Bruce is very careful not to let his frustration show. He knows Cassandra can see it, but that doesn’t matter, just so long as Dick doesn’t think he’s in trouble. “You’re not a Talon anymore, Dick. You’re just a person, and so is Jason. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Bruce,” Dick says. It has never been more obvious that he does not understand.

“Dick, when I ask if you understand something, I need you to tell me the truth. If you tell me you don’t understand, I can find a better way to explain it to you. But if you lie to me, I won’t be able to help you. Does that make sense?”

“Yes, Bruce,” he says. Then he disappears completely under his weighted blanket. Bruce gives up.

Cassandra rises gracefully, patting Jason on the head and handing Bruce his discarded cowl before leaving the room. Bruce pulls Jason closer, speaking softly about nothing as long as the boy can hear him.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Murderers don’t get to be homesick for the people they’ve killed.

Scowling, Cassandra pushes Bruce’s coffee away. He laughs.

“What if we tried something with chocolate in it?”


Bruce goes to the counter to order, for the third time. He’d offered to take her to the ice cream parlor down the street, or the smoothie shop, or that bubble tea place, but she was determined to find something she liked here.

He returns to the table with a hot chocolate and a mocha. Cassandra tries them both, and likes both.

“You are my favorite dad,” she tells him.

It’s been a great day. Tim told them both that Cassandra likes ballet; there weren’t any shows in town at the moment, but Bruce had found a special exhibit at a museum. They’d gotten lunch at Bruce’s favorite pizza place. Cassandra had wanted to pick out her own clothes, so they’d gone to the mall, and Bruce had sat awkwardly in the waiting room while she tried things on. And now they were getting coffee.

“You did good,” Cassandra says. “We can talk about the boys now.” She takes a sip of her hot chocolate, then of her mocha. “I understand Dick and I understand you, but I don’t understand how to make you understand each other. Jason hides. He should keep hiding until he wants to stop. He goes too deep in for me to find him.”

“Thank you, Cassandra,” Bruce says. She’s finished her hot chocolate, so he goes to get a muffin—Cassandra is still half starved from being on the run.

“Tim is scared of you,” she says when he comes back. She cuts the muffin in half and pushes Bruce’s piece across the table. “You’re his dad, and he loves you, and he knows you don’t love him.”

Shit. Well, he didn’t see that coming.

“I don’t…dislike him,” he offers.

Cassandra frowns at him. “He says you are—reforming. Is that a word?”

Bruce nods.

“You are reforming a thing called Arkham?”

“I am.”

“Tim says you will reform Arkham and then you will send him back, because you feel guilty but also
“You hate him.”

“I would never send Tim back to Arkham.”

“Good. You can tell him later. It is still my turn.” Cassandra finishes her half of the muffin, then reaches over to steal Bruce’s.

If Tim was not trying so hard not to be a crazy person, he would scream. He’s been alone for twenty six hours and counting. He has no idea what time it is, but he knows exactly how long it’s been. He’s not losing a second now that he’s lucid enough to keep track.

His last physical contact was four days ago, when Bruce administered the antidote. His last time outside was three years and one month ago.

Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to scream. Maybe Bruce forgot to turn off the soundproofing again, and no one will ever know.

This is the longest he’s gone without seeing Cass since Bruce brought her here. Maybe she found out he’s an insane person who murdered his father. Maybe she’ll start avoiding him like the others do.

It wasn’t quite so bad before Bruce took Dick away and made him stop listening to Tim. He wasn’t doing anything bad. Dick didn’t even recognize the name Dick, only Talon. And Tim was only telling him to do things like talk to him, or pretend to listen while Tim talked. Bruce didn’t have to freak out about it.

Tim is an insane person who murdered his father. He doesn’t get to decide what’s worth freaking out about.

He’s been alone for twenty six and a half hours. He’s hungry. He’s lonely.

It doesn’t matter. Murderers don’t get to be homesick for the people they’ve killed.

He hears the door opening at the top of the stairs, and tries hard to look like he doesn’t care at all when Bruce comes into view.

“What time is it?” he asks without looking over at him.

“About four,” Bruce says.

“Am or pm?”

“Pm.”

“Is it dark out yet?”

“It hasn’t gotten dark this early in weeks.”

“Well, I wouldn’t know that,” Tim says, “would I?”

Tim still hasn’t looked up when he hears his cell door click open. He finally makes eye contact, but the weird, fake Bruce is as unreadable as ever.

“Bruce?”
“Let’s take a walk,” he says. “Talk a little.”

Tim doesn’t trust this Bruce at all, but the temptation of leaving his cell for the first time in over two weeks is too strong. When Bruce takes him up into the kitchen and then out onto the grounds, he forgets all about who to trust, and just focuses on the grass and the sun.

He must lose some time after all, because the next time he notices Bruce, he’s looking at Tim the way he looks at Jason, the way he used to look at Tim in another universe.

“I wasn’t hallucinating when they first brought me to Arkham,” he says abruptly. If he picks a fight, maybe fake Bruce will stop looking so soft and fond and Dad, and things will be safe again. “I was just talking to people with super hearing. But you knew that, right? From my chart? You’ve been keeping me in a lead coated basement because of Superman, and not because you’re an asshole who didn’t even think about the fact that I haven’t seen the sun since I was going by Junior. Right?”

“I’m sorry, Tim.”

Bruce is supposed to be defensive, not apologetic, and Tim looks up at him, startled. He still looks soft and fond, and Tim wants to cry.

“They didn’t answer,” he says, “No one ever answered.”

They sit on the damp brown grass in silence for several minutes before Bruce asks, “Do you really think I’ll send you back to Arkham?”

This isn’t the real Cass, either. He should have known better than to trust her. “You said you were only keeping me because you can’t go back to my world. So you’re fixing the Asylum; I guess you found a way around that problem.”

“I’m trying to reform Arkham because of you, Tim, but I’m not doing it for you. You’ll stay here.”

“In a cage in the basement.”

Bruce sighs. “I never should have brought you here,” he says.

Tim is not going to cry.

“It wasn’t fair to you. I’d never so much as babysat, and I thought I could just pull a traumatized teenager out of another reality and be a good parent. I have no idea how to take care of you, and I’ve handled that…poorly. And I’m sorry.”

I killed you, Tim thinks. It’s all he can ever think when Bruce is nice to him, and he hates it. I killed you. I killed you. “Can I go back to my cage now?”

“No,” Bruce says. “We’re going to pick out a bedroom for you.”
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

He stops reading abruptly, unwilling to be consumed with rage this early in the morning.

“It is slightly past noon,” Alfred informs him.

Chapter Notes

Extra mini-chapter!

This shouldn’t, Bruce thinks as he looks down at the newspaper, really be a surprise.

“Wayne’s Erratic Behavior Continues—Underage Girlfriend?”

Just because Bruce spends the day with a young woman they’ve never seen before—he stops reading abruptly, unwilling to be consumed with rage this early in the morning. He’ll deal with damage control after breakfast.

“It is slightly past noon,” Alfred informs him.

“I patrolled late last night.”

“The situation has been handled,” Alfred informs him next.

He switches the TV to a recording of Cassandra on the front step of the manor, wearing the pink pajamas they’d bought yesterday.

“My name is Cassandra,” she’s telling the reporters. “Bruce is my dad. We did not know for a long time. Until my mother died. In China. I like my dad and Gotham very much, and you should stop saying gross things about him. No questions. You woke me up. I am sleeping now.”

She leaves, the door slamming shut behind her, and the video ends.

Bruce does some quick math—it’s a near thing, but this cover story doesn’t actually involve him sleeping with a woman in China during a summer vacation in high school. That’s dealt with, then.

“Where is she now?”

Alfred smiles. “You heard the girl. She went back to bed.”
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

“Dad?” Jason says. Bruce didn’t expect Jason to call him that.

Jason wakes up.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Ten days before Jason’s eighteenth birthday, a completely unfamiliar voice shouts down the hall, “Dad!”

Bruce abandons his work and runs toward the voice. Dick is perched on top of a high shelf. Jason, when he sees Bruce, points at him. His eyes are clear and bright and focused.

“What the fuck is that thing, and why does it look like Dickie?”

“Don’t talk about your brother like that,” Bruce says automatically. Jason is talking. He thinks he might be going into shock.

“My brother? Are you saying that’s actually—Dad? You okay? You’re staring at me.”

“Jason,” Bruce manages after a few false starts, “Jason, you haven’t spoken since you were fifteen.”

“Since I…how old am I now?”

“You’ll be eighteen next month.”

“What the fuck.”

Bruce feels an urge to scold Jason for his language, which is probably the most absurd thing he could possibly be concerned about right now.

“Dad?” Jason says.

Bruce didn’t expect Jason to call him that.

“It’s okay, Jason. I’ll explain everything. I just need to call Leslie, okay?”

Jason nods shakily. “Can you tell her to fix my wrist?”

Bruce looks down at his twisted left arm; he’d forgotten all about that in the months since Jason’s arrival. “Is it bothering you?”

“Yeah,” he says quietly. “I don’t know what happened.”

“Okay. I’ll be right back, okay? I just need to get the phone.”

After a moment of hesitation, Bruce collects Dick from his shelf on the way out the door; he doesn’t
need this sudden change upsetting the building trust between the boys.

When he returns with his cell phone, less than three minutes later, Jason’s eyes are blank and distant, and he smiles widely when he hears his name. Bruce sits down on the floor beside him, unsure whether to be disappointed or relieved. He knows this isn’t the real Jason—Tim reminds him often enough. But this is the Jason that’s his son.

“He needs a neurologist, Bruce,” Leslie says, not for the first time.

“What am I going to tell a neurologist? The kid’s got an autopsy scar.”

Jason shakes his head, dislodging her searching fingers from his hair. It’s fine; she’s not really expecting to find any new lumps and bumps.

“He’d get better treatment with a specialist.”

Bruce doesn’t answer. Leslie shines her light in Jason’s eyes, and he tracks the movement sluggishly.

“Any other changes? Anything strange before he spoke to you yesterday?”

“I think he said something, or tried to, a few weeks ago. I was trying to get him to really focus on me—it only lasted a second.”

Leslie flicks the light off and steps aside. “Try it again. Whatever you did then.”

She watches as Bruce climbs onto the exam table and cups Jason’s chin, speaking softly and maintaining eye contact, as much as Jason’s wandering gaze will allow it. Whatever happened, though, it clearly isn't happening again.

“All right, Bruce. Leave the boy alone. He’s healthy as far as I can tell, but again, I’m not a brain doctor.”

“If anyone outside our circle sees him undressed, I’ll lose all four of them.”

Leslie gives up for now. She got through to him on the Joker venom antidote; she’ll get this too. Eventually.

“Are you sure about the wrist?”

“He asked for it.”

Whatever the wide-awake Jason of yesterday wanted, today’s catatonic Jason is violently opposed to the gas mask Leslie tries to use. He actually runs from Bruce, and ends up shaking in Alfred’s arms.

“All right, Jason,” Alfred says, “all right. You don’t need a mask, do you? Just the needle.”

Jason nods. Leslie is surprised that he tolerates the IV line without the mask anesthetic, but then, she reminds herself, Jason isn’t a child—just a deeply traumatized young adult.

“He’s very claustrophobic,” Alfred explains, “but only intermittently. I suspect it has to do with how much he remembers, on any given day, about waking up in a coffin and digging out of his own grave.”

“Oh. I see.” She really wishes she didn’t.
Leslie moves on to Tim, who she is now fairly confident will survive to adulthood. He lets her poke and prod as much as she wants, strangely quiet and withdrawn, but his eyes are bright and manic.

He’s been like this, Alfred reports, since being moved upstairs. He shies away when Alfred comes too close; it’s the only time he’s moved without prompting today, and it’s not the first time he’s reacted this way to Alfred’s presence.

Leslie decides to ask, as long as he’s being fairly cooperative, “Why are you afraid of Alfred, Tim?”

“’M dangerous,” he mumbles. “Already killed Bruce. Can’t hurt Alfie too.”

Leslie sighs, making a note to pass the information on to Bruce and Alfred. These boys need so much therapy.

“You can increase your antidote dosage by 15% every time you can go a month without passing out on your current dose. I need to see you every time you increase. Now go drag Bruce away from Jason for me. I need his help with the little one.”

“Dick,” Bruce says, “this is Leslie. Can you say hello to Leslie?”

“Hello, Leslie,” the boy says, somewhat robotically. At least he’s responding to his name this time.

“Hello, Dick.”

He smiles at her, hesitant and also rather robotic, before looking back up at Bruce.

“Leslie is a doctor, Dick, but she’s a nice doctor. She’s only going to look at you. She won’t hurt you, okay?”

“Yes, Bruce.”

Dick is the most perfectly cooperative child she’s ever examined, but it’s the sort of cooperation that fills her with sorrow and fury. She’s relieved to pronounce him not quite human but perfectly healthy, and send him on his way.

“If I don’t tell him what to do,” Bruce explains quietly, “he’ll follow me around getting more and more frightened until I do.”

Therapy, Leslie thinks. They all need therapy. There has to be someone she can recommend.

“Please tell me Cassandra is as well-adjusted as she seems in the tabloids.”

Cassandra is. She’s weedy and too-thin, covered in an alarming number of scars, but she’s cooperative and polite, with an appropriate level of wariness for the situation. She’s mentally and emotionally sound, and at least knows how to take care of herself physically. Leslie sort of wants to take her home.

Chapter End Notes

FYI, we have now officially upgraded to twice weekly chapter updates. Tuesdays and Fridays!
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

“Brucie!” Selina Kyle says, coming toward them. “Great party. Great family.” She pulls a blue pocket square matching Bruce’s from her clutch. “I don’t know which of your kids has such sticky fingers, but I was hoping we could negotiate a hostage exchange?”

“Hostage exchange?” he repeats. For a moment the baffled Brucie act is genuine, then he puts the pieces together, pulling a necklace from his pocket. “Um. Jason gave this to me, about twenty minutes ago?”

(Bruce has a fancy party. Catwoman and Superboy show up.)

"It’s an annual event with a rotating location,” Alfred explains patiently. Again. “You’ve had three years to prepare. You cannot cancel or reschedule.”

Alfred removes Jason’s cowl, beginning the hopeless task of straightening out his hair. Jason squirms. Tim is sitting on the countertop across from them, idly swinging his legs. Alfred has already told him to get down twice. He finds it hard to be properly irritated, as Tim has finally stopped acting so afraid of him.

“Fine,” Bruce says. “Gala. Three weeks. Can we talk about this later? We’re going to be late.”

Alfred gives up on Jason’s hair, and begins checking that everything is in order with his splint.

“People are going to become suspicious eventually, if you continue adopting teen boys with special needs who you’ve apparently pulled out of thin air.”

The splint is in place; Alfred watches fondly as Jason traces Bruce’s signature. He, Bruce, Leslie, and Tim had all signed the splint. Dick and Cassandra couldn’t write, but Cassandra had sketched a lovely flower, and Dick had managed what they were afraid was intended to be the symbol for the Court of Owls.

“Tim is different,” Bruce says. “He’s the recently-orphaned son of an old family friend on the west coast.”

They’re on their way to City Hall now, so that Bruce can get official custody of Tim, and so that he can sign the paperwork to remain Jason’s guardian now that he’s eighteen.

“Be careful,” Alfred says. “And we will be discussing the gala when you get back.”

Jason misses his quiet hat. They’re not in the manor, and he never wears it when they’re not in the manor, but it doesn’t usually matter. Not when it’s the books and the trees and him and Dad. But there are people here, and they want something from him but he can’t tell what, and they made his dad and the other boy—Tim?—they made his dad and Tim go away, and he needs the hat to make things quiet so he can think.
There are three ladies and a man, and he knows they’re asking questions, but he can’t focus long enough to even know what the questions are. Obviously he isn’t going to answer. But they won’t stop talking to him, and they won’t stop touching him.

They want him to take off his shirt, he thinks, because they think Dad hurt him, but Dad would never hurt him, and he likes his shirt where it is, on him, and he wants them to leave him alone and he thinks he’s crying, and they still won’t give him space. They’re in a crowd around him, and he doesn’t know how to get out, and he wants them to stop.

“Jason, sweetheart,” one of the ladies says.

“No,” he shouts, as surprised by the sound of his own voice as they are. “No! Dad!”

Dad bursts into the room, and Jason runs to him. He yells a lot, about signing papers and torturing his son and he clearly didn’t want to be separated from me in the first place did you ever think—Jason puts his hands over his ears. Tim pulls him away from Dad, but then he keeps pulling him, out to the car and to Alfred, so that’s okay.

“You were right,” Tim says to Alfred. “They were suspicious. I don’t think they liked the cast.”

Tim goes away again, and Alfred pulls Jason’s hat out of the glove box. He tugs it as far down over his ears as it will go. Jason hates this place.

Bruce makes his rounds, checking on all the kids one last time before the event starts.

Cassandra is beautiful, and remarkably calm. “If they bother me, I will say go away,” she tells him. “I am from…not from here. I might forget the manners.”

“Good,” Bruce says. “Be as rude as you like. Just help me keep an eye on the boys.”

Dick’s makeup is flawless, but it won’t matter how good he looks if he keeps acting like himself, not with social services breathing down Bruce’s neck. Alfred was right—three teenage boys with dark hair, blue eyes, and special needs, all in under a year, was too much. (Probably he shouldn’t have gone with Dick’s original eye color for the contacts.)

This thing has to go perfectly. He’d have lost everything if Jason hadn’t freaked out as soon as they’d tried to examine him.

“What are you going to do if someone makes you feel bad, Dick?”

“Go to Tim.”

Bruce has implemented a buddy system for the night—Jason with Cassandra, and Dick with Tim.

“What if Tim isn’t there, or Tim is having trouble?”

“Go to you or Alfred or Cassandra.”

“Good job,” Bruce says. “Do you remember why?”

“Because people might be dangerous, but I shouldn’t handle it alone, because I am a little boy, not a weapon.”

His ability to recite the rules doesn’t necessarily indicate an actual understanding that he’s a child and
not a weapon, but it will have to do for now.

They go over all the things Dick isn't supposed to mention at all, no matter what—Talons, Owls, Grandmasters, assassins, killing, coffins, Bruce’s mask, Jason’s mask, and the cave—and Bruce moves on to Tim.

“I’m fine, B. I haven’t had an episode in two weeks, my cover story is solid, and I grew up with parties like this. I can take care of myself, and I can take care of Dickie, too. I handled Jason a couple weeks ago, didn’t I? When he was panicking and you were making it worse with all the yelling?”

“Just be careful,” Bruce says.

“Sure. Whatever.”

Bruce feels a pang of guilt. He’s hurt Tim’s feelings again. He’s especially skilled in that area.

The hug he attempts is awkward, but Tim seems pleased. “I’m sorry. You’ll be great. I’m glad you’re here.”

He straightens Tim’s tie, then goes to find Jason.

Jason is in a bad mood. He doesn’t like the suit, he ran out of patience with his splint days ago, and the cowl, which he’s been extra attached to lately, was confiscated after his shower. The only thing that could make things worse on the Jason front is him waking up.

Tim had been very enthusiastic when Jason spoke to the social workers. Bruce still isn't sure how he feels about the whole thing in general, but he knows everything will blow up in their faces if Jason is suddenly loud and confused halfway through the gala.

Maybe, Bruce thinks as he checks that Jason’s buttons are buttoned and his laces are tied, he should get really high quality ear plugs for Dick and Jason. He could tell people they were hearing aids, and the boys could wear them in public all the time without blowing Bruce’s cover or even looking strange. Although he suspects the noise-cancelling cowl is about the shape of the thing, just as much as the function it performs.

Alfred comes to collect them long before Bruce is ready.

-

Tim’s first thought when they step into the room is that everyone is way older than they should be. Then he remembers that he’s not thirteen anymore. He’s nearly seventeen, and the Tim that belongs here is nearly nineteen.

They’d made really sure, before bringing Tim out of the manor, that no one would recognize him. They might mistake the two Tims for brothers, at the worst, if they saw them standing side by side. (Which they won’t, because the other Tim is still abroad.) Tim has grown up all wrong—too short, too thin, too pale, features mostly normal at a glance, but hopelessly distorted if you happened to know what he looked like before. It won’t be a problem.

Tim doesn’t feel sixteen. He’s spent most of the last few years drugged so heavily he was barely awake. He catches himself looking for the few other kids who get dragged to these things, then he remembers they’re all in college here.

Dick tugs on the bottom of his suit jacket. “Are you okay, Tim?”
It’s not the kind of question Talon-Dick asks, which means Bruce must have given him some specific instruction about looking out for Tim.

“I’m good. How about you? See anyone you killed?”

Shit. Did he actually just say that out loud? No wonder Bruce kind of hates him, aside from the murder thing.

“Never mind. Don’t answer that.”

Dick stops scanning the room for victims. He lets Tim take his hand.

Dick thinks Bruce is turning Tim into a Talon; he’d tried to give him advice about it one day. Tim keeps forgetting to mention it to Bruce.

“Hi! Can I ask you boys a couple questions?”

It takes Tim a minute to recognize Vicki Vale, which is just as well since he shouldn’t recognize her at all.

“Sorry,” he says. “My dad said not to talk to strangers. Or reporters.”

“Bruce Wayne?” she presses.

“My dad.”

“His dad is dead,” Dick offers helpfully.

Vicki mumbles something apologetic about Tim’s loss, and he pulls Dickie away. He’s not in the mood to talk about his imaginary dead family.

-

Cassandra likes the party. Mostly. There are too many people, and too many of them want to talk to her, but mostly it isn't bad. The music is nice, the food is good, and everyone is dressed up pretty.

Alfred took her to the tailor and let her pick out the fabric for her dress; Bruce and her brothers all have the same fabric in their front pockets.

Jason is playing with his fabric now, following her while she wanders. Cassandra likes having Jason where she can see him. She would like to have Dick and Tim where she could see them, too, but Tim did not want a babysitter, and Bruce left Dick with him for back-up.

She scans the room for people who are problems. The lady talking to Dick and Tim is a problem, but they must know it, because they walk away before Cassandra can get involved. She finds the people Bruce told her to especially look out for—the social workers he showed her pictures of—but she doesn’t think they’ll be a problem. Their bodies say suspicion and worry and good intentions, and she thinks if they understand how bad they scared Jason before, taking him away from Bruce, they won’t bother him now. Cassandra will keep track of them just in case.

There is a fancy woman stealing things; Jason is already staring at her when Cassandra notices. He’s dropped his fabric, and is pulling at the cast again. Cassandra picks up the fabric and redirects him.

The woman is friendly, and people seem to know and like her. Every time she stops to talk to someone, she leaves something behind and takes something else away. Cassandra is too far away to see details, but no one else sees anything.
Except for Jason, who the woman must notice staring, because now she is coming toward them. Jason is still playing with his fabric, but absently. His body says I know you and I like you and I trust you, so Cassandra decides to be polite.

“Hello,” the woman says. “Cassie Wayne, isn’t it?”

“Cassandra.”

“Of course.” She smiles brightly, not quite real. “And I suppose this young man must be Jason.”

Jason’s smile is completely real, and it makes the woman’s smile more real, too.

“I’m Selina Kyle. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Cassandra is saved from having to talk to another person by Jason, who manages to dominate the conversation without saying a single word. He shows Selina his fabric square, and she signs his cast. She doesn’t even try to steal from them, but Cassandra watches, delighted, as Jason casually swaps out his fabric square for whatever Selina has in her clutch.

- Selina is having a good night. Not particularly lucrative, but that’s hardly the point of nights like this. She’d started the evening with a plastic ring from a gumball machine, which she’d swapped for a wedding band, which she’d exchanged for a solitaire ring, which she’d exchanged for a broach, for a bracelet, for another bracelet, for a watch, and so on. Her goal is a chaotic end to the night, with no one in possession of their own valuables.

It’s going splendidly so far, and she’s met the oldest two of Wayne’s new kids.

The girl is smart, and almost certainly not actually Brucie’s, though it’s anyone’s guess if he realizes that. The boy is precious—he’s turned up a broken wrist and another adopted brother in the last couple weeks, and there have been…rumors. It’s ridiculous; Brucie Wayne is completely harmless, and everyone knows it. Too damn stupid to date, for all the money in the world, but sweet, and he’s got that butler around for anything that requires actual competence.

One of those kids, she realizes ten minutes later, when her fingers twist around silk instead of a gold chain, is a very talented pick-pocket.

- The kids are fine, Bruce tells himself. Jason is with Kate. Cassandra is nodding seriously to something Dick is saying, and Tim is standing a few feet away. He’s drinking sparkling cider, holding two more glasses for his siblings, and at some point in the night he’s acquired a nametag that says “Recently Orphaned—Don’t Ask Me How.”

Bruce decides he doesn’t want to know.

He’s talking to Jim Gordon, or trying to. It feels like it’s been months since he’s talked to an adult who wasn’t his butler or his cousin—who wasn’t family. There’s the social workers, of course, but as far as what he gets out of the conversation, that’s not much different from the talking he does as Batman.

He should be nicer. It’s not their faults he’s withholding enormous amounts of information about the kids.
He keeps getting distracted from what Jim is saying by the compulsive need to know what his children are doing. Dick has latched on to Alfred as he walks past, and is now shadowing him closely. Tim and Cassandra are talking; Tim is gesturing wildly, and Cassandra looks amused. Jason is still with Kate, and they’ve stopped to talk to Renee Montoya.

“Sorry, Jim. I didn’t catch that. Hey, how’s Barbara been?”

Jim shakes his head, giving up on whatever he was trying to tell Bruce. “She’s good. Came home briefly for Christmas. I think she’s getting serious about that boy.”

Bruce has no idea what boy Jim’s talking about, which probably means they’ve already discussed Barbara while he wasn’t listening. Thank God his cover’s a ditz; this is the most stressful party he’s ever hosted, and there haven’t even been any super villain attacks.

Speak of the devil.

“Brucie!” Selina Kyle says, coming toward them. “Great party. Great family.” She pulls a blue pocket square matching Bruce’s from her clutch. “I don’t know which of your kids has such sticky fingers, but I was hoping we could negotiate a hostage exchange?”

“Hostage exchange?” he repeats. For a moment the baffled Brucie act is genuine, then he puts the pieces together, pulling a necklace from his pocket. “Um. Jason gave this to me, about twenty minutes ago?”

“Jason? Really?” She takes the necklace, and Bruce allows it, though it certainly wasn’t hers to start with. She leans close to tuck the pocket square in Bruce’s pocket beside his own, patting him on the chest. “Fair warning, Brucie, I think your newest boy is a little drunk.”

Distracted, Bruce reaches out absently to retrieve the watch she’s just removed from his wrist. Tim was drinking sparkling cider, right?

“Sorry, Jim. Gotta go.”

Tim doesn’t think he’s drunk, exactly. Maybe a little tipsy. Not that he has a whole lot of experience to judge from. But he’s been drunk before. There was that time with Harley, after they—well. There was that time with Harley.

Bruce had dragged him out of the party and put him to bed like some little kid, then gone back for Dick and Jason.

Dick had been visibly irritated about it—there’s still an extrovert somewhere under all that trauma. And he’d been actually chatty with Cass earlier.

Tim decides abruptly that he doesn’t want to think about Dick. Not zombie-Dick, who thinks they’re all in line to become monsters, and not real Dick, who never came back for him.

Kon, he decides. He’ll think about Kon.

The appearance of Superboy in his window a few minutes later has a very sobering effect. It’s possible he’s been thinking about Kon out loud. It’s possible he’s a little drunker than he thought.

It’s not possible that Kon is finally here, now, after three years of Tim missing him, in a different universe where he doesn’t know him.
“Conner?”

He just stares at Tim, which probably means he doesn’t go by that name here, which probably means he’s never even met Superman.

When random strangers talk to Kon or Clark at home, it’s usually—Kon probably thinks Tim’s some drunk guy with a celebrity crush. Why did he come?

“I don’t usually answer shit like this,” he says, like he’s reading Tim’s mind, “but your heartbeat is weird, man.”

“Oh.”

“So are you okay, or what? I got places to be.”

Kon is his age, here, but then Kon’s aging has always been weird.

“Dude,” he says, impatient.

“Sorry. It’s probably the Joker. He electrocuted me a bunch—must have thrown the rhythm off.”

“Someone electrocuted you?”

Tim’s brain is starting to catch up with him. “Yeah. Local psychopath. Look, you gotta go. My… um, my dad is gonna flip.”

But Kon seems actually interested now. “Why would your dad flip?”

“Superpowered stranger in his drunk teenager’s bedroom at midnight?”

Kon shrugs. “What’s a Joker?”

“I told you. Local psychopath. He kidnapped me, tortured me for a while. It’s fine, Kon. Batman rescued me. Kind of.”

“You keep calling me Kon. Before I got here, when I was just listening, too. What’s that about?”

Tim sighs. There is no way he’s going to be able to hide Superboy from Bruce at this point. “You’re Superman’s clone, right? I know who he is. I know where he lives. I know where his family lives. If you leave now, and come back when I call, I’ll tell you everything.”

Kon stares at him for a moment, then nods sharply and goes back out the window.

Seconds later, Cass lets herself into the room. “Tim? You have company?”

Bruce is in the hall behind her. Yeah, Tim’s screwed.

But he got to see Kon. And if he can get around Bruce (and give up a bunch of sensitive information to someone who might be working with Lex Luthor), he’ll get to see him again.
“Hey Tim?” Jason calls.

“Yeah?”

“Who the fuck are you?”

“I’m your foster brother from another alternate universe. You’re dead there.”

“Oh.”

The timer falls to zero, and everything flashes and burns, and Jason didn’t think he could hurt more than he already did but he was wrong. Then he’s staring at his reflection in the second upstairs bathroom, and his face is half a foot higher than it should be in the mirror, and the J burned into his cheek is a well-healed scar.

Jason makes it to the toilet just in time to throw up. Then he goes to find his dad.

Dad barely glances up when Jason finds him in the library, which is oddly reassuring—things may feel really weird for him right now, but at least it’s only him. He may not remember it, but he’s supposed to be here and walking around and somehow not dead.

“Good morning, Jason. No cowl today?”

“What?”

He looks back up at him, almost frighteningly intense. “Jason?”

“I think something’s wrong, Dad.”

A little of the intensity fades away, and Jason sits down on the couch beside him, leaning in when Dad wraps an arm around his shoulders. He doesn’t quite fit like he’s supposed to.

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

Jason doesn’t ask how he guessed that’s the problem. Dad just knows things. “I was with the Joker. There was the—the explosion. Then I was upstairs.”

He hums, stroking Jason’s hair. “You’ve been sick a long time, Jason.”

That’s weird. He’s called him Jason three times in a row now. Dad almost never calls him Jason. Jay, Jay-lad, kid, son, champ, sport. Old Sport, for an infuriating two weeks after they read The Great Gatsby together. Never Jason. Whatever’s going on, it’s worse than he thought.

“How long?”

He doesn’t answer.
“How long have I been sick, Dad?”

“You turned eighteen last month.”

Oh.

“I think I’m going to throw up again.”

He doesn’t move away, which is weird too. Dad can do blood and guts just fine, but he hates getting puked on.

“Do you need a bucket?”

“No. I need, I think, I think I just want to lie down for a while.”

“Okay. I’ll come upstairs with you.”

Jason is perfectly capable of getting upstairs by himself, but he’s really freaked out, and he’d like his dad where he can see him. Things get weird again when they take a wrong turn in the hallway.

“Um, Dad? Where ya going?”

He stops abruptly, turning back to look at Jason. “Oh. You’ve been sleeping in my room lately.”

He looks…nervous, and Jason starts to feel uncomfortable. Something weird is definitely going on.

“Right. Well, I wanna go to my room now.”

“Jason.”

He takes off down the hall, Dad following.

The room is empty. It doesn’t look like he’s been sleeping in his dad’s room lately. It doesn’t look like he’s been sleeping in his room for three years. It looks like he’s never even been here.

“Where’s my stuff? Dad? What’s going on?”

“Jason—”

A kid he’s never seen in his life comes out of the room across the hall and interrupts. “He’s not your dad, Jason. You’re in an alternate universe.”

“Tim!” Dad snaps. Bruce. Not Dad?

“He needed to know,” the kid says.

“I was going to break it to him gently.”

Jason’s heard enough. He backs into the empty bedroom and locks the door behind him. Dad—Bruce. Not Dad. Bruce and the kid stop arguing after a while, and Bruce tries to coax Jason out again. He shouts a lot in response. He doesn’t understand, and he doesn’t want to. His dad is wrong, his stuff is missing, and his head hurts.

-  

Bruce knows it’s serious when even Alfred can’t get Jason out. Jason loves Alfred.
“Hey Tim,” he shouts through the door, “is that my Alfred?”

“No.”

“Fuck off, Alfred.”

Bruce wants to be mad at Tim, but really, any chance of breaking things to Jason gently was lost when he found his bedroom.

“Hey Tim?” Jason calls.

“Yeah?”

“Who the fuck are you?”

“I’m your foster brother from another alternate universe. You’re dead there.”

“Oh.”

Bruce finally manages to send Tim downstairs, with strict instructions not to contact Superboy until he’s done more research. Alfred’s given him back the multiverse tech so he can learn more about various versions of the meta who broke into his drunk teenager’s bedroom three nights ago.

He sits outside Jason’s door and starts telling him the whole story, unsure if he’s listening or not.

“Hey Bruce?” Jason says after about an hour, a pained pause before Bruce’s name.

“Yes, Jason?”

“Can you go away?”

“I’ll leave if you unlock the door. I want to be able to get to you if you go catatonic again.”

“Fine.”

Bruce waits to hear the lock click before walking away, hoping selfishly that Jason will be catatonic again when he comes back.

He finds Dick sitting on the landing, with sunglasses and a blanket but no headphones; the boy smiles hesitantly, and Bruce crouches down beside him.

“You won’t be causing me any trouble today, will you?” It’s not the sort of rhetorical question he should be posing to Dick, of all people, but he’s tired and stressed and not thinking clearly.

“I’m a good boy,” Dick says, sounding only a little anxious.

“You are,” Bruce assures him.

Dick reaches out, and Bruce lifts him up, allowing him to climb onto his shoulders. He braces himself as Dick lunges off and grabs the chandelier, swinging up and settling on top of it, one leg dangling. He’s got the stature of a gymnast and the build of an assassin, short and slim, and is just beginning to be too big for this. Given that the chandelier seems to be the only place he’s actually warm enough, Bruce doubts he’ll let a growth spurt stop him.

“Okay, Dick?” he checks.
Dick offers a thumbs-up in response, something Cassandra taught him recently.

He’s been doing better lately, Bruce thinks. Since Cassandra came, since they’d convinced him that Jason wouldn’t hurt him. He’d apparently loved the party, despite clinging like a limpet to Tim, Cassandra, and Alfred by turns for the entire thing.

Tim had mentioned the day after the party, in an attempt to distract Bruce from the Superboy problem, that Dick thought he was being turned into a Talon. Bruce had not been successfully distracted, but he, Tim, and Cassandra together had managed to explain the Joker venom in a way he seemed to both understand and believe. Dick has warmed up to Bruce significantly in the few days since.

He leaves Dick in the chandelier and goes down to the cave to research Superboy. And Damian, but Alfred doesn’t need to know about that.

-  

Jason finds Dad in the cave. He woke up in a room that looks like his, but it was empty, and his head hurts like he’s been crying a lot. His cast is gone; he thinks he took it off himself but he can’t quite remember. His head is too loud, and he can’t find his cowl.

Talking sounds too hard, so he makes bat ears on his head with his fingers, and waits in the cave while Dad goes to find it for him. He thinks maybe he’s supposed to be mad at Dad, but he can’t remember why. Maybe he will when he puts the cowl on and it’s quiet enough to think again.
Dick sits by the window with his book and tries hard not to bounce.

It doesn’t work.

Talons are silent and still, says a nasty voice inside his head. He ignores it, and stops trying to hold still. Bruce says he isn’t a Talon anymore, and Dick is trying hard to believe him. He is happy, and his body wants to bounce, so he is going to bounce.

“Good job,” Alfred says, looking down at the page where Cassandra has neatly copied out her name.

They’re attempting a lesson in reading and writing. Cassandra doesn’t seem to care much, but she’s humoring him, for now at least. Dick has done nothing but glare down at the paper in front of him.

Dick is a bright boy, at least in matters not pertaining to human relations, and at eight, he should have learned to read and write before being taken by the Court. But he refuses to even touch the pencil provided. It’s the first time a lack of cooperation on Dick’s part has ever been due to anything but a lack of comprehension.

“Dick,” Alfred tries, “what do you remember from before you were a Talon?”

“No,” Dick says flatly.

Alfred blinks in surprise. That question is usually answered with a blank, somewhat puzzled stare. Dick is, Alfred realizes, actually acting like a teenage boy.

“Just write out your name, Dick, and we can be done for the day.”

Dick grabs his pencil, but instead of copying out Alfred’s carefully printed “Dick,” scrawls “Richard John Grayson” in a messy, childish hand. Finished, he stomps out of the library.

Cassandra laughs. “It’s okay, Alfred. He is being a person. Not always good at it yet.”

Alfred turns his attention to Cassandra’s education, but makes a note to inform Bruce that Dick does, at least, remember something from before the Court of Owls. He suspects any memories are a recent development—Dick’s emotional well-being has been improving in leaps and bounds over the past month, and his confusion in the past has always seemed genuine.

“Superboy,” Tim whispers. It’s the perfect time to talk to Kon. Bruce is dealing with an Arkham breakout, and won’t be back in time to interfere. Jason, who’s been catatonic and completely silent again since the day he cut off his own cast, had woken up from a nightmare shouting for his dad, and though he still doesn’t seem to be fully lucid, it didn’t look, when Tim snuck out, like Alfred would be able to calm him down anytime soon.

Dick’s been recovering his pre-Talon memories slowly (trauma-induced amnesia, Leslie says), and
as far as they can tell, has just remembered his parents falling. Cass is fielding that one, leaving Tim free to escape to the very edge of the grounds, where no one is likely to find him.

“Superboy,” he says again.

Kon lands. “It’s been three weeks.”

“Sorry. I had to get around my dad.”

Kon doesn’t look like he cares. “Well?”

Tim takes a deep breath. Bruce is going to kill him, but he’s already killed Bruce, so that’s only fair. “My name is Tim Drake. I’m from an alternate universe where we’re friends. You’re the clone of Superman and Lex Luthor. Your Kryptonian name is Kon-El, and your civilian ID where I come from is Conner Kent.

“Superman goes by Clark Kent. He’s a reporter in Metropolis, and he’s married to a woman named Lois Lane. You have a younger half-brother named Jon. I know more. I know everything. And I’ll tell you, but not tonight.”

“Why not tonight?”

All business. Tim looks down, twisting the hem of his shirt. He can’t tell if Kon believes him. He can’t tell if he cares.

“I miss you,” he admits.

Kon frowns. He takes several minutes to answer. “Get around your dad better next time. I’ll take you somewhere. Gotham’s too creepy at night. And don’t call me Conner. That’s weird. I don’t like it. Kon’s okay, I guess.”

He flies away before Tim can answer.

-

Cassandra takes Dick’s hand, looks both ways, and crosses the street. She has a very important job today. Bruce has dropped them off on his way to work, and she is taking Dick to a gymnastics lesson, because he needs to interact with other kids his age.

His makeup is very, very good today, and they have practiced and practiced what he should and shouldn’t say. Cassandra is going to sign the permission slip for him to be here, like Alfred taught her, and then she is going to watch the class. When it’s over, they’ll walk back to Bruce’s office together, and practice reading and writing until Bruce takes them home for lunch.

Cassandra has back-up makeup in her purse for emergencies, and a new cell phone, also for emergencies. It’s the first time they’ve had Dick in public when they didn’t absolutely have to, and everyone is nervous. But it will be good.

-

Dick sits by the window with his book and tries hard not to bounce.

It doesn’t work.

Talons are silent and still, says a nasty voice inside his head. He ignores it, and stops trying to hold still. Bruce says he isn’t a Talon anymore, and Dick is trying hard to believe him. He is happy, and
his body wants to bounce, so he is going to bounce.

None of the kids he played with today were Talons, and none of them were important enough to be killed by a Talon, and the gymnastics wasn’t hard enough to count as training, so probably Cassandra was telling the truth and it was just for fun.

He picks up his book and tries to stop bouncing again. Tim said that if he wasn’t sure he was safe, it was good to test it by saying no to little things, so he wouldn’t get punished too much if he was wrong. But he said no to Alfred three times without being in trouble, so now he’s trying to be good.

His book is much harder than Cassandra’s, even though she’s older. It isn’t fair. He hates books, and he hates reading, and he hates the way the words swim around on the page. There’s a word for why he hates reading so much, and he thinks he should maybe tell Bruce, but he can’t remember. It’s from the other life, when he was warm and loud and little, and the bright lights didn’t bother him.

He puts down the book and spends a few minutes remembering, then goes to the desk.

“Bruce?”

Bruce looks up and smiles at him. “Yes, Dick?”

“I’m lexic.”

He frowns, but the thinking frown, not the scary one. “Lexic?”

“Delexic?”

“Dyslexic?” Bruce asks.

That’s the word. Dick nods. Bruce smiles again.

“All right. We’ll have to tell Alfred so he can adjust your lesson plan to help. Do you want to take a break and meet some of the people I work with?”

Dick thinks about it. They will be nice to him, because they work for Bruce and Bruce says he is important and safe. They won’t be too loud, because Bruce told them he has Sensory Issues. Also, if he is going to meet people, he should do it now, while all the gunk is still on his skin. (He thinks his skin used to be darker and less see-through and more like other people’s, but he doesn’t like to remember that. It makes him feel sick.)

“Yes,” he tells Bruce. “I want to meet the people.”
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Cassandra checks on her family, now that they’re safe at home again. Bruce is talking to Selina; her body language is irritated. She feels affection and sadness for Jason, but not love-love-love like Bruce does.

Bruce loves all of them, but for Cassandra he feels gratitude-relief-love. For Tim he feels frustration-guilt-love, and for Dick it is guilt-sadness-love. Jason is love-love-love, which makes sense because until the last few weeks Jason felt love-love-love for Bruce, too, uncomplicated by anything else.

Chapter Notes

Early update because my computer has been having fits and I have to take advantage of this functionality while it lasts.

(BTW I'll be starting NaNoWriMo next week but it shouldn't impact the update schedule.)


He’s in Dad—not Dad. He’s in Bruce’s bed. Bruce isn't there. He grabs the cowl on the nightstand before getting up—he thinks he’s been wearing it a lot, so maybe he’ll get farther with it. He wants to do some investigating before they find out he's himself again.

He passes zombie Dick, who waves from the top of the chandelier, and Fake Alfred, who says something he can’t hear with the cowl on. He smiles and keeps on going.

The family picture in the front hall is gone. Jason’s special shelves in the library are full of boring books he hates. There are no pictures of him. There are no pictures of Dick. The birth certificates and adoption papers are still locked up in Bruce’s office, though.

He sees Bruce coming in his peripheral vision and pulls off the cowl.

“That’s not my name.”

“What?”

“Jason Peter Todd? You adopted me when I was twelve. My name is Jason Wayne.”

“I’m sorry,” Bruce says. “I didn’t know.”

“I want to go home,” Jason says. “I want my real dad. Take me home.”
“I can’t. The technology doesn’t work that way.”

“Then make it work that way. You’re Batman. You can do anything.”

“Jason,” Bruce says.

“What?” His face is still Dad’s face, and Jason can still read it. There’s something bad. Something worse.

“Jason, there was a riot in Arkham. About two months after I brought you here. Your Bruce…”

“He’s dead.” Jason doesn’t bother waiting for a confirmation; he doesn’t need to. “My dad is dead.”

“Jason…”

“No. My dad is dead.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Leave me alone.”

Jason runs out of the room. He hasn’t packed an escape bag in years, but it’s not the sort of thing you forget. The paperwork still in his hand when Bruce showed up. A jacket. A hat—not the cowl. Sturdy shoes, spare underwear. Backpack. Water bottles. Ready-made, nonperishable food. It takes a few hours to get everything together without being caught, especially since nothing is quite where he expects it to be.

There’s one rough moment when he runs into some girl—Cassandra? He thinks Bruce mentioned her. But she just nods at him and keeps on walking. Jason doesn’t think she’ll tell on him.

Bruce really, really didn’t want to tell Jason what happened to his Bruce. (There must have been something he could have done, some way to foresee this and prevent it from happening, even from across the multiverse.)

He lets him run off. The best case scenario is that he’ll calm down and let Bruce talk to him in a couple hours. The most likely is that he’ll slip back into catatonia again, and it’ll be a few weeks before they can address the problem.

Regardless, he’s going to need some space. Bruce leaves it for a few hours, or tries to. It’s hard, giving his son space when he’s so upset, but as far as Jason’s concerned, he’s not Bruce’s son. Jason’s dad is dead.

He tries so hard to leave it alone, but when lunchtime comes and goes, he decides to at least check on him.

Jason isn’t in Bruce’s room or his own, and he isn’t in the library or the cave. If he’s not easy to find, he’s probably still fully aware of himself, and probably doesn’t want to be found. Bruce decides to let him be.

It’s when dinner-time comes and goes that Bruce starts to really worry. Jason isn’t in any of his usual places. Bruce gathers the rest of the family, and they sweep the entire manor.

He isn't there.
Alfred finds food missing in the pantry. Bruce finds himself short nearly a thousand dollars cash. Cassandra admits to catching him in the process of packing up to go—she hadn’t mentioned it before because he had been desperate, and seemed to know what he was doing.

“I forgot it wasn’t his Gotham,” she says.

“It’s fine, Cassandra. We’ll find him.”

It’s not fine, and Cassandra can probably tell. If Jason slips back into catatonia while he’s out there…

They skim through hours of video footage from the entire manor. Tim is sharp and focused, clearly worried. Dick doesn’t seem to understand the problem, but is obediently pointing at the screen every time Jason appears.

“He wants to be away from you,” Cassandra says, watching video-Jason raid the pantry, “but he doesn’t want to be alone. He wants comfort. Who does he trust?”

Bruce runs through the list of candidates in his head. Barbara—not here. Kate—too close to Bruce. Jim—too close to Batman. Selina—

“You said he recognized Selina? At the party?”

Cassandra nods. Bruce makes the call.

It’s not entirely unusual for Selina to get a call from Bruce Wayne. She’d dumped him very politely, and he’ll still occasionally invite her to things when he isn’t in the mood for a date that expects something from him. He hasn’t called her since he started collecting orphans, though (most likely because he hadn’t appeared at any events except the one he’d hosted), and he’s never called her at 11pm.

“Is my son there?” he asks as soon as she answers the phone.

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“Jason’s missing. He likes you. He might come to you.”

“Missing?” She’d known Bruce was an idiot at the best of times, but really. “You mean to tell me there’s a teenage boy with special needs and designer clothes alone in Gotham at night?”

“I’m going to look for him now,” Bruce says, sounding a touch impatient, “but I’m hoping he’ll come to you.”

“Why would he—”

“Selina. I will give you a million dollars if you keep my son safe until he either falls asleep or is ready to come home.”

“Sure, Bruce,” she says, mostly humoring him. She’s never even told him where she lives; Jason certainly won’t be able to find her. Maybe Catwoman could check some places.

Ten minutes later someone knocks on her door.

He has a black eye, a split lip, and a large rip in his expensive jeans.
“Jason,” she says, horrified.

He smiles brightly, stepping past her to let himself in. “You know me. I wasn’t sure you would. Tried Babs first, but the Clocktower was empty.”

“Jason,” she says again, “your eye.” She’ll work out what the hell is going on here when he’s taken care of physically.

“Yeah, I got in a fight. Just a little one. Ice?”

“Sure.” She goes to the kitchen, watching as he makes himself at home on her couch. “Your dad called me. He’s worried sick.”

“My dad is dead,” Jason tells her, voice mostly flat, just the hint of a tremor.

It sounds like something that’s news to him. Did he come out of whatever condition he was in when they met, and find himself suddenly orphaned and living with strangers?

“Bruce, then,” she amends.

“Are you going to tattle?”

“I’ll call him and tell him you’re here, so he won’t worry, but he’s asked me to take care of you until you’re ready to go back.”

He mutters something she doesn’t catch, and she finds some peas in the freezer. When she gets back to the couch, Jason has pulled the lace from one shoe and is dangling it over the back to play with her cats, calling them by name.

“I think you’d better tell me what’s going on,” she says, as calmly as she can manage. She knows this kid has never been in her apartment, had never even met her until a month ago.

Jason takes the frozen peas and pulls a cat into his lap. “You won’t believe me.”

“Try.”

“Bruce Wayne is Batman. I’m from an alternate universe where Bruce Wayne is still Batman, but also my dad. My—that Bruce Wayne is dead, so this Bruce Wayne found me and brought me here, along with a bunch of other kids who lost their versions of him in other worlds. But I was hurt real bad before he found me, and I didn’t understand at first that he wasn’t my dad, and when I did I told him to send me back, and that’s when he told me my dad was dead. That was this morning.”

He was right. Selina doesn’t believe him. The kid is delusional at best, and at worst a fantastic liar. But how does he know her cats’ names?

“Ask him,” Jason says. “You’re calling anyway, right?”

“Oh,” Bruce says when she brings it up. “I was hoping he wouldn’t mention that.”

“It’s ridiculous,” she says, “of course.”

“Well, Catwoman, in the spirit of full disclosure…”

Selina hangs up the phone five minutes later, certain that Brucie Wayne is, absurdly, Batman.
Jason, by now, has tossed the thawing peas aside, and is on the ground playing with one of her new kittens.

“Do you know that one’s name?” she asks.

“Only the older ones. This world’s a few years ahead of mine. Dad—Bruce says the me here is at university in Europe, working on his Masters.”

“Would you like to keep her?” she offers.

“Bruce would flip.”

“I imagine that’s a large part of the appeal.”

He grins at her, re-splitting the lip that’s just stopped bleeding. “Thanks.”

“How’d we meet here, anyway?” he asks later, when his new kitten is curled sleepily around his ankle.

She tells him about the party, and he grins at her again.

“I’m smart, you know. Even when I’m not quite all there. He says I was living on the street like that for two years.”

“Do you remember anything?”

He reaches down to pet the kitten, avoiding her eyes. “A little. I remember digging out of my grave after the Joker killed me. I had sort of a flashback about it on the way here—that’s how I got in the fight. Bumped into some guy, and he thought I was trying to start something.” He looks back up at her. “Hey, Selina?”

“Yes?”

“Are you really gonna let me stay a while?”

“Of course.”

“Can I have some food then? I got into it with Da—with Bruce as soon as I woke up, and I haven’t really eaten anything all day.”

Selina goes to order Chinese. She has the feeling her life is about to take a very strange turn.

Selina doesn’t bring Jason home the next morning, or the next. His previous record is about three hours awake and aware; at this point, Bruce mostly expects him to remain so. He skips work and patrol, observing the bedrooms of Jasons in various universes and doing his best to mimic the effect in the empty room Jason had locked himself away in.

Bruce isn’t entirely certain Jason will be willing to come back at all. He tries not to think about it. Surely Selina won’t be willing to keep the boy indefinitely.

She arrives at the manor late that night, leading Jason by the hand. He has his hood pulled well over his face, and a kitten cradled in his free arm.

“He’s been like this since I woke up this morning,” Selina says, “but I didn’t want to bring him back
until he nodded when I suggested it.” She disentangles her hand from Jason’s. “All right, sweetie?”

He nods and takes a few steps toward Bruce, using one hand to mimic Bat ears. With the cowl found and donned, he and his kitten wander off. Bruce turns his attention to Selina.

“You gave him a pet?”

“I did. And if you let him keep it I’ll forget about that million dollars you promised me.”

“Now I’ll have to get them all pets.”

“That sounds like your problem, Batman.”

He grimaces. “We should talk.”

“We should,” she agrees.

“After I check on Jason.”

“I’d wait on that. He’s still roaring mad at you.”

“About what? He never remembers, when he goes catatonic again.”

“Yeah, well, you told him his dad was dead. I imagine that’s the sort of info that sticks. Just give him some space, Bruce. And tell him to call me next time he needs to get out of here. He’s a great kid.”

Cassandra checks on her family, now that they’re safe at home again. Bruce is talking to Selina; her body language is irritated. She feels affection and sadness for Jason, but not love-love-love like Bruce does.

Bruce loves all of them, but for Cassandra he feels gratitude-relief-love. For Tim he feels frustration-guilt-love, and for Dick it is guilt-sadness-love. Jason is love-love-love, which makes sense because until the last few weeks Jason felt love-love-love for Bruce, too, uncomplicated by anything else.

Tonight, Jason’s body says danger, danger, hide, like it usually does, but there is also confusion and deep, deep sadness. Then the kitten climbs onto his Bat-ears, and he laughs. A little of the sadness lifts, and Cassandra moves on.

Alfred is worried for Jason. Tim is up to something, but she doesn’t know what yet; nothing very bad. Dick is hard to find. He is in his bedroom, sitting in the bed, not even a little bit tired.

“Do you want to come down and see Jason?” she asks.

“I am supposed to stay here until Alfred comes to get me in the morning,” he tells her.

Cassandra frowns. Dick is doing much better, but sometimes they will run into things like this—something Bruce probably mentioned months ago that he has interpreted as a very important rule.

“You should come downstairs with everyone else.”

“I am supposed to stay here,” he says firmly.

“Not tonight,” Cassandra says, even more firmly. “Tonight you are supposed to come downstairs and play with Jason. I will tell Bruce.”
Dick will like the kitten, she thinks. And when Selina leaves she will make Bruce explain to him that he does not have to stay locked in his room.

“Jason,” Bruce says quietly. “Jason, can you look at me please?”

Jason turns slowly, eyes stopping just to the right of Bruce’s head. He doesn’t bother pushing for more; it’s been a rough few days.

“Do you want to stay in my room tonight, or do you want your own bedroom?”

It takes a few minutes to get anything out of him, but eventually Jason points down the hall, away from Bruce’s room.

Bruce is starting to think he’s really screwed things up with Jason.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

“Hey, B!” Tim shouts. “I’m going out with friends.”

Kon grabs him and flies away before Bruce can object.

Jason wakes up to something in his mouth, which turns out to be a tail. Right. Selina gave him a kitten, mostly to irritate Da—to irritate Bruce. But Jason must have missed his reaction, because he’s clearly back in the manor now. In his room.

He sits up to look around, thinking fondly about what a creep his dad is. This actually looks like his room, and spying must have been involved somewhere. His books are on his shelves—just the same shelves he remembers, and a lot of the books are even the right editions. The quilt he’s kicked to the foot of the bed in his sleep is the same color and pattern. The nightstand and the lamp aren’t quite like his, but they’re similar, and the desk and the dresser match. The room has even been painted.

He won’t find his clothes in that dresser, though, and his notes won’t be written in the margins of those books. It’s a nice effort, and he appreciates it. But he’s still missing nearly three years of his life, and his dad is still dead, and the Bruce Wayne of this world is still just a stranger wearing his dad’s face.

Jason rolls over to go back to sleep. Maybe that fuzzy feeling will come back when he wakes up, and he won’t have to think about it anymore. If his head goes fuzzy enough, he won’t have to bother telling Dad and Bruce apart.

- “Hey, B!” Tim shouts. “I’m going out with friends.”

Kon grabs him and flies away before Bruce can object.

This is good, Bruce thinks. Mostly. Sure, Tim literally flew away with a stranger who has superpowers, but he’s out of the house. Bruce has been trying to do that for weeks. Come to the grocery store, Tim. Come to the park, Tim. Come to the store and I’ll buy you a phone while we’re there. You can have anything you want if you come out of the manor and pick it yourself.

Nothing. He just keeps insisting it’s dangerous, still unable to cope with misplaced guilt over everything that happened after the Joker.

Bruce is a fan of anyone who can get Tim away from the house. And if anything goes wrong, well. He has a large stash of kryptonite, and knows how to contact both Clark Kent and Lex Luthor.

- Jason hates the foggy feeling in his brain. He sort of remembers wanting it, earlier, because he was upset, but now he’s still upset, only he can’t quite remember why, and that makes it worse. You can’t stop being upset if you don’t know what you’re upset about.
He gets an awful, heavy feeling in his stomach every time he thinks about Dad. He wants his brother. Dick is the best when there’s trouble with Dad. But there’s something wrong with Dick.

He’s Dick, but he’s not Jason’s Dick.

It doesn’t make sense. He goes to find Alfred. Alfred always makes sense, and Alfred always makes things better.

Bruce finds a Damian. He’s found many Damians, but most of them have a Talia. Most of them, even if they are murderers, are sane and physically healthy, and are not alone and unloved in their worlds.

This particular Damian is fifteen. Talia died when he was two. Bruce, after his time with the League of Assassins, decided to focus on saving Gotham legally, with judicious application of his excessive wealth, and leave crime-fighting to the comic books. Damian likely doesn’t even know who his father is. And even if he does, this Bruce probably couldn’t handle him.

He shouldn’t be left alone with Ra’s and the League. He doesn’t seem particularly happy there, which likely has something to do with the fact that after his mother’s death, he doesn’t appear to have begun training, or even interacted with Ra’s, until age seven or eight. Clearly, he belongs in this world, with a family who loves him.

Unfortunately, being fully aware of himself and his surroundings, Damian can’t just be grabbed like the other boys. Bruce will have to convince him to come. He only has one chance, and he’s afraid Damian will be a harder sell than Cassandra.

Bruce decides to bide his time. He’ll look for a good opportunity to speak to Damian, but for now he’ll focus on the children already here.

“Are you sure about this?” Tim asks, looking up at the door.

“Come on, Tim. I’m Superboy. What did you think would happen when you gave me Superman’s home address?”

“I know, Kon. But are you sure?”

Kon rings the doorbell. Tim steps forward, because there’s no reason to be freaked out by this. It’s just Clark. Tim’s known him since he was eleven.

Sure, this Clark has no idea who he is, and he’s bringing a half-clone of Lex Luthor to the home he shares with his wife and son. And Tim’s Clark must have hated him in the end, because he never answered when Tim called for help in Arkham. But still. It’s just Clark.

He smiles brightly when the door opens. “Hi, Mr. Kent! My name is Tim, and this is my friend—”

“Superboy,” Kon interrupts, destroying Tim’s plan to ease Clark into it. “I’m your clone.”

“Half-clone,” he clarifies.

“So more like a son really,” says Kon.

“Surprise,” Tim says. “It’s a boy.”
Clark just stares at them for a while. “I think you boys should head on home now,” he says, finally. Then he closes the door on them.

The boys look at each other. “Um,” Kon says. “What just happened?”

“I don’t think he believed us. To be fair, I don’t think I would believe us either.”

“I know you had a plan—sorry. I got excited.”

Tim shrugs. “It’s fine. He’ll come around.” He never really had in Tim’s world, but Kon doesn’t need to hear that right now. “We should get off his porch.”

They settle on the roof of some skyscraper on the other end of Metropolis, stopping to pick up food on the way. It’s the third time they’ve hung out like this, and Tim thinks they’re starting to actually be friends. He hopes things going badly with Clark won’t mess that up.

It’s been weeks, and Tim still thinks it was a bad idea for Bruce to bring him up into the manor. He hasn’t done anything bad yet, but that could always change. He makes sure he’s never alone with Dick or Jason or Alfred, just in case. But mostly he tries to just stay in his room. Bruce got him a cell phone a couple weeks ago, so lately he’s been hiding out and texting Kon; Bruce seems to have decided the friendship is a good idea.

Things are better with Kon. He doesn’t have to be afraid of snapping and hurting Kon, because Kon is much stronger than him. And he doesn’t have to feel guilty about hurting him before.

He can’t let this get messed up. Maybe he can make up for the anticlimactic disaster with Clark by going around him and meeting Kon’s little brother somehow? Jon, Tim thinks he’s named. About four. He doesn’t exist in Tim’s world.

“Hey, Tim. Dude, you’re spacing out on me again.”

Tim snaps out of his head and into the present, grabbing the slice of pizza Kon holds out. This is good. Everything is good.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Damian’s father grips his shoulder again. It feels warm and safe, nothing like when Grandfather touches him. “I don’t think I like your grandfather very much, Damian. Would you like to come up into the house?”

“It has been brought to my attention,” Bruce says (by Alfred, Cassandra, Kate, and most recently Selina, whose business it really isn’t), “that I’m not great at communicating with all of you. So we’re going to talk, as a family, about your brother Damian.”

It isn’t much of a conversation; Bruce doesn’t communicate because he’s bad at it. And the only people here who aren’t bad at it—Cassandra and Alfred—already know all about the Damian he’s found. Jason is pretty out of it, Dick has been quiet and withdrawn all day, and Tim is wearing his standard mask of indifference.

“Okay,” Bruce says, trying to wrap up, feeling like he’s running a board meeting for a group of puzzled children. “So Cassandra is going to go and talk to Damian, because we think he’ll respond better to her. She’s willing to stay until he’s convinced, so we’re sending her with supplies and monitoring closely. Any questions?”

There are no questions.

“Great! Is there anything anyone else would like to talk about while we’re all here?”

“I like gymnastics,” Dick reports listlessly, likely because he thinks Bruce wants the question answered more than anything else. It isn’t much of a discussion topic.

“I think I’m dating Superboy,” Tim offers in a deceptively casual voice.

Bruce frowns. He hasn’t said anything about Tim running off with Superboy regularly, despite the threat to their identities, because it’s one of the few things he seems to actually enjoy. But if they’re dating, that’s a whole new set of problems to deal with.

“You think?” he presses.

“We haven’t talked about it, but he keeps holding my hand.” He looks distinctly uncomfortable; Bruce isn’t sure why he brought this up in the first place.

“Do you want to be dating Superboy, Tim?”

“I dunno,” he mumbles. “My body is way behind. I’m not as far into puberty as I should be, and I don’t think my hormones are right.”

Bruce shouldn’t have offered to talk. He has only himself to blame for this. Why did he start with teenagers?

“Do you want to talk to Leslie about it?” This counts as medical, right?
Tim looks horrified. “I want to talk to you about it. Later. Alone. I just never get to see you alone, because you’re always so busy with Dick and Jason.”

“Oh,” Bruce says. “Okay. After we get Damian settled in?”

Bruce really doesn’t want to talk to his kind-of son about boys, or puberty, or anything like that, but apparently Tim wants to talk to him, specifically. And generally Tim doesn’t seem to like Bruce much. So this is important. He can do this.


She leans over to ruffle his hair before stepping into the alternate universe.

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Damian goes through the portal because The One Who Is All has said that it will be better. Most things, he thinks, would be better than this, and his Aunt Nyssa told him before she left that The One Who Is All could be trusted.

He knows he’s not speaking to the Cassandra Cain of this time and place. She is no older than she was when she left five years ago, renouncing the life of an assassin and converting so many of the men sent after her that Grandfather had been forced to let her go. Also, this version of her speaks fluent English, where the one he knew was fully mute, but understood Chinese and Arabic.

“You will stay with your dad,” she tells him, “and you will be my little brother.”

Damian follows her out of the woods behind his assignment’s home, and into a dim, industrial room full of people. There is an old man in a suit, a boy with a smile that doesn’t fit on his face, and a boy who is more a shell than a boy. There is an older, whiter version of Damian, and sitting at his feet, twined around one leg, is what he thinks can only be a demon; humanoid, but unnaturally colored and unnaturally still, with something corpse-like about it.

They call Grandfather the Demon’s Head, but no demon would actually come to heel for him. Damian begins to wonder if he’s made a mistake.

The man who looks like him smiles. He doesn’t stand up, probably because of the creature wrapped around his leg. “Hello, Damian. My name is Bruce. I’m your father, and I’m very glad to have you here. This is Alfred, and these are your brothers.”

The boy with the bad smile tries to really smile over top of the one that doesn’t fit. It doesn’t quite work, but Damian appreciates the effort. He is an interloper brought here from another world; no one has to be kind.

“I’m Tim,” he says. “This is Jason.” He nudges the boy next to him, who narrows empty eyes, but doesn’t otherwise react.

“Hello,” Damian says. He notices belatedly that the second boy is wearing a very peculiar hat.

“Jason is sick,” his father says, “so we need to be careful with him. Some days he’s better, but he’s usually in a bad mood on those days.”

He bends to cup the face of the creature at his feet, which blinks sleepily and reaches out its arms. His father picks it up and stands, coming a few steps closer to Damian.

“And this is your younger brother, Dick. He’s a little tired tonight.”
“Hi,” Dick says. Then he turns his head into Damian’s father’s chest.

“He’s a person?” Damian checks. As the first words he’s ever spoken to his father, they may leave something to be desired.

His father frowns. Definitely not the best words. “He is.”

“He is scared, Bruce,” the One Who is All says.

“Oh.” He shifts his grip on Dick. “I’m sorry. Yes. Dick was tortured by a group called the Court of Owls. They…changed him, but he is still just a boy. Okay?”

“Okay,” Damian repeats. He wishes she hadn’t told his father he was afraid. He is fifteen, practically an adult. Too old to be afraid of demons, even, and certainly too old to be afraid of a boy younger than him who merely looks a little odd.

His father sets Dick down on an empty chair and comes closer to Damian. He reaches out a hand he seems not to know what to do with; finally he settles it on Damian’s shoulder.

“You’re like Peter Pan,” Damian blurts out. It is probably the most foolish, childish thing he’s ever said, and he regrets it instantly. He’d read the book years ago, waiting for his target and her family to come home. He’d been badly beaten, later, for trying to spare the young daughter’s life.

“Lost boys,” he adds in explanation, when no one in the room seems disapproving. He gestures at the other three boys. “You saved them. They are all useless. My grandfather would not keep them alive.”

“I’m not useless,” the one called Tim says.

“You don’t even know if you have a boyfriend, Timmy,” says the One Who is All.

“Shut up.” He shoves at her, and she shoves back, but they are both laughing.

Damian’s father grips his shoulder again. It feels warm and safe, nothing like when Grandfather touches him. “I don’t think I like your grandfather very much, Damian. Would you like to come up into the house?”

“Tim?” Bruce says. He knocks on the door, pushing it open when he finds it unlatched.

Tim is sitting on his bed with the phone Bruce got him when it became clear that conversations with Superboy were going to be a frequent occurrence.

“Did you want to talk now?”

He looks up, tossing the phone aside. “I thought you wanted to get Damian settled in first.”

“He’s here. He’s in bed. Cassandra says he’s not a danger to himself or any of us. I’m sure there will be plenty to deal with in the morning, but right now I’m making time for you.”

“You never make time for me,” he says.

“I should. I will.”

Tim smiles, nothing of the Joker in his face. “Okay. Let’s talk.”
Dick sits in his bed, thinking. He’s not nearly as tired as he was a few hours ago, which Alfred says is what comes of being nocturnal for six years. Bruce says none of them are Talons, and Dick believes him. But no one has ever seemed as much like a Talon as Damian. Which means he’s probably scared and confused and cold, even if he’s better at being a person than Dick is. Dick doesn’t have to wait for Alfred to get out of bed anymore, and he has so many blankets he can’t even count them, even now that Alfred is teaching him math. Bruce gives him blankets and blankets and blankets, like they aren’t the best thing in the world, like he has an infinite supply.

So Dick takes a few blankets and goes to find his new brother.

“Hi,” Dick says, standing in the open door. “Do you want blankets?”

Damian is sitting in his bed with the lamp still on, shivering a little. He nods. “It’s warmer where I come from.”

Dick crawls onto the bed, dumping the blankets on his lap. “It’s colder where I come from, but that’s because the cold makes us weak and sad and easier to control. Bruce says I should be happy and comfortable and safe.”

“Do you like it here?” Damian asks. He’s still staring at Dick, but that’s okay. Dick looks weird.

“It is so good here it has to be a trap. But I’m pretty sure it’s not. No one could fake being nice for as many months as I’ve been here. They never slip. Sometimes they shout, and sometimes they’re mean by accident, but they never hurt you. Bruce touches me all the time, without hitting or kicking or squeezing wrong. It makes me feel like a person. And he is always giving me blankets.”

“I don’t think I should be here,” Damian says. “I’m dangerous.”

Dick flicks off the lamp so the only thing visible in the room is his yellow predator eyes. “So am I,” he says in his Talon voice.

But it’s the first time he’s used his Talon voice since going with Bruce, and he doesn’t like it at all. The Talon voice is for victims. The Court of Owls has sentenced you to die. He turns the lamp back on—the light isn’t bright enough to hurt his eyes—and wraps himself in one of the blankets he brought.

“Anyway,” he says when things are safe again, “you can’t be as dangerous as me and Tim, because we had to be locked up when we were new.”

“Do you think he’ll lock me up?” Damian asks.

Dick shakes his head. “Cassie said no. Cass and Alfred are the real bosses.”

Bruce makes time for Damian in the morning; the multi-universal equivalent of jet lag has him up long before the rest of the household, and Bruce collects him from his room to make his best attempt at breakfast.

“I didn’t expect you to come with Cassandra so easily,” he admits, buttering toast carefully. “The Demon’s Heir—that’s a pretty big deal.”

“I’m not his heir,” Damian says. “I was supposed to be. It’s the only reason I was allowed to be
born. But I’m not.”

He’s staring intently at the counter, clearly uncomfortable. Bruce digs around in the cupboard for peanut butter and jam, unsure what Damian will want.

“When I was very small,” Damian continues, still looking carefully away from Bruce, “I saw my mother killed and sat in her congealing blood for hours before we were found. I don’t remember this, but my grandfather says it broke me. It made me barely fit to serve beneath him, and I am allowed to remain in the League only by his mercy and the blood we share.”

“Not wanting to inflict that kind of pain on someone else isn’t a weakness, Damian.”

“It is in the League of Assassins.”

“But you’re not in the League anymore.”

Damian smiles. “I’m not, am I?”

“You’re not. So how do you want to start your normal childhood?”

He’s quiet for a moment, thinking. Then he smiles again. “Can I learn to ride a bike?”
“You rescued all of us, but I’m the only one who didn’t get a choice. Sure, Jason came under false pretenses, and Dick came because you accidentally triggered his brainwashing. But they came. You held me down until I was too weak to fight back.”

Bruce’s newest charge is calm, polite, and only slightly malnourished. Unfortunately he is, like the other four, completely covered in scars. More mentally stable than any of the other boys, and more talkative than Cassandra, Damian is able to tell Leslie the source of most injuries. Most of his stories start with “My grandfather was disappointed.”

Tim is friendly and comfortable today, allowing the most complete exam yet. Dick is the same, and she almost wishes she hadn’t been able to be so thorough; they both have more old wounds than she’d been able to categorize before. Tim shows her more electric burns than the obvious ones on his head and chest. Dick gets about twenty seconds into a description of the Talonization process before going even paler than usual, throwing up, and sobbing inconsolably for the next hour.

Leslie regrets asking; all she’s learned is that the whole thing was traumatic, which isn’t exactly news.

Bruce carries him for a while, wandering around the cave and speaking softly. After several minutes, he hands the still-crying boy off to Cassandra and goes to collect Jason from Alfred in the kitchen.

“Jason,” he says, “do you remember Leslie?”

Jason glares up at Bruce for a moment, and she realizes abruptly that he’s awake.

“Yeah,” he says, looking over at her. “I’ve known her longer than I’ve known you—known my dad. You don’t have to treat me like I’m stupid.”

“I didn’t mean—”

“Hi, Leslie,” Jason interrupts him.

It’s another horrifyingly productive exam, with Jason calmly identifying which scars are from his childhood, his time with Bruce, and after—a terrible combination of being beaten by the Joker, exploding, crawling out of his grave, and living catatonic on the streets for two years. His memory of waking up in the coffin is clear today, and when he talks about the Joker, he can tell her which scars come from a backhand and which come from a forehead with a crowbar.

He finishes the story, long after she finishes the exam, with “And then I woke up and found out my dad was dead and I was living with an imposter.” He points accusingly at Bruce, then stomps off to the other side of the cave.

“Therapy,” Leslie says when she’s through with all the kids. “They all need therapy.”

“If anyone else finds out,” Bruce starts.
“I don’t care, Bruce. Every one of those kids has been abused, and half of them think it’s normal. Damian is struggling to adjust to a completely different lifestyle, Jason is a mess, and Dick is the most traumatized child I’ve ever seen. Tim isn’t doing nearly as well as he wants us to think he is, and Cassandra is too busy babysitting to deal with her own issues. You get these kids the help they need, or you can find another doctor to patch up Batman.”

Bruce glances over at the children, gathered on the other side of the cave. “I’ll work on it,” he tells her.

“I know therapists,” Tim offers. He and Bruce are the only ones left in the cave; Alfred carried Dick with him when he saw Leslie out, and Jason, still irritated with Bruce, had trailed after them. Damian and Cassandra are in his room, probably comparing their childhoods with the League of Assassins.

“You do?” Bruce asks. He sounds skeptical, which is understandable given 90% of the interactions they’ve had.

“Sure. There’s Dr. Crane, Dr. Strange, Dr. Quinn, Dr.—”

“Tim,” Bruce says.

“Really, there are a lot of licensed psychologists in Gotham. I know if—”

“Tim.”

“I miss her,” he says quietly, abruptly changing the mood in the room. Bruce visibly struggles to change tracks.

“That’s Stockholm Syndrome talking, Tim.”

“It’s not.”

“Tim—”

“Well, maybe it is. But you kidnapped me too, Bruce.”

“I rescued you.”

“You rescued all of us, but I’m the only one who didn’t get a choice. Sure, Jason came under false pretenses, and Dick came because you accidentally triggered his brainwashing. But they came. You held me down until I was too weak to fight back.”

“Oh,” Bruce says.

If Tim gives him time to actually process this, he’ll go off to wallow in guilt somewhere, and they’ll never be able to talk about it. Tim wants to talk about it.

“I’m better off here, Bruce. I know that. And you couldn’t have got me here any other way, because I couldn’t believe you were real. But do you know how terrifying it is to be attacked in the night by the ghost of the man you killed? After everything else that happened there?”

“Tim,” Bruce says, “Tim, I’m sorry. I didn’t—”

“Think about it? We all know that, B. It—it doesn’t matter. But you don’t get to act like you’re better than Harley just because you had good intentions. So did she. She knew I’d be Arkham-bound after
what happened, and she decided to spare a half-mad, increasingly helpless child from being locked up with dozens of psychotic murderers.”

“I understand, but she hurt you, Tim. She kept on hurting you. For months.”

“And what do you call locking me in a cage in your basement?”

Bruce flinches. Hurting him isn’t nearly as fun as it used to be.

“That wasn’t fair,” Tim says. “I’m sorry. But you don’t—you’re only assuming she hurt me. I’ve never told anyone about that time.”

“Didn’t she hurt you?” Bruce asks.

“It’s…complicated,” Tim says. “She wanted to finish what the Joker started. And I wanted her to. I just wanted to be what he was making me, so I could stop hurting and being confused. But Harley was only ever comforting me after, when he was there. She didn’t like hurting me herself, and she wasn’t very good at it. So she didn’t, much. Mostly it was just Joker venom. It really didn’t—”

“Tim,” Bruce interrupts. He looks really serious, and also like he’s comfortable with the conversation, which must mean Tim screwed up somewhere—he doesn’t want Bruce comfortable right now.

“Yeah?”

“How often were you exposed to Joker venom during your ten months with Harley?”

Oh. Yeah. Information he probably should have shared several months ago, when they first started developing the antidote. He honestly hadn’t even thought about it.

“Um. Pretty often, I guess. People generally aren’t exposed to it a lot, so I suppose no one checked, but I think it might be addictive? Me and Harley, we used the airborne version pretty much recreationally. She’s fundamentally a very sad person, you know? And laughter is the best medicine.”

“Tim,” Bruce says, clearly horrified. Tim is rapidly losing the upper hand in this conversation. He plows ahead.

“We did injections whenever she thought I needed one. Which was pretty often, I guess. Bruce, you know how Joker venom works, basically. For the first several hours you laugh hysterically. And then the smile freezes on your face, and there’s clearly something messed up going on inside your head, but no one can tell what from the outside. And if you never get treatment, or if the psycho who designed the venom in the first place is mixing drugs, you regain basic functions like speech, and your features stay distorted but the smile relaxes a little.”

“Why are you telling me this, Tim?”

“Because people who live long enough to regain basic mobility inevitably try to kill themselves, Bruce. Harley kept me on a near constant supply of the injected form so I never got the chance to come down far enough to recognize how messed up I was and try to end it. I was functional until Arkham. Sure, the exposure would have killed me eventually, but since Arkham never gave me the damn antidote, all they did was slow the process down, and make me feel how sick I was in the meantime.”

“Tim,” Bruce says.
He thinks he’s regained control efficiently. He’s not enjoying it.

“The airborne was just for fun, on top of that. Just to laugh for a while. We were both too messed up to make anything worse by not bothering with an antidote.”

“Why didn’t Arkham give you the antidote?”

He sighs. “I don’t know, B. I was half gone by then. I realized Harley wasn’t coming back for me pretty quick, so I started calling Kon and Clark for help. I knew what was going to happen to me in Arkham. But no one came, and then they started drugging me. I remember getting beat up by a lot of people, and being tortured by doctors and nurses, and moments of lucidity that were increasingly few and far between. And I don’t want to talk about Arkham anymore.”

“Okay, Tim. That’s okay.”

Tim isn’t sure when he started crying. He also isn’t sure when Bruce decided to hug him, or when he decided to let himself he hugged. It’s…nice.

“I miss her,” he says, “but not as much as I miss you.”

“I’m here, Tim. I’m right here.”

“You’re not. Not really. I killed you. You were my dad and I killed you.”

As soon as Poison Ivy had gotten there, she’d injected Harley with something that sobered her up instantly. Tim had sat there, high on Joker gas, laughing hysterically, while they talked.

“He’s not well, Harley. And neither are you. Let me take him back to Gotham. His family will take care of him. I’ll take care of you. We’ll fix this.”

Tim couldn’t stop laughing. He wasn’t sure he wanted to. The idea of his parents taking care of him, even without the Joker’s influence, was pretty hilarious.

“It will be better, sweetheart,” Ivy had said later, while she set the broken bones in his hand and ankle from that incident last weekend. “You’ll see. As soon as they check you into Arkham, that ridiculous brother of yours will come.”

Tim hadn’t wanted Nightwing. He hadn’t quite been making the connection to Dick. He hadn’t even thought of himself as Tim in months—it had been JJ or Junior or sometimes, in the worst parts of his nightmares, Robin. He wanted Harley. He just wanted to stay with Harley.

But Harley didn’t want him. Not anymore.

“It’ll be better, baby,” she’d said, tearful. And then she’d just stood there while Ivy took him away.

Tim hasn’t thought of himself as JJ or Junior or even Robin in years, but he still wakes up some mornings missing Harley.

Bruce holds on to Tim until he cries himself out, then he carries him up to bed. He doesn’t really know where to go from there. He and Tim aren’t close, exactly.

What do you do when your son accuses you—no, that’s not fair. Tim was right. What do you do
when your son points out that you gained custody through kidnapping, offers exclusive new details of his torture, and has a breakdown in your arms about how he—how he—is this a situation where he’d want to see his boyfriend when he wakes up? Are he and Superboy that close? Is it creepy if Bruce watches him sleep, just to make sure he’s okay? Is it even safe to leave him alone right now? Should he ask Cassandra? Do people still have body language to read when they’re asleep?

Bruce decides to stay in Tim’s room until someone walks by and tells him what else to do.
“You don’t have to worry about me getting hurt,” Dick says. Then he picks up a jagged rock from the driveway and slices through his forearm.

The day starts out well enough. Selina comes early to collect Jason, a plan made two days ago when he was much more awake; he looks dazed but pleased as she whisks away her “favorite kittens,” rushing out of the manor with one hand in Jason’s and his pet tucked carefully into the other arm.

Kate comes not long after that—she and Cassandra are having what she insists on calling a girls’ night, even though it’s starting at 10am.

“Yes, but she’s spending the night, Bruce, so it counts.”

“And what will you be doing for this girls’ night?”

“Eating takeout, painting our nails, and mocking you,” Kate answers promptly. Cass grins at both of them, clearly delighted, and Bruce checks that she’s packed her toothbrush and pajamas before letting them go.

He doesn’t know how he became such a dad so fast.

The next order of business is teaching Damian to ride a bike, a plan already postponed for several days by bad weather. Even in today’s bright sun, Damian insists on jeans and a sweater. He’s not nearly as bad as Dick, who is in fact currently wearing two sweaters and a windbreaker, but North Africa (which Damian cites as his most recent location) is a lot warmer than North America.

The lesson is going well. Alfred and Dick are there to supervise, but quickly become distracted by the generations of abandoned bicycles in the storage shed. After the discovery of a bike likely older than Ra’s al Ghul, Damian and Bruce pause the lesson to join them.

Then Dick discovers a unicycle and, proving his latent circus training intact, rides it down the driveway and back. While doing a handstand. Without a helmet.

“Richard Wayne,” Bruce says. “You can’t do things like that!”

“Why not?” he asks, squinting in the sunlight, apparently genuinely curious.

Bruce bends to search for his sunglasses, which fell off his face early in the ride. “It’s dangerous,” he says, trying to stay calm. He knows it was an honest question, and Dick still panics at any sign he may be angry. “You could get hurt.”

“You don’t have to worry about me getting hurt,” Dick says. Then he picks up a jagged rock from the driveway and slices through his forearm.

For a moment, everyone stands frozen in shock, as dark, nearly black blood wells up through the layers of Dick’s clothing. Then his face scrunches up and he wobbles slightly, because Talon strength and Talon healing have nothing to do with pain. Alfred and Bruce both rush forward, Alfred
crouching in the gravel to hold the boy while Bruce peels back the layers of ripped sweater and tries to staunch the blood flow.

Damian runs inside, returning moments later with Tim and a first aid kit. Tim, looking wild, dumps medical supplies into Damian’s arms until he comes up with sutures; he holds them out hopefully, but Bruce shakes his head. The sliced tendons in Dick’s arms will have healed themselves before they could be stitched up properly. Tim’s read the Talon data more thoroughly than Bruce; he would know that if he was thinking straight.

“Why did you do that, Dick?” Tim demands. “Why did you do that?”

“I don’t know.”

Alfred carries Dick inside, uncaring as his suit is increasingly stained with both dirt and unnatural black blood. The others follow, Damian wide-eyed and horrified, Bruce with still-shaking hands, Tim clinging tightly to his unneeded sutures. The bikes are forgotten.

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An hour later Dick is in the kitchen with Alfred, working grumpily on his spelling, a completely unnecessary purple band-aid on his fully healed arm. (It’s possible that his several horrific scars predate his Talonization and therefore his Talon healing factor, but Alfred finds it more likely that those bastards had ways of overriding the healing when they wanted a punishment to be well-remembered.)

Dick does not do well, on a merely conceptual level, with “punishments” or “consequences for his actions,” but they manage with “unpleasant things we have to do now so we will remember not to do bad things later.” It’s something of a relief the boy loathes schoolwork so much; they’ve yet to think of any other “unpleasant things” that won’t further traumatize him.

They’re still not certain what happened. Bruce may have triggered a strange bit of residual brainwashing, or it may have been the natural impulse of a traumatized child who’d been taught that injury was inherently a nonissue. Dick himself doesn’t know. Cassandra may have been able to tell if she had been present at the moment it happened, but she wasn’t, and one can’t read the past through the body language of one who doesn’t understand it.

“I didn’t mean to scare everyone,” Dick mumbles, poking at his band-aid.

“I know, Dick,” Alfred says gently. “But it doesn’t matter that we were scared. What matters is that you were hurt.”

“But it doesn’t matter if I get hurt. That’s why I get better. So I can get hurt again and again and still be useful.”

“I before e,” Alfred corrects absently, looking down at Dick’s paper, before he catches himself and returns to the matter at hand. “That was from when you were a Talon, Dick. We don’t want you to be useful. We just want you to be safe. Remember?”

Dick nods, scrubbing furiously at the spelling sheet with his eraser. “Right?” he checks.

Alfred looks down again. “Good job. But we don’t want you to get hurt when you can help it, Dick. We especially don’t want you to hurt yourself. Hurt is still hurt, even if it goes away faster for you than for other people. We want you to be safe, Dick.”

“Why?”
“Because we love you,” he says firmly. “All right?”

“All right,” Dick agrees. “Do I still have to finish my spelling?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry about your bike lesson,” Bruce says. He’s in the library with Tim and Damian, unsure what to do with either boy. Tim seems to prefer it when Bruce leaves him alone, more often than not, and Damian is still largely a stranger. It’s harder, in some ways, to connect with such a well-adjusted child.

He’s under no illusions that Damian is as healthy as he appears; like Cassandra, he’s old enough and stable enough to have been trained out of showing weakness. He’s a fifteen year old boy who’s been tormented and abused for most of his life. But unlike Bruce’s other sons, he has enough self-control not to show it, and Bruce has no idea how to build trust, or encourage him to open up.

Trust with Cassandra and Jason was instant; with Dick it’s been slow and painful but natural. Tim’s trust depends on the day and how much he’s comparing this version of Bruce to his own, and nothing Bruce does seems to have any impact. He doesn’t know where to start with Damian—plying him with blankets is probably not the way to go.

“It’s fine, Father,” he says. “Are you sure Dick will be all right?”

“As much as he ever is. The wound is already fully healed.”

“Good,” Damian says, and they fall into awkward silence. Tim glances up from his phone briefly, then goes back to what he was doing, likely texting Kon.

Bruce, unsure what else to do with himself, goes to the kitchen to check on Dick and Alfred. They’re fine; Dick is maybe a little lethargic. He apologizes to Bruce, ramblingly, clearly not quite sure what he’s apologizing for. Bruce assures him, for the thousandth time, than he only wants him to be safe. Reading Alfred’s lips over Dick’s head, Bruce adds that he loves him, meaning it very much. He kisses Dick gently on the forehead, for good measure, before going back to the library.

Damian’s drawing on a stray piece of paper with a stub of pencil when he returns. Tim is still texting.

“How an artist?” Bruce asks.

Damian looks up, startled. “When I don’t have more important things to do,” he says, cautiously.

Bruce smiles. This, he can work with. “You’re a teenage boy with no one to assassinate. Nothing more important to do, here. I’ll get you a sketchbook and some proper pencils tomorrow, okay? And we can go to the art supply store together when I’ve got you here legally. Get whatever you want.”

“All right,” Damian says. “Thank you, Father.”

He’s grinning hugely, and Bruce is so relieved that he’s done one thing right today. Casting about for another victory he spots a lonely chess pawn in the corner. That’ll do. Well, not that exactly. Chess is a game for two. But they have plenty of other options, pulled out of storage and quickly abandoned by an unfocused Jason in his first few weeks at the manor.

“Damian,” Bruce asks, “do you have much experience with American board games?”
Damian shakes his head.

“Tim! Put your phone away. We’re playing a board game.”

He’s shocked by how quickly and easily the kid obeys, stuffing it in his pocket and asking, “Which one?”

Bruce turns the corner nearest the solitary chess piece and finds the forgotten stack of games he was hoping for. “I’ve got Monopoly, Clue, and Candyland,” he offers.

“Candyland,” Tim says decisively. Bruce shrugs off his surprise and starts setting it up. They have about two hours before Selina brings Jason back, and Bruce puts him and Dick to bed and preps for patrol.

Kate shuts her alarm off quickly, before it can wake the younger woman sleeping on her couch; she’d forgotten to turn it off last night. She checks that Cassandra is still asleep before tiptoeing to the kitchen to start breakfast. Pancakes, she thinks.

The kitchen is a mess, covered in old food that would have made perfectly good leftovers if she’d remembered to throw it in the fridge before passing out way too late last night. The cookies, at least, are salvageable. Maybe the cupcakes. But all that pizza and Thai food is gonna have to go.

They’d spent most of the day shopping, then people-watching while pretending to shop, Cassandra’s silent commentary a consistent delight. She’s said all of three words since Kate picked her up yesterday, but fortunately she’s got an expressive face, and Kate isn’t utterly terrible at reading body language herself.

Once night had fallen they’d gone back to her place for the night she’d promised Bruce—takeout, nails, and mocking. Cass had painted her nails a sparkling pink, finishing just before Kate knocked the bottle onto the carpet in her enthusiasm about the many embarrassments of Bruce’s high school years.

On a hunch that it might be some sort of comfort, Kate had put all the movies on mute for the night, prompting two of Cassandra’s three words of the day, a whispered “thank you.”

Kate finishes the pancakes and goes to wake Cass up. In a few hours she’ll go home, and Kate’s sure she’ll be happy to see—and talk to—her father and brothers. But she’s glad she could give the kid a bit of a break.

“What’s her name?” Damian asks, stroking the cat’s head with one finger.

“We don’t know,” Tim says. “She’s Jason’s, and he’s mostly nonverbal, you know? So when he’s fully with us, there are so many things that seem more important than what to call his cat.”

“Names are important,” Damian says. “I will ask, as soon as he is awake again.”

“Here, gimme.” Tim grabs the cat, dropping it on Jason’s rare uncowled head.

He laughs as tiny claws tangle in his hair, eyes still not focused but definitely brighter, and shakes her off into Dick’s waiting arms.
Tim kind of loves his brothers.

This is nice, but Damian knows better than to get attached. If you trust the wrong people, they’ll stab you in the back, but trusting the right people is even worse. Sooner or later, someone will stab them in the back just to hurt you. It’s safer for everyone involved if you never trust anyone at all.

But this is really nice.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

“Jay! Kate’s gonna let us run comms!”

His enthusiasm has her questioning the decision, but it’s too late now. As long as nothing really serious comes up, they’ll be fine.

Kate looks down at the twenty page manual Bruce left her. “A weekend with the boys will be easy and fun,” is a pretty hard sell in light of the manual. She really doesn’t see why Bruce and Alfred both had to go to Metropolis with Cassandra to see Swan Lake.

“I haven’t babysat since I was fifteen,” Kate had said.

“I’ve never babysat,” Bruce had said, as if that was somehow a legitimate counter-argument.

She’s been in charge here for about half an hour, which means she only has about 59.5 hours to go until they come back Sunday night. It’s been easy so far, but soon the boys will be waking up and coming downstairs for breakfast.

There’s an entire page in the manual dedicated to breakfast. Dick is not allowed to add sugar to his sugary cereal. Tim can only have one cup of coffee. (One cup unless: there’s a paragraph dedicated to complicated negotiations for more.) Damian is a vegetarian. Instructions for Jason vary depending on his mental state—there are five options.

Tim comes downstairs first, starting his cup of coffee immediately.

“Have you read the rules yet?” he asks.

“Just the ones for breakfast.”

“Damn,” he says, though he doesn’t sound truly upset. “How do you feel about ignoring the coffee laws?”

She doesn’t bother answering; if they’ve really met in an alternate universe, he should know she won’t cave that easily.

“It was worth a shot,” Tim says. “Jason’s door was closed when I walked by, so he’s probably pretty lucid. Or he was sometime in the middle of the night, at least. It was open when he went to bed.”

There’s a note on that in Bruce’s manual. The more present and aware he is, the more Jason values his privacy.

“Damian had a nightmare last night,” Tim continues. “Bruce probably told you. But he’ll sleep in later than usual this morning. Did B say anything in there about Kon?”

Kon, Kate remembers vaguely from a conversation with Bruce between punching mobsters, is a meta, and Tim’s friend, or possibly his boyfriend. She flips through the manual.
“You can go out with him tomorrow, but you have to be home before dark.”

Tim smiles at her. “Thanks, Kate.”

She notices, as he turns and walks away, that his coffee mug is full again. Brat.

Jason waits as long as he can to go downstairs, until he gets too hungry. Dad and Alfred are both gone, and he’s not sure how he feels about that.

Kate is nice. Well, his Kate is nice. He thinks he’s met this one a couple times, but none that he can remember really clearly. He woke up this morning knowing exactly who Bruce wasn’t, and still wanting him; he’s annoyed with himself for wanting the comfort of a fake dad, and with Bruce for not being there to provide it.

His cat is curled at his feet; he pulls her up toward the pillows, and she nuzzles into his neck. Maybe he can convince Kate to let him visit Selina. Selina is just as weird and different as everything else in this world, but for some reason it doesn’t bother him as much, with her. Maybe because, unlike Bruce and Alfred, she never had a close relationship with Jason while he was catatonic that he can’t quite remember now.

Sometimes he pretends Dad just has amnesia. That helps. It was Tim’s idea. It’s easier to act like Dad just forgot things than to think about how he’s a whole other person who never knew them.

Kate is still in the kitchen when he gets there, reading the newspaper.

“Morning, Jay,” she says. “You hungry?”

He doesn’t answer, mostly because he’s curious how long it will take her to work out if he’s awake today or not. He gets his own breakfast, watching from the corner of his eye as Kate sets aside the newspaper and pulls out a binder with Dad’s obsessive tendencies written all over it. That, he thinks, is cheating; she’ll figure out much faster with an instruction manual.

Jason suspects calling him Jay was Tim’s idea, too. It was probably Cassandra who noticed he wasn’t used to being called by his full name all the time, but “start using nicknames like his version of you does so he’ll be more comfortable with you” is definitely the kind of suggestion Tim would make.

And it’s working. Kid really is a manipulative brat. Kid—he’s older than Jason feels, most days. This whole thing is just weird.

But it could be worse. He should be dead.

Jason takes his toast and goes to find his brothers, still ignoring Kate. He’s pretty sure he heard Dami scream last night. (It’s always really bad when any of the kids but Jason and Tim—when any of the assassin kids—actually make a sound. People worked pretty hard to train it out of them, showing weakness like that.) Dick will be in bed with Damian and so many blankets weighing them down it’s a wonder they aren’t crushed. Tim will be in the hall right outside, messing with his phone, because he thinks admitting how much he cares is going to make him go full Joker on them, or something; Jason doesn’t really get it, and only Cassandra is any good at coaxing him out of that kind of thing. Whatever—the cat will help them all cheer up.
Kate flips through the instructions again, baffled. They got through most of the day without trouble, but Bruce apparently expects her to watch the kids and patrol, which, as far as she can tell, isn't actually possible. Does he expect her to just leave them unsupervised?

His note only says “Patrol tonight.” Nothing else in the instructions suggests they can be home alone. They’re full of notes like “Tim should never be alone with only one of his brothers,” and “only Dick is allowed to climb into the chandelier.” Her favorite rule is “Jason is not allowed into my office when he is lucid enough to pick locks”—exactly how much lucidity does it take to pick a lock? How is she supposed to know when to kick him out? “Damian isn’t allowed on the cave computers until I’ve finished upgrading security around the Talia al Ghul files” has her dying to read through said files. But Kate is strong. She can resist temptation. At least until the boys are in bed.

She’s going to have to ask them what to do about patrol; maybe Bruce mentioned something, or maybe he and Alfred routinely leave them alone in the middle of the night, and she’s stressed over nothing.

Tim, she thinks, is the most likely to know what Bruce would want. Unfortunately, he’s also the most likely to lie to her.

He probably won’t lie when it concerns the safety of his brothers; he’s been taking charge of things all day, something she suspects he often does as the only boy Bruce doesn’t baby.

Kate thinks the kid could do with some babying—he’s even younger than Jason, and just as badly traumatized. But that’s not her job.

“Tim?” she asks. “Do Bruce and Alfred ever leave you home alone?”

He looks up at her. “B wants you to patrol while you babysit, doesn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. I know he’s done it before, but not since he let me out of the cell for good, and it was back when Dickie was afraid to leave his bedroom without being collected. You could lock me up again if it would make you feel better.”

“Do you think that’s necessary?” Kate asks. Locking a child in one of Bruce’s emergency containment cells for no good reason would not, in fact, make her feel better about anything.

Instead of answering, Tim says, “Or I could keep an eye on things in the cave. You know, since Alfie’s gone, too. Jay and I both know how to run comms.”

Knowing exactly where the boys are, and being able to talk to them while she’s out, though—that definitely would make her feel better.

“Bruce wants Damian to stay off the computers,” she tells Tim, “and I want all four of you to stay in the cave while I’m gone.”

“Deal,” Tim says. “Jay! Kate’s gonna let us run comms!”

His enthusiasm has her questioning the decision, but it’s too late now. As long as nothing really serious comes up, they’ll be fine.

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Damian sketches as fast as he can, trying to keep up with Dick’s movement on the mats. Dick’s been
flipping around for over an hour; Damian’s never seen him get tired when he’s doing gymnastics, no matter how long he goes.

Tim and Jason are by the computers, watching the city and talking to Batwoman while she fights crime. Father would never let them do that—he wants them all to have as normal childhoods as possible, and thinks the other versions of himself who let them be his sidekicks were stupid and irresponsible. But they both seemed really excited, so Damian didn’t say anything about it.

Jason’s cat curls up in his lap, and Damian sets aside his sketchbook to pet her.

“Shit,” Jason says, loud and sudden in the silence of the cave. Damian looks up; Jason is herding Tim over to the mats. “Dick! Dami! Come sit with Tim.”

Tim is alarmingly pale. Jason pushes him gently to the ground beside Damian, then moves the cat from Damian’s lap to Tim’s. Dick bounds over and sits beside them. Jason leaves, and returns with Tim’s cell phone, which he places in Tim’s shaking hand.

He hasn’t seen Harley since she let Poison Ivy take him away. And now she’s right there on Eighth Street. He could steal one of Bruce’s cars and be there in ten minutes. He could have Harley back.

Except Harley doesn’t want him anymore. She let Ivy put him in Arkham. How can he make Harley want him again?

When Harley took him before, it was right after he killed Bruce. Maybe if he killed Bruce again—but Bruce isn’t here. And Bruce promised never to send him back to Arkham. And Harley already has sent him to Arkham. Harley doesn’t want him.

But he wants Harley.

“Tim?” Dick says. He doesn’t answer. Dick frowns, scooting closer. Tim is acting like Jason, and Dick doesn’t know what to do about it. He looks over at Damian; Damian shrugs, then scoots closer to Tim too. Jason’s cat starts purring and kneading at Tim’s legs.

After a few minutes of careful consideration, Dick takes a deep breath and wraps his arms around Tim.

(Dick doesn’t understand at all about the multi-verse, but Cass says only two things matter. The first thing is that the Owls can never find him here, and the second is that sometimes he reminds Tim and Jason of someone they love and miss. And Dick knows that person touched Tim a lot, hugged him when he was sad.)

Touching people makes Dick nervous sometimes. He loves it when Bruce picks him up or when Cass grabs his hand, but he doesn’t know how much contact he’s allowed to initiate. Especially with Tim and Jason.

Tim relaxes a little, though, when Dick hugs him, so he must have done the right thing.

He lets go and takes the phone out of Tim’s hand. Tim only has four numbers saved—Bruce, Cass, Alfred, and Kon. Dick pushes the button to call Kon.

“Hey, Tim. What’s up?”
“You have to talk to Tim,” Dick says. “He’s sick—you have to talk to him until he feels better.”

Dick presses the phone to Tim’s ear, holding it there until Tim reaches up to do it himself. Dick leans into his shoulder, where he can half hear Kon rambling. Damian backs away a little, picking his sketchbook up again. Dick looks around; Jason is still at the computer. That means it’s Dick’s job to take care of Tim until someone grown up comes back.

Kate drops Harley Quinn off at Arkham and rushes back to the cave. Bruce is going to kill her. She’s been in charge for less than a day, and she’s already let them do something they weren’t supposed to do and triggered some kind of episode. If she’d known seeing certain criminals would make them completely freak out, she wouldn’t even have let them into the cave.

She doesn’t even know what happened, really. Jason said she had to catch Harley Quinn right away, because Tim saw her and it messed him up bad. She hadn’t heard much of anything after that—enough odd comments from Jason that she’s certain Tim hasn’t snapped and killed the others like he mentioned last winter, but nothing useful. And Jason’s comments have been increasing incoherent over the last twenty minutes; she suspects he’s losing lucidity fast.

The boys seem all right, when Kate parks and goes to investigate. Damian is drawing. Jason has wandered away from the computers and is doodling on a piece of paper Damian must have ripped from the sketchbook for him.

Tim is a few feet away, pale and shaky, speaking very slowly into his phone. Dick is sprawled across his lap, with Jason’s cat sitting on his chest. They’re okay. She hasn’t killed her cousin’s kids. Not yet, at least.

She has, however, let them stay up hours past the bedtime in his instructions. Putting them to bed is supposed to be a simple matter, depending on where Jason’s at. It’ll be a little harder when he’s like this, because he’s more likely to want Bruce.

Kate kneels down in front of him and Damian. “Bedtime, guys.”

Damian flips his sketchbook shut and stands immediately, but doesn’t go anywhere, probably waiting to see how she does with Jason.

“Come on, Jay,” she tries. “It’s really late; you must be tired.”

He stares at her for a moment, apparently uncomprehending. Damian bends down and tugs at his arm. Jason stands and lets himself be led upstairs by his brother. Kate moves on to the next issue, relieved.

“Hey, Tim. How are you feeling?”

He says goodbye to whoever’s on the other side of the phone, then hangs up and looks at her slowly.

“I’m okay.”

He’s still visibly trembling.

“Yeah? You talked to Bruce?”
He shakes his head. “Kon.”

“Okay. We should probably call him then, let him know what happened.”

Tim shakes his head again, and she decides to try a different angle.

“What did happen, Tim?”

“Saw Harley. Wanted to go find her. Was stupid—she doesn’t want me anymore.”

And this is officially above Kate’s pay grade.

“I really think we should call Bruce.”

“No,” Tim says.

Dick sits up, and the cat scurries away. “Tim?”

“S’okay, Dickie.” Dick slumps down again, still half asleep, and Tim turns back to Kate. “It’s a special weekend for Cass. If you call Bruce he’ll rush back here and ruin it. Promise I’m fine. You can lock me up if it makes you feel better.”

He keeps offering that. Kate does not find the imprisonment of children comforting.

“If you’re sure,” she says finally, even though Bruce will be pissed when he inevitably finds out. “Just go to bed, both of you.”

She can’t believe there are two more days of this. She is never agreeing to babysit again.

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Saturday is easy, in comparison. Tim is quiet and jittery, refusing both breakfast and coffee. (There’s nothing in the manual for that.) He winds up in the library with Damian and Jason; Jason doesn’t seem fully present, but he’s flipping slowly through a book of poetry, so maybe she’s wrong. She isn’t going to ask. Kate’s afraid for a moment that she’s lost Dick, but eventually spots limbs dangling from the chandelier.

After lunch, Tim leaves to see his friend. She keeps the other boys occupied for a few hours with movies from the approved list in Bruce’s instructions. Then she calls Renee to complain about her stupid cousin and his stupid babysitting manual.

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“Are you having fun so far?” Bruce checks.

Cassandra nods. She hasn’t spoken once today; she hasn’t needed to. Last night they saw a ballet called Giselle, and so far tonight they are halfway through Swan Lake. Tim was right about ballet. She is having a very good time.

Cassandra loves her little brothers. But they are all very sad and very sick. They take a lot of time and work, and sometimes Cassandra feels forgotten.

This weekend she has Bruce and Alfred all to herself. Bruce didn’t even call to check on the boys last night, even though he obviously wanted to, and even though she told him he could. “This weekend is for you, Cassandra,” he said. “The boys will be fine with Kate.”
She thinks this is probably true. Kate is very nice. She didn’t mind that Cassandra wasn’t in the mood to talk, and when they watched movies together, she pushed the button so that everyone else would stop talking too, and Cassandra didn’t have to keep on translating her brain into words to keep up. It was nice. Like the ballet. No one talks in the ballet. They just move, and she doesn’t have to work at all to understand them.

They get through Sunday without complications, though Kate is beginning to feel crowded. Damian has discovered she’s an excellent source of information on the early life of his father, and has kept her occupied with storytelling for several hours. Dick has been following them, which Bruce’s instructions say probably means he’s feeling anxious.

There’s nothing in the manual about why Tim might be following them all, but she assumes it’s because he’s still shaken from the other night. Jason has been locked up in his room since breakfast, which Bruce wrote usually means he’s lucid and not pleased about it. (Kate feels only slightly guilty that she’s relieved by this; three teenagers watching her every move is unsettling enough.)

Jason has just wandered downstairs, looking tired and dazed, when Bruce gets home. He wraps himself around Bruce immediately, while Dick flings himself at Alfred and Tim hugs Cassandra. Damian stands awkwardly beside Kate for a moment, until Bruce pulls him close.

Everything is very pleasant for a few minutes, until Bruce asks how things went. That’s when Tim bursts suddenly into tears, and Kate gives up all hope of escaping without a lecture.

Bruce finds Tim in his room after Kate’s hasty retreat; the kid is, absurdly, trying to pretend nothing happened.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” he asks again.

“I’m fine,” Tim says, rolling his eyes, as if he hadn’t been crying three minutes ago, as if Bruce’s concern wasn’t completely justified.

“I know things with Harley were—”

“Please stop talking,” Tim says.

“Okay,” Bruce says after a moment of consideration. “I’m here if you need me.”

“Thanks,” Tim says quietly. Bruce goes to check on the others.
Chapter Summary

Bruce watches, impressed, as Jason slowly coaxes a personal history out of Damian. It occurs to him that he barely knows Jason—what Tim calls the real Jason. He’ll have to work harder to rectify that; Jason’s seemed less angry with him, the last several times he’s been awake.

When Bruce wakes up, Jason is asleep in the spare bed, the one they still keep in Bruce’s room for the nights when Jason needs to be close to him.

Bruce went to bed alone, and didn’t hear Jason come in—he must have had one of his quieter nightmares. That cat is sleeping half on top of his head; it opens one eye briefly to look at Bruce. He glances down at the mess beneath Jason’s bed—books and games and various odds and ends that have caught his attention—and realizes suddenly that he hasn’t taken Jay out of the manor in weeks. Selina has, once, but not Bruce.

Dick and Cassandra go to gymnastics every week, then spend a few hours with him at the office. Tim goes wherever he goes with Superboy usually once or twice a week. Damian isn’t officially, legally here yet, so he can’t be seen in public. But there’s no reason Jason can’t leave the manor, and yet Bruce has kept him cooped up for close to a month.

“Good morning, Jay,” he says when the boy sits up about twenty minutes later. “Do you want to go to the bookstore today?”

Jason nods, and Bruce smiles. Sometimes he thinks he’s a terrible father, but he really loves his kids.

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After a few minutes in the bookstore, Bruce leaves Jason with one of the employees—Amanda, he remembers, because Jason is particularly fond of her.

He promised Leslie he’d work on getting the kids some therapy, and he has been, but he can’t find anyone he trusts. Bruce isn’t a trusting person naturally, and he’s especially suspicious of doctors in general, and anyone in the mental health field in particular. There’s just such a high turnover rate in Gotham, with all the doctors that end up in the criminal psych ward.

He’ll continue searching, but in the meantime he wants to be as prepared as possible for anything his kids might need. Fortunately, with a justified, city-wide fear of therapists becoming super villains, there are a lot of self help books available in Gotham libraries and bookstores.

He finds a book on adopting older children, a couple on adolescent PTSD, and a couple more on traumatic brain injuries. He grabs some stuff about child abuse, some general “bonding with your teenagers” stuff, a book with a chapter on Stockholm Syndrome, two about ADHD, and one about autism. (It’s possible, he thinks, that Dick has ADHD; Bruce is pretty sure that none of his kids are autistic, but having more information can’t possibly hurt. He takes three more books about general psychiatric disorders in children and teens, leaving behind only the one titled “How Not to Raise a Second Joker,” which he thinks is in poor taste. And potentially very upsetting for Tim.)
He gets a few books on puberty, making sure they have a couple chapters on sexuality and, recalling his incredibly awkward conversation with Tim, asexuality specifically. He adds three ASL books to the pile for Cass, and some things about culture shock and adopting from other countries for her and Damian. He’s just flipping through something about the emotional burden on oldest daughters when Jason calls, “Dad?”

“Hang on sweetie; we’ll find him,” Amanda’s voice says. She’s consistently great with Jason, and seems to be taking his newfound ability to speak in stride.

Bruce puts his current book on the stack and goes around the corner to meet them. He wonders absently if it would be a bad idea to buy the entire bookstore just so he could give Amanda a raise.

When Jason and Amanda find him, Bruce lets himself be led over to where Jay’s been looking at books. He checks the ones Jason’s pulled out; it’s always interesting to see what he’s chosen and try to decide why. Sometimes the books have an interesting cover—bright colors or embossing that gives them a nice texture, something that would catch Jason’s attention even when he’s at his least aware. Sometimes they seem to be actually chosen for content, though Bruce is never quite sure. There are certainly plenty of books he chooses with no attention to content at all—he’s particularly fond of the shade of blue a series of programming language guides uses on its covers.

Today Jason’s picked out three books. One is a fairly boring paperback edition of Jane Eyre; that one he probably chose for content, forgetting the three copies he already has at home. Jason’s memory is not the best, and Bruce always buys whatever he chooses, so they end up with a lot of duplicates. There’s a hardcover young adult sci-fi novel with an appealing swirl of color and a lovely font on the cover, which could easily have been chosen for content, aesthetics, or both. The third book, a collection of Japanese fairy tales, will likely be enjoyable if he can focus on it, but Jay probably chose it for the illustrations.

“Do you want anything else?” Bruce checks.

Jason shakes his head.

“All right. Take them to the counter, please; I need Amanda’s help carrying my books.”

After they check out, and after an employee named Steve, who Jason likes nearly as much as Amanda, helps Bruce carry a ridiculous number of books to the car, they go to the park.

They sit on a bench while Bruce reads the first chapter of the new sci-fi book, then wander around for a while before getting chili dogs and ice cream. Before they leave Bruce gets ice cream sandwiches to take home for the other kids. (Except for Dick, who still finds ice cream frighteningly cold, and gets a hot chocolate instead.)

“Did you have a good day, Jason?”

“Yeah.”

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It takes several consecutive good days for Jason to finish coaching Damian on the proper accent and attitude of a Gotham street kid; there is no way Damian, with hints of Talia only in his skin tone and around the eyes, is going to pass for anything other than a biological child, and Bruce doesn’t dare to show up at the courthouse with a second surprise from abroad.

On the morning of their scheduled appointment with the social workers, Jason wakes up fully lucid, or close to it, and Bruce convinces him to come along, hoping for some damage control after their
last disastrous visit.

Bruce shows up fifteen minutes late with two tense, uncomfortable teenagers, hoping desperately that a fourth adoption—fifth child—in a single year isn't going to push the social workers past their limits. He has serious doubts, even after all the practice, about Damian’s ability to pass for a street kid.

Jason visibly shakes off his discomfort and leans against the counter, smiling charmingly at the receptionist. “Hi. We’re here to see some social worker? That’s my little brother and my dad.” He motions vaguely behind him, then lowers his voice slightly, speaking with repressed excitement. “He’s Bruce Wayne.”

Bruce relaxes a little. Jason is good at this sort of thing, thanks to his other self, and he’s been helping Damian. As planned, hastily, in the car, Jason talks to the social workers first, since they have no idea how long he’ll be awake and himself on this occasion.

Jason sketches out his current situation quickly and uncomfortably, with support from Bruce, before giving a barely fabricated history of his past.

“My dad—he looked a lot like Bruce, and I was confused when Bruce found me. He adopted me too, not all official, on the streets—I been in foster care before, and I always run away, but I picked my dad, and he picked me—we got in the way of one of the gangs. My fault. Dad protected me. They killed him, and I got hurt real bad. I don’t remember much after that, until waking up and Bruce was there. He told me the date—it’s been about three years.”

Jason tells them he wants to stay with Bruce, that he wants Bruce to continue being his legal guardian, and that he wants to change his name to Jason Wayne. (“Willis Todd was an asshole. I’d want my dad’s name, but I never actually knew it. Shit like that don’t matter on the streets.)

When they’re done he asks to go sit in the car, clearly drained, and Bruce gives him the keys. He’s a little worried about Jason being alone, but the kid’s clearly at his limit. Then it’s Damian’s turn.

“So we saw Wayne on this magazine cover, and Matt was like, ‘Man, he looks just like you,’ and we were joking ‘bout how he keeps adopting these kids who look a little like him—it was Jake’s idea, but why not, right? I mean, he’s the kinda guy who’d give you a hot meal or fifty bucks or something before he slams the door in your face. Wasn’t actually expecting him to order a DNA test.”

Bruce leaves the building with custody of Damian Wayne.

“So where’d you come from for real?” Jason asks when they join him in the car. “Like, aside from all the bullshit with Ra’s.”

Bruce watches, impressed, as Jason slowly coaxes a personal history out of Damian. He drives slowly and aimlessly around town, not wanting to disrupt the conversation by arriving at home. It occurs to him that he barely knows Jason—what Tim calls the real Jason. He’ll have to work harder to rectify that; Jason’s seemed less angry with him, the last several times he’s been awake, but that may be only because he’s been so focused on coaching Damian.

“I was in China with a few of Mother’s friends until I was about seven,” Damian explains at Jason’s prompting. “That’s when Grandfather remembered I existed. He was angry I hadn’t been trained as much as he wanted, and had several of the ninja I stayed with killed over it.”

Bruce tells himself firmly, again, that flying out to Nanda Parbat and picking a fight with Ra’s al Ghul is pointless and stupid. It isn’t even the same Ra’s. Bruce is pretty sure his Ra’s is a better
person than the one Damian knows. He’s pretty sure even his Joker is a better person than the ones Tim and Jason know—he may be a lunatic responsible for dozens of deaths, but at least he’s not a psychopath responsible for hundreds. This Joker’s last escape from Arkham led to three injuries and no deaths—he’d been spraying people with one of those squirting flowers filled with acid. The time before that it was Batman and Batwoman against the Joker and Harley Quinn. Kate had said something that made Bruce laugh, and the Joker had counted that as a victory of some sort, Kate doing what he never could, and had gone back to the asylum willingly. Bruce is pretty sure other versions of the Joker would have become obsessed with killing her over that joke.

Bruce is really grateful for his Gotham.
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

“You’re such a pushover, B,” he says. Then, louder, “You can’t get a pet on the way out of town, Dami. Try again next week, and start by giving him that lecture you’re working on. Bruce is highly susceptible to a good guilt-trip.”

He crouches down on the ground beside Jason. “Can I hold the crab, Jay?”

Jason tips it gently into Tim’s palm. He hands it back to the employee; Jason looks vaguely betrayed. “Sorry about my brothers,” he says. “And my dumb dad. We gotta go, Bruce. Alfie says it’s your turn to drive.”

“You turned seventeen,” Bruce says.

Tim looks up. Bruce is wording it like the birthday is already past, and he forgot about it until now, which Tim thinks should make him angry. But his sense of the passage of time has been so screwed up for so many years now, he never would have noticed it himself. He doesn’t even know if Bruce means Tim Drake’s real birthday, or the one on his forged paperwork. He only really knew he was sixteen because Bruce said so.

“When?” he asks instead of getting upset.

If Bruce is surprised by the question, he doesn’t let it show. “Thursday. I’m sorry we didn’t do anything at the time. You had a date with Kon, and I didn’t want to…interfere with your plans. But Alfred is making your cake now, and the kids are wrapping your presents.” He smiles, a little nervous—he probably prepared this speech expecting Tim to be mad at him. “It was meant to be a surprise party, but Cassandra thought that might not go over well.”

“I would have freaked out,” Tim confirms, a little stunned. He thinks a birthday cake might be the nicest thing anyone’s done for him in nearly four years.

“And we’re going on a trip,” Bruce continues. “All of us, but I thought—I thought you might like it.”

Tim is equal parts desperate and terrified to be out in the rest of the world. He’s only left the manor grounds, aside from his meeting with the social workers, when he’s with Kon. He doesn’t have a Kryptonite supply, which means he can’t hurt Kon, and Kon won’t let him hurt (or be hurt by) anyone else.

“Where are we going?” he asks.

Bruce smiles his biggest, most vapid Brucie smile. “I have to do some business with my friend Ollie in Star City.”

Translation: I’m going to torture a Justice League member by going full Brucie on him, and you get to watch.

This is going to be great.
Bruce doesn’t need to go and do business with Oliver Queen in person; Queen and both of their companies would certainly prefer if he didn’t. But bothering his fellow businessmen is one of Bruce’s favorite activities. Lex is even more fun than Oliver, but he doesn’t feel comfortable bringing his kids so close to a super villain, despite the fact that said super villain is more or less his son’s boyfriend’s dad. Oliver is safer, and with their history he thinks Tim will enjoy it at least, and Jason if he’s lucid. And Cassandra knew Roy Harper, so she’s likely heard enough stories to have some personal investment as well.

He knows Tim is going to continue pushing for his involvement in the Justice League. He suspects he’s already been spying on Superman, at the very least. This will be a good opportunity to study the League on a more personal level.

It will also be a good opportunity to have the kids out and about, getting fresh air and meeting new people, without intense scrutiny from the usual Gotham reporters. Bruce Wayne isn't nearly as big a deal outside the city.

They’ll spend a full week in Star City, with a few hours dedicated to pestering Oliver each work day—that’s a day for each of the kids to accompany him to the office. They’ll be under the radar outside Gotham, so he can spend the rest of the week giving them a proper vacation.

Maybe he can rely on the power of zoos, malls, and hotel swimming pools, and skip the disaster therapy is bound to present. Or maybe Oliver can recommend someone discrete.

They take the limo. The jet would be faster, but they’re not in any particular hurry, and Damian had mentioned “curiosity at the concept of a road trip.” Dick, whose early life was essentially one long road trip, had perked up at this, and it was settled.

Alfred is driving at the moment, with Cassandra in the passenger seat. Bruce has the boys in the back. Dick is asleep, curled into Bruce’s side, and Jason is staring out the window, cowl on the seat beside him. As Bruce watches, the cat emerges from the pocket of his oversized hoodie.

Bruce sighs. He has no one but himself to blame for that—he should have noticed before they were in the road. He’ll have to call Selina and tell her not to bother checking on it. He’ll also have to find out the going rate for bribing hotels into allowing forbidden pets.

Damian is speaking earnestly about something Tim is absolutely not paying attention to; Bruce diverts his attention so Tim can take the nap he clearly needs. (He heard Tim having a nightmare last night, but it was over by the time he got to his room.)

Dick wakes up after about an hour, and climbs over Bruce and Jason to look out the window.

“Dad?” Jason asks, coming to attention a little.

“You’re all right, Jay.”

He nods, already drifting away again.

“There’s nothing out there, Dick,” Tim mutters when Dick climbs over him for a different view.

“I know,” he says. “You can see everything. It’s great.” He turns around. “Damian, you should draw it!”
Damian shakes his head. “Motion sickness.”

“Medicine?” Cass offers from the front seat. Bruce can hear her searching for it already.

“Bruce,” Dick says, “are we really going to a petting zoo?”

“We are.”

“And a regular zoo?”

“Yes.”

“Can I bring home an elephant?”

“No, Dick.”

“Oh.” He brightens again almost immediately. “A toy elephant?”

“Sure.”

“A blanket with elephants on it?”

“Why not?”

Grinning, Dick throws himself across the car and practically into Bruce’s lap; Bruce reaches out to steady him, then pulls the sunglasses out of his pocket and slides them on to Dick’s face.

“You’ll hurt your eyes.”

“Sorry, Bruce.” He turns around to settle himself properly on Bruce’s lap, then asks, “Will you tell me about Oliver Queen and Star City?”

“Sure, Dick.”

It’s amazing, how much progress his youngest son has made. There are plenty of bad days, but even then, Dick is always more child than Talon.

Bruce looks up to find Damian and Cassandra have switched places.

“Okay?” he checks. She nods, then her eyes widen suddenly, and she lunges across the seats to grab Jason’s cat just as wind rushes into the car.

Jason startles, then reaches out to close his window; the cat must have stepped on the button.

“Alfred,” Bruce calls, “can you disable the windows back here?”

“We’re gonna need to stop for cat food and litter, too,” Tim tells him, taking the cat from Cassandra.

“Did you bring that cat along?” Alfred demands. Bruce can’t see his face from this angle, but he sounds deeply disapproving.

“I can’t be held responsible for my actions while catatonic,” Jason announces. Then he takes back his cat and drops the cowl in Tim’s lap.

“Why are you giving me this?”

“You’re trying to sleep, right? Way easier to turn off your ears than to shut up a hyperactive
Dickiebird.”

Bruce wakes up when the car stops. “Alfred?”

“We’re at a pet store. You and Jason will gather the necessary supplies while I refill the tank across the street.”

“All right,” Bruce says. “Come on, Jay. Let’s go.”

Jason has completely checked out again, but he unbuckles his seatbelt and hands the cat off to Dick easily enough.

“Can I come to the pet store?” Dick asks.

“Not this time,” Bruce says.

“Why not?”

“You don’t have your makeup on, bud.”

“Oh.”

Dick looks down, stroking the kitten slowly. Bruce wants more than anything to tell Dick that he’s working on it, that he’s going to make it better. But that’s not a promise he’s sure he can keep—how do you fix the fact that someone is half undead?

“I’ll take you to a pet store in Star City,” he says instead.

“Okay,” Dick says quietly. He doesn’t look up.

It’s not about the pet store, not really, and Bruce vows to try harder when they get home. Dick’s a bright, friendly kid, and if they can get him looking human, and get his reading level up, Bruce thinks he would benefit a lot from a couple years in high school.

“Come on, Jason,” he says again, and they go into the pet store.

Jason is much fonder of Bruce when he’s like this, which is nice. But a quick shopping trip would be much easier if he was a little more aware. Three customers at the front of the store have their dogs along. That slows Jason down a lot. If they were in any of the places they frequent in Gotham he’d leave Jason there while he grabbed what he needed a few feet away. But he doesn’t even know what town they’re in, and these people can’t be trusted with his son in his most vulnerable state.

Eventually they move past the dogs. Then Jason spots the fish. They’ve been in the store for about forty minutes when Damian finds them.

“Alfred sent me to—is that a parakeet?”

Bruce sighs. “Damian, stay with your brother while I find the cat food. Don’t talk to strangers.”

He finds what he needs quickly. When he gets back, both boys are holding chinchillas.

Bruce tries to think of anything he might have done to upset Alfred recently. This has to be some sort of punishment. It’s Jason’s cat; he understands why he’s in the store right now. But why would Alfred send in Damian? Tim or Cassandra would have Jason ready to go by now. Damian is the one
obsessed with animals.

By the time Tim joins them, the chinchillas have been put away, and Damian is lecturing a frazzled employee about appropriate cage sizes while another supervises Jason and the large hermit crab crawling over his hands.

“You’re such a pushover, B,” he says. Then, louder, “You can’t get a pet on the way out of town, Dami. Try again next week, and start by giving him that lecture you’re working on. Bruce is highly susceptible to a good guilt-trip.”

He crouches down on the ground beside Jason. “Can I hold the crab, Jay?”

Jason tips it gently into Tim’s palm. He hands it back to the employee; Jason looks vaguely betrayed. “Sorry about my brothers,” he says. “And my dumb dad. We gotta go, Bruce. Alfie says it’s your turn to drive.”

Damian wishes he hadn’t gotten sick and been moved permanently to the front seat, but he’s still having a good time, and even better now that Father is driving.

He likes being close to him, but Damian doesn’t know how to talk to his father, and feels stiff and awkward every time he tries. He wishes he could talk to him as easily as Dick does, but Dick says he used to be much worse at it than Damian, and Tim confirms this. Tim is mostly rude to Father, but it seems to work for him; Father never minds. Jason gets along best with him when he’s nonverbal, and next best when he’s half there, unclear and a little childish. It always seems easy for Cassandra.

He’s tried to talk the way Jason taught him for the social workers, but that was terrible. It doesn’t sound disrespectful when Jason calls him Dad, or even when Dick and Cassandra call him Bruce, or Tim calls him B. But when Damian tries to be casual, when he says “dad” instead of “father,” it feels disrespectful, even in his head.

“Can I really have a pet?” he asks, finally, to fill the silence.

“No farm animals,” Father says after a brief pause. “Especially no cows.”


“We’ll see,” Father says. But he’s smiling, so Damian thinks he means yes.
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

“Jay? You with me?” He’d thought Jason was doing fairly well today, but he isn’t sure.

“You taught me to swim,” he says, “Well, other you. For Robin stuff.”

You and other you, Bruce thinks, is a distinction infinitely preferable to dad and fake dad, dad and imposter, or even dad and Bruce. It’s slow going, but he’ll take what he can get.

Bruce and Alfred have miscalculated their time on the road. Badly. They didn’t account for all the kids. Kids who have to go to the bathroom. Kids who get carsick. Kids who have tragically never been to McDonald’s. Kids who have to apply heavy makeup before going into McDonald’s or gas station restrooms. Kids who are reclaiming their acrobatic histories and cannot stay cooped up in this car for any longer. Kids who brought along their cats and had to stop at the pet store.

They can’t make the drive in one day. They stop at a cheap roadside motel, because it’s late and they’re tired and it’s what’s available. They can only get two rooms, each with two queens.

The first room is easy. Dick and Damian in one bed, Bruce and Jason in the other. Bruce has shared a bed with Jason plenty of times, and the younger boys get along well enough; as long as Jason doesn’t wake up suddenly and angrily, the way he sometimes does, there won’t be any trouble.

The problem is that Cassandra, as the only girl, should have her own bed. And Tim, as the most volatile, probably should as well—Alfred says he has no concerns about sharing a bed with him, but Tim insists it isn’t safe.

Cassandra solves the problem by putting herself and Tim in the same bed, where they both fall asleep before Bruce can decide if it’s an acceptable solution.

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Bruce is woken by Jason’s tossing and turning beside him—the comforter is pulled over his head, and he’s making the muffled sound that means he’s dreaming about digging out of his grave. Bruce pulls the covers back.

“All right, Jay,” he murmurs, “you’re all right. Just breathe, kiddo.”

Jason settles, and Bruce slips out of bed, intending to check on the others as long as he’s awake.

Jason’s grave nightmares are always like this, audible but quiet, characterized mainly by frantic movements as he struggles with an imaginary suffocation. His nightmares about the explosion and his death are usually silent, though he cries and opens his mouth to scream. Bruce doesn’t know what the actual screaming nightmares are about—they’re new since Jason began waking up, and he isn’t willing to talk about them.

Tim convulses horribly when dreaming about the Joker; he only occasionally cries out.
Dick shouts once when dreaming about his parents’ fall, and whimpers and sobs through nightmares about becoming a Talon.

Damian and Cassandra have never had the luxury of weakness a screaming nightmare would show—their bad dreams are indicated by the smallest of twitches and flinches, all stronger reactions trained out of them long ago.

Bruce checks on Dick and Damian first, in the next bed over. Dick is fine tonight. Damian is tense and frowning; Bruce sits on the edge of the bed, stroking his hair and humming until he relaxes. He goes to the adjoining room next. Tim and Cassandra are both sleeping peacefully tonight, as is Alfred.

Bruce isn’t inclined to sleep himself—he’d normally still be patrolling at this hour. He finds Jason’s cat beneath the bed, and pets it for a few minutes before setting it down beside Jason. He checks on all the kids one more time before settling in the arm chair by the window to check his emails.

Dick wakes up early, because there are not enough blankets on the bed, and he’s cold, even though Alfred brought in four blankets from the car for him. It’s still too dark, and everyone else is still sleeping. But Bruce is sleeping in a chair, and Bruce is warm. Dick takes the blankets from Bruce and Jason’s bed, because Jason isn’t using them and he doesn’t want to make Damian cold, and gets into Bruce’s lap. He wakes up, but only a little bit. Dick pulls the blankets up over both of them.

“Richard. Do you want to help me start the car?”

Dick wakes up when Alfred touches his shoulder. He doesn’t want to put on his stupid makeup, but he does want to go outside.

“Why don’t we skip it,” Alfred says, “just this once? I don’t see anyone down in the parking lot.”

Alfred is the best. Dick follows him outside, pulling a little wheeled suitcase—he told Alfred that Talons are strong and he can help carry more, but Alfred won’t let him. One hand is for pulling the suitcase, and one hand is for holding Alfred’s. That’s okay. Dick would rather hold on to Alfred than to the bags.

“Can I sit in front by you?” he asks.

“Damian has to sit in front, or he’ll get sick. But you can stay with me until the others wake up.”

“Okay.”

Dick sits in the front seat, watching the parking lot. Their car is much longer than everyone else’s, and people keep on looking at it. When people look too close, he ducks beneath the window so they won’t notice his face is wrong. They’ll probably have to wait a long time before they leave—Bruce always sleeps in late. But that’s okay. Dick likes spending time with Alfred.

They reach their hotel in Star City early Sunday afternoon. Bruce has rented out the hotel’s entire swimming pool for the week, so that all his alarmingly scarred up children can swim in peace; he gets them changed into their swim suits quickly, so Alfred can have some peace and quiet to unpack.

“Does everyone know how to swim?” he checks.
“Yeah, B.”

“Yes, Father.”

Cassandra dives into the deep end in response. Bruce looks at his two remaining children.

“Jay? You with me?” He’d thought Jason was doing fairly well today, but he isn’t sure.

“You taught me to swim,” he says, “Well, other you. For Robin stuff.”

You and other you, Bruce thinks, is a distinction infinitely preferable to dad and fake dad, dad and imposter, or even dad and Bruce. It’s slow going, but he’ll take what he can get.

“You’re good, then?” he checks.

“I’m good,” Jason says, though he makes no move to actually enter the water. Bruce turns to Dick, who’s sitting at the edge of the pool with his feet in the water.

“Do you know how to swim, Dickie?”

“Dunno,” he says. “Can’t remember.”

“We’re going to call that a no, then. Come on, into the shallow end. Jason, do you want to help me teach Dick how to swim?”

“Okay.”

Dick does, as it turns out, know how to swim, more or less. After half an hour he and Jason join Tim and Damian in some complicated water game with Cassandra refereeing; Bruce leaves them to their own devices, swimming laps.

“Hey Bruce!” Tim shouts, voice echoing around the pool. “Come play with us.”

Bruce swims over, abandoning his laps.
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

They’ve made it through fifteen minutes of actually talking mostly about business when the kid, slouched in a chair in the corner, eyes still on his phone, says, “Bruce, I’m bored.”

“What do you want to do?” Bruce asks immediately, like he’s here in Oliver’s office to entertain his kids, and not for important business deals.

On Monday morning, Bruce shows up at Oliver’s office two hours late, with a ridiculously complicated frappuccino, Dick, and several months’ worth of pent up obnoxiousness.

“Ollie!” he shouts.

Oliver’s answering smile looks pained. “Good morning, Bruce.”

“This is my kid. Say hi to Ollie, bud.”

“Hi, Ollie!” Dick says brightly.

Oliver winces. “I wasn’t aware you were bringing your son.”

“Oh, yeah. Just today, though. Tomorrow I’ll have Tim.”

“Tim?” Oliver repeats.

“Sure. And then Damian. Gotta introduce them to the family business, you know? Hey, Dickie, you wanna finish this drink for me? Too much sugar.”

Oliver watches in horror as Dick bounces—literally bounces—around his lab. Bruce gave the kid a large caramel frap. The sugar. The caffeine. It’s got to wear off soon, right?

“What does this thing do?” Bruce asks, jabbing a finger into a very delicate piece of equipment.

Before he can answer, there’s a crash from the other side of the room. Oliver watches the smirk vanish from Bruce’s face. He rushes toward the sound.

“Dickie? You okay?”

The Bruce that walks back toward Oliver seems like a different man, serious and concerned. The kid is in his arms, sunglasses askew; he points accusingly at the wreckage.

“It moved.”

The million dollar equipment the boy just destroyed had included a motion sensor.

“I think it’s time we went home for the day,” Bruce says. “Oliver, I’ll write you a check for the
damages tomorrow.”

Oliver is pretty sure it’s the first time in over a decade Bruce has called him by his actual name.

Bruce sets Dick down on the grass as soon as they get outside.

“Please,” he’s saying, “I didn’t mean to. Please.”

It’s been a long time since he’s brought out the pleases. “Dick.”

He flinches away from Bruce.

“Dick, hey. Look at me. When am I going to hurt you? What did I say?”

“Never,” Dick says.

“And why am I never going to hurt you?”

“Because I’m your son and you love me.”

“Good. Hey, come over here.”

Dick takes a few steps forward, allowing Bruce to wrap him in a very gentle hug.

“You’re okay, Dick. I don’t care what happens to Oliver Queen’s stuff. And it was my fault anyway. I should have been paying more attention to you, and I shouldn’t have given you all that coffee and sugar.”

It was the first time he’d expressed any interest in anything frozen, and Bruce hadn’t thought it through. Most days the kid was afraid of ice cream.

(Tim’s research on Talons had shown that, since they were undead and therefore largely unkillable, they were usually kept not just in coffins, but frozen in coffins. It made Bruce wish he and Kate hadn’t taken out the Owls when they had. He would make it much more painful, given a second chance.)

“You’re okay,” he says again. “We’re going back to the hotel now, and we have three hours before we go to the museum. You can take a nap, or you can go swimming.”

“Okay,” Dick says, sniffling a little.

“I’m sorry, Dickie. We’ll have fun the rest of the week. I promise.”

Oliver has been aware that Bruce Wayne was adopting children right and left, but he hasn’t paid much attention. Brucie is always doing something strange, and if Alfred Pennyworth raised that mess, he’s more than capable of caring for whatever orphans he drags home.

Now that the orphans are all coming traipsing through his office, though, some research is in order. He starts with the kid Brucie brought in today.

The hyperactive ten year old Oliver thought they were dealing with is actually turning fifteen in two weeks. He also, according to office gossip, had a breakdown in the parking lot and had to be assured
multiple times that Bruce wasn’t going to hurt him. Oliver doesn’t like it. You have to have a lot of trauma to think Brucie Wayne is a threat. A kid messed up enough to be afraid of Wayne should be with a much more competent caretaker than Wayne could possibly be.

Oliver moves on. The two that are supposed to be biological—well. The boy clearly is; the girl almost certainly isn’t, and he and Bruce aren’t exactly friends, but he doesn’t like the idea of some woman taking advantage of someone like Brucie, who probably didn’t even consider trying to confirm her story.

The oldest boy—Jason—that’s the one Oliver’s heard the most about. The first one he adopted, and the one he takes out in public the most often. The information available about him online is, therefore, a lot more accurate and detailed than anyone else’s. Brain damage. Nonverbal. About eighteen. Frequently seen at the library. Very attached to Bruce.

That one, at least, makes sense to Oliver. Having someone around who’s as genuinely fond of him as this kid reportedly is must be very appealing to Bruce, who’s popular mainly for his absurdity, and whose strongest emotional connection is with his butler.

Besides, Oliver’s pretty sure Bruce has some brain damage himself—he was never the same after that adventure abroad in college.

It’s when he looks into the last kid—Tim something—that things get really interesting. Because this kid doesn’t exist. Oliver’s not fantastic with computers, himself, but Cyborg set up his laptop for him, and it’s got all sorts of databases only the Justice League has access to. So when he wonders how Bruce befriended a random family on the west coast, enough to be left with custody of their son, it only takes about twenty minutes to accidentally discover that the kid’s dead parents were never born. The cover is good—too good to be spotted by social services or anyone in the media.

Curious, suspicious, Oliver goes back to Jason. Catherine and Willis Todd, at least, exist. They were married at a courthouse four months before his birth; there are no photos. Willis has been in prison since Jason was three, dead since he was fourteen. Catherine overdosed on heroin when the kid was six or seven. Recordkeeping is bad—it always is for street kids, especially in Gotham. (Oliver hates Gotham; he’s glad Batman is so damn territorial, because it gives him a reason to stay away.) But the kid exists.

Oliver sets the whole thing aside and gets back to his actual job, making a note to keep an eye on Tim and Cassandra when Bruce brings them in.

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“It’s the healing factor,” Tim says abruptly when they’re in the car on their way to Queen Industries.  

“What?”  

“Dick’s adjusting so well. It should have taken him years to get this much better, Bruce. But I figured it out. The only reason he’s adjusting so well from being a Talon is that he still is one. The Talon healing factor is letting his mind recover.”

Bruce thinks this over. He doesn’t like the conclusion he comes to. “You’re right,” he says. “That makes perfect sense. And it means—”

“It means if you give him a normal body, you’re dooming him to be a frightened little boy inside that body forever.”

“I can’t cure him,” Bruce says.
“You can’t cure him,” Tim confirms. “Not if you want him to recover.”

They’ve reached their destination by now; they sit in the parking lot for a few minutes, staring at each other. Bruce is grateful for and impressed by how smart Tim is, all the things he thinks of that have never occurred to Bruce. He just really wishes the kid didn’t always bring bad news.

“We should go inside,” he says finally. “Oliver’s waiting.”

“I’m sorry, Bruce.”

“It’s not your fault,” Bruce says. “You’ve just saved us all a lot of pain.”

He takes a minute to send an email; he prefers being late to see Oliver, anyway. His irritation is hilarious.

“Lucius—

Do you remember the masking technology we discussed about 15 years ago? It was after they found out Harvey Dent’s face couldn’t be fixed with surgery—we abandoned the project when he became Two-Face.

I want R&D working on that project again. Make it a priority.

—Bruce”

If he can’t cure Dick, he can at least get him something better than full-body makeup.

Tim is reading over his shoulder. “Good,” he says. “I wonder if my Bruce—you know, I bet a way to make his face look more normal could still help Harvey a lot. Your Harvey, at least. Everyone in this reality seems more curable or redeemable or whatever.”

Bruce looks up at him, surprised. He knows Tim is extremely observant and deeply caring, but he seldom sees those traits applied for anyone but his siblings.

“I’ll think about,” he says. “Are you ready for Queen?”

Tim grins at him. “Absolutely.”

Tim is a sullen teenager who barely looks up from his phone when Bruce introduces him, and Oliver feels his suspicion fade away; he still thinks there’s something strange going on, but he doubts a scrawny, screen-addicted seventeen year old has more idea of what’s happening than Brucie does.

They’ve made it through fifteen minutes of actually talking mostly about business when the kid, slouched in a chair in the corner, eyes still on his phone, says, “Bruce, I’m bored.”

“What do you want to do?” Bruce asks immediately, like he’s here in Oliver’s office to entertain his kids, and not for important business deals.

“You said he had cool stuff,” the kid whines.

“He does. Right, Ollie?”

And somehow they end up in one of the labs, Bruce and Oliver talking idly as Tim roams the room.
“I don’t know what half of this shit does,” Oliver says.

“He does.” Bruce is watching Tim, expression open and affectionate.

He really loves these kids, Oliver realizes. Adopting them wasn’t just one of the stupid, spontaneous decisions he’s known for.

The kid, leaning down to study some piece of equipment, shoves his hair back from his face, revealing deep scarring at his temple and the inside of his upper arm. Bruce doesn’t seem to notice, still smiling fondly. A few minutes later, Tim’s phone dings, and he seems to forget all about exploring the lab, texting furiously as Oliver coaxes Bruce back up to his office.

“Do you know anyone named Roy?” Bruce asks as they walk down the hall.

Tim glances up from his phone for just a moment, gaze sharp and intense.

No one is supposed to know about that. He never even told the League.

“No,” Oliver says, aware he’s taken too long to answer, grateful that Bruce won’t pick up on it.

“Can’t say that I do. Why do you ask?”

Bruce shrugs. “Just something I heard somewhere.”

Oliver wants to press him for more information, but the tapping of Tim’s keyboard has stilled, and his earlier suspicions are returning.

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“Why did you ask about Roy?” Tim asks, back in the limo.

“Just curious.” Roy Harper must be approaching thirty, to Dick’s physical and Jay’s emotional fifteen. But he’d been a good friend to his sons, in other worlds.

“Ollie will be suspicious.”

“That’s good. We’ll see what the Justice League does with suspicion.”

Tim looks quickly over at him, but doesn’t answer.

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“There’s something weird going on. He knew about Roy, Dinah. And so did that kid.”

“How is Roy?” she asks.

“How should I know? Haven’t seen the kid since he was twelve.”

“Please. Like you don’t spy on him.”

Oliver sighs. “You’re the one who said I couldn’t keep him.”

“I said you couldn’t keep him as a sidekick, Ollie,” Dinah says. “You still could have adopted him.”

He shrugs. “If my first thought, meeting a preteen, was that he would be a good crime fighter, I probably would have been a shitty dad.”

“So how is he?” Dinah presses.
Ollie smiles, Wayne and his kids forgotten for the moment. “Good. That daughter of his is adorable.”
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

“...And then she picked it up with her trunk, and then she—Bruce? Are you listening to me?”

Bruce turns to face him, smiling. “Of course I am, Dickie.”

“Good.” He pushes his sunglasses up on his nose, then grabs Bruce’s hand. “Will you stay with me when they look at the bad birds?”

Oliver likes Damian immediately. He particularly appreciates the way the kid is clearly baffled and horrified by Brucie’s behavior. He’s the newest addition to the family, a street kid who reportedly rang Bruce’s doorbell on a dare, and found himself DNA tested and adopted within the week. He’s been there less than a month.

Damian is a serious, quiet kid who clearly doesn’t know what to make of his biological family. He calls Bruce father, and speaks with a slight accent that suggests his mother was an immigrant.

“Father,” he says, hesitantly, about twenty minutes in, “I thought you and Mr. Queen were supposed to go over financial reports this morning.”

Bruce sits down and tries to focus. Damian is Oliver’s new favorite person.

“Father,” he says again, half an hour later, when Brucie’s antics have reached levels that have Oliver dying to strangle him, “are you having a stroke?”

Bruce looks amused. “No, Damian.”

“Have you been drugged?”

The amusement fades. “No, Damian. I’m fine. I’m just annoying Oliver.”

“Oh,” Damian says. “All right.”

Oliver is pleased to know Brucie is aware of the effect he has on others. He has mixed feelings on the confirmation of a long-held suspicion that Bruce is irritating him on purpose. He is deeply disappointed to lose an ally in Damian, who does not attempt again to get his father on track.

“...And then she picked it up with her trunk, and then she—Bruce? Are you listening to me?”

Bruce turns to face him, smiling. “Of course I am, Dickie.”

“Good.” He pushes his sunglasses up on his nose, then grabs Bruce’s hand. “Will you stay with me when they look at the bad birds?”

Bad birds, Bruce assumes, are not only owls, but any predator birds—anything with eyes like Dick’s, beneath his contacts. (He reminds himself, again, to develop tinted contacts so Dick doesn’t
need the sunglasses any time he goes out in the daylight.)

“Sure. Do you want to look at the lions again?” He’d liked the big cats almost as much as the elephants.

Dick nods and steps forward, still holding Bruce’s hand. “Hey, Bruce?”

“Yes, Dick?”

“Do you think my parents knew what was going to happen to me?”

Bruce hesitates, thinking it over. It’s important to be honest with him. “You never became Talon in a world where they survived. I don’t know if they knew what could happen, but if they did, I’m sure they would have done everything in their power to prevent it.”

“If they hadn’t died,” Dick says.

“If they hadn’t died,” he confirms.

“It’s okay. You’re a good dad.”

They pause for a moment so that Dick can watch the penguins, and Bruce can watch Tim and Jason; Jason doesn’t look like he’s fully himself at the moment, but he’s clearly participating in a conversation.

“Hey, Bruce?” Dick says.

“Yes?”

“Do Talons have sex?”

He’s almost fifteen, Bruce reminds himself. Dick acts like a child because he was a child when his life was stripped away. He’s clingy and painfully childish, but he’s not actually a little boy. This is normal, Bruce tells himself. This is a normal question that he should have probably expected at some point—just yesterday Tim was asking what was going to happen if Dick wanted to date someone.

“Because I heard you and Tim talking about it,” Dick continues, “only you never really got anywhere about it. And I just wanted to know if my babies would be Talons or people.”

Why, Bruce asks himself for the thousandth time, did he think it was a good idea to start with teenagers?

“If they were Talons, they would still be people,” he says, because this is an issue he runs into again and again with Dick. He’s gotten to the point where he recognizes that he is a person, but remains convinced that he wasn’t a person until Bruce said he was—that his time as a Talon somehow doesn’t count. It may be a defense mechanism; Bruce isn’t sure. “And you shouldn’t be thinking about babies any time soon.”

“I was just wondering,” Dick says. He turns his attention back to the penguins.

-  

“Hi, Jay,” Tim says. He’s left Bruce and Cass to deal with Dick and Damian respectively, joining Alfred and the quiet sibling.

“Tim,” Jason says.
Tim jumps. He could have sworn Jay was completely out of it; just a couple minutes ago he was holding Alfred’s hand, and Alfred is still watching him like a hawk from only a few feet away.

He turns to study Jason carefully, taking in his posture and unfocused eyes. Yeah, he’s not fully with it.

Tim likes Jason’s in-between state, just because it makes more sense to him than when Jay snaps suddenly back to himself, seems like a more natural healing of the brain. But in-between Jay has never addressed Tim by name. He mostly says things like “Where’s Dad,” and “I need Alfred.” For slightly-verbal-but-not-really-present Jason, Tim barely even registers. Except, apparently, today.

“Are you having fun?” he asks, not quite sure how to maintain a conversation with this particular Jason.

Jason shakes his head. “Loud. Smell—smells bad.”


“Dick—Dickie is wrong.” Jason speaks slowly, with clear difficulty; Tim wonders why he bothers.

“I know. But he’s still Dick.”

“Still Dick,” Jason agrees.

“Hey, Jason?”

He looks at Tim expectantly.

“What’s your cat’s name?”

Jason smiles. “Secret,” he says.

“The cat is named Secret, or the cat’s name is a secret?”

Jason’s smile widens. Amused, Tim puts more effort into continuing the halting conversation.

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“Father,” Damian says. “Father, did you see the lizards?

“I did,” Bruce says.

“Did you see the lemurs?”

“I did.”

“Can we see the lemurs again?”

“Sure. I told Dick we’d have another look at the big cats; we can see the lemurs next.”

The zoo, Bruce thinks, was a good idea.

-

Cassandra studies Oliver Queen. She’s not as subtle about it as she could be, willing to play along with Bruce’s game of tormenting him. He hasn’t done anything in particular to deserve it as far as she knows, at least in this universe—there was a lot of bad blood, she remembers, between him and
Roy Harper, who was always very nice to her and probably deserved better. Bruce, when she asked, listed research and fun as his reasons for torture; she isn’t sure where the research fits in, but she is having fun.

Oliver finds her unnerving. He feels a lot of annoyance, and a little bit of worry and sadness, about Bruce. The annoyance is obvious. She hasn’t worked out where the other things are coming from yet.

Bruce is currently describing his whirlwind romance with Cassandra’s imaginary mother. It’s a convoluted but rather boring story, which he’s clearly making up as he goes. Oliver looks increasingly pained as the story drags on and on.

Cassandra resumes staring at Oliver. She decides that the reasons for his feelings are not going to become apparent through body language alone.

“How do you know my dad?” she asks abruptly, interrupting Bruce’s endless story. He won’t mind—he’s only rambling.

“Our parents worked together occasionally, and we attended a lot of the same social events.”

That’s not helpful. She keeps digging. “So you knew him when he was little?”

“Not well, but yes.”

“What was my dad like when he was a kid?”

Oliver smiles. “He was a bratty little know-it-all. Hated him so much. He always knew what he was doing, though.”

Oh. He’s worried because of them—Cassandra and her brothers. He thinks Bruce is in over his head, and he’s sad because he doesn’t always know what he’s doing anymore.

Except Bruce definitely still does. She decides to give Oliver a break, anyway.

“Can you tell me stories? You probably know different ones from Alfred.”
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

“You took me to the Gotham City Aquarium when I was thirteen,” Jason says without turning around. “I’d never even seen a fish tank before—everyone at home was too poor for pets like that, pretty things you couldn’t even touch. You bought me Sea Monkeys in the gift shop. They only lived a couple months, but it was real fun while it lasted.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Bruce!” Dick says. “Bruce, did you see? I touched a stingray!”

Bruce nods, smiling. He’s got a photo of the moment.

“Dickie,” Tim says suddenly, “hold my hand.”

Bruce and Dick look down in horror at the natural, blue-gray skin of his hand. Dick thrusts it hastily into Tim’s. There are limits, apparently, to waterproof makeup.

Bruce glances around; no one is paying any attention to them, and the security camera isn’t at an angle to pick up much.

“Go ahead, Dick,” he says. “You haven’t touched the starfish yet. We’ll fix it in the bathroom later.”

Tim will keep an eye on Dick. Bruce goes to check on the other kids. Damian is also enjoying touching things in the pool. Bruce gets a few more pictures before going to track down Jason and Cass. Cassandra is watching an octopus intently, turning away just for a moment to smile at Bruce. Jason is a little harder to find, but he’s been present enough all day that Bruce isn’t too worried. Eventually he spots him at the sea horse exhibit, reading an informational pamphlet.

“You took me to the Gotham City Aquarium when I was thirteen,” Jason says without turning around. “I’d never even seen a fish tank before—everyone at home was too poor for pets like that, pretty things you couldn’t even touch. You bought me Sea Monkeys in the gift shop. They only lived a couple months, but it was real fun while it lasted.”

“I’m sorry,” Bruce says, not quite sure what he’s apologizing for. He just hates how sad he sounds, much more than he hates the usual anger.

“I know I have a cat now,” Jason says, still not looking away from the sea horses, “but can I have Sea Monkeys again?”

“Of course, Jay.”

Bruce finishes getting dressed and goes to check on Jason again; it’s his turn to come to the office, but if he’s going to be out of it today, he’ll probably just be bored.
“Hey, Jason. I’m going to see Oliver Queen today. Do you remember Ollie?”

Jason doesn’t react at first, but his expression clears a little when he adds, “Green Arrow?”

He nods.

“I’m going to see Green Arrow, at his work. Do you want to come?” If he doesn’t, Bruce will probably skip the whole thing today.

“Brucie?” Jason asks.

“Yeah, Jay. I’m gonna be Brucie. Do you want to come watch?”

Jason nods again.

“Okay. Let’s get you dressed.”

Bruce greets Oliver more quietly than usual, flinging an arm around today’s kid and pulling him close for introductions.

“Jason, this is my friend Ollie. Ollie, Jason.”

“Ollie,” the kid repeats, looking dazed, sounding largely indifferent. Not nonverbal, then. The articles were wrong.

“Hi, Jason. It’s nice to meet you.”

The kid looks over at Bruce. He doesn’t answer.

They trail after Oliver as he tries to get actual work done, Brucie a constant distraction. He’s telling some stupid, rambling story about some woman he slept with when Jason laughs suddenly. Bruce and Oliver both turn to look at him.

“What is it, Jay?”

“Sorry, Dad,” he says, still smiling. “Sorry.”

Oliver looks between them, confused. Jason is amused and trying—badly—to hide it. Bruce is indignant.

“Do you find my romantic troubles amusing?” Bruce asks.

“No,” Jason says, “I find the fact that you’re a liar amusing.”

He turns to Oliver, bright and confident and very unlike the boy who entered his building forty minutes ago. “That was from a book we read.”

“Brucie, you can read?” Oliver asks with exaggerated incredulity. Bruce turns his indignation on him, and Jason laughs again.

“I like him,” he tells Bruce.

All the wind goes out of Bruce’s sails. “Of course you do,” he says fondly. “You always like it when people pick on me.”
“Selina and Kate are hilarious,” the kid says.

Everyone is in a good mood, and Oliver manages to herd Bruce up to his office for more paperwork. Bruce signs, absently, whatever Oliver puts in front of him, while Jason wanders around the room.

“Aren’t you going to read those?” Oliver asks. He’d emailed copies to Bruce a week ago, but knows better than to expect him to read ahead.

Bruce shrugs. “I trust you.”

Oliver sighs. “At least tell me you’re still having Fox read things for you at home.”

“Of course,” he says.

“And not just at work? Someone’s been reading things like the adoption papers, too? Fox or Alfred if you’re not doing it?”

“Tim read his paperwork,” Bruce offers after a moment of consideration. “He said it was all in order.”

Oliver resists—narrowly—the temptation to bang his head on his desk repeatedly. Sometimes, like earlier today, Bruce seems like the same kid he used to be stuck with at boring parties. Other times…

“They’re good kids,” he says. “But I hope you know exactly what you signed up for.”

“That’s easy. I signed up to be their dad.”

Oliver gives up.

When Bruce starts talking, half an hour later, about how they have to get together for dinner before he goes back to Gotham, because it’s been forever and he’s dying to meet Ollie’s fiancé, Oliver immediately invites him to come to his house on Saturday night. He doubts Bruce is planning to go anywhere without all five of his children, and he doesn’t want to deal with all that chaos in a restaurant. Bruce looks relieved, which shows he has some common sense, at least, though not nearly enough.

“Sorry I blew your cover a little,” Jason says when they get back to the car. “You surprised me.”

“It’s fine. I’ve been testing Oliver, a little—good to keep him on his toes.” Bruce glances carefully over at Jason as he backs out of his parking space. “Tim wants me to join the Justice League. What do you think about it?”

“Wonder Woman is awesome,” Jason says immediately. “And Superman was a really good friend for you.”

“Is that a yes, then?”

“Yeah. The Justice League would be good. For all of us. You need more friends your age.”

“Dinah,” Oliver says.

“Hm?” She doesn’t look up from her magazine.
“What do teenage boys like?”

“Girls,” she answers promptly.

Oliver considers that. Not feasible. “What else?”

She thinks for a moment. “Video games?”

That’ll work. “Great! I am going out and buying all the video games. Be back soon.”

Dinah finally starts paying attention. “Ollie? What’s up?”

“Bruce Wayne is coming over tomorrow. With all five of his kids. And probably his butler. I need something to keep them busy.”

“You invited the Waynes to our house?”

And this is not a conversation he wants to have right now. “Gotta go, Di. See you later.”

Chapter End Notes

So, I kinda caught up with myself. Probably no Friday update this week. I know what happens up until about chapter 40; it's just a matter of getting everything together. So we'll probably just be skipping the one update, but no promises. If I think it's going to take longer to get going again, I'll probably start posting another fic in the meantime, but I think I can catch up quick.
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

“You know who you look like?”

“Who?” Dinah asks.

“Black Canary,” Tim says. “You know, the superhero? She’s from Star City, right? I bet if she took off her mask she’d look just like you.”

Chapter Notes

Chapter 33, better late than never. And now that I'm caught up on the writing, I've got 60+ comments to reply to. Promise I'll get there eventually!

As soon as they step inside, Jason goes to the couch in the living room with the confidence of someone who’s done so several times before. Oliver doesn’t say anything about it. Bruce makes eye contact with Cassandra; she nods once and follows Jason. He’s been sick all day, and Bruce doesn’t want him left alone. (He’d stayed at the hotel with Alfred while Bruce took the other kids out, but had wanted to come here.)

“Kids,” Bruce says to the remaining three, “this is Ollie’s girlfriend, Dinah Lance.”

“Hello, Miss Lance,” Damian says politely. Dick still doesn’t greet people unless prompted directly. Tim narrows his eyes in the way that means something interesting is about to happen.

“You know who you look like?”

“Who?” Dinah asks.

“Black Canary,” Tim says. “You know, the superhero? She’s from Star City, right? I bet if she took off her mask she’d look just like you.”

Dinah laughs, a stilted, insincere sound. Bruce tries to work up the parenting skills to be anything other than amused. He doesn’t succeed.

“Video games!” Oliver says, loudly and suddenly. He herds everyone quickly away from Dinah.

Jason’s head hurts. He never used to get debilitating headaches before coming to this alternate universe, but then he’d never exploded before, either. Bruce was worried; he’d wanted him to stay home with Alfred. Jason had wanted to come. But he hadn’t been thinking, then. Roy is—his head hurts too much to do math, but he does it anyway—Roy is either twenty seven or twenty eight here, older than Dick, the same age as Barbara. He’s not going to be at Oliver’s house. And Jason really doesn’t care about Green Arrow and Black Canary.
Plus, being around them when he’s not at his best is just asking for another mistake like yesterday. Bruce had just been—it’s not an aspect of his dad that he’s seen in this version, before. This Bruce has been serious, and kind, and a good parent, but he’s never acted stupid for the fun of it like Jason’s dad always does, and it had taken him by surprise. Made him forget they weren’t alone. Made him forget Bruce wasn’t Dad.

He doesn’t want to think about that right now. If Bruce joins the Justice League, he’ll get to meet Wonder Woman again. That’ll be cool. None of Dad’s other friends are that interesting.

Cassandra sits down beside him on the couch. “Tim is a problem,” she says.

Jason looks up; she’s smiling, so whatever problem he’s causing must be Bruce-sanctioned.

“He send you to keep me out of trouble?”

Cassandra nods. “I’ll tell him if you feel worse.”

Jason stares at the opposite wall, blank where it should have a photo of Roy, Ollie, Dinah, and Conner hanging. “Thanks, Cass.”

Tim has decided that maybe Oliver Queen isn't that bad, actually. Both of his little brothers are currently being introduced to video games for the first time—some racing game that Tim doesn’t recognize, possibly because he hasn’t gotten to really be a kid in about four years.

Video games aren’t something that would occur to Bruce or Alfred. A large stack of nonviolent video games wouldn’t occur to Oliver Queen; that’s probably thanks to Dinah.

Dick pulls on his shirt. “Timmy, am I doing it right?”

He studies the screen. “Turn left—drive Damian off the road.”

“Hey!”

Tim holds up his hands. “If you guys wanna play fair, go ahead. Be lame.”

“Where are you going?” Damian asks.

“Talking to the grown ups. Watch Dickie?”

Damian nods, scooting over to fill the gap left when Tim stands up.

The boy who brought up Black Canary—Tim—walks in and attached himself quietly to Bruce, who stops abruptly in the middle of making an idiot of himself.

“You all right?” he asks.

Tim nods toward the next room. “Damian looks like a kid.”

“Damian is a kid,” Bruce says.

“Don’t worry, I got a picture. Has Jay resurfaced?” Bruce shakes his head, and the kid turns to Oliver. “Oliver, do you have some painkillers my brother could take? He’s been getting killer
migraines since, you know. The accident.”

“T’ll take care of it,” Dinah offers, partly because she sees what Ollie meant about Tim being unnerving, and partly because she’ll take any excuse to get away from Bruce, a constant annoyance without the nostalgia factor Ollie has.

She risks a closer look at Tim before she leaves the room; Oliver is right. There’s severe scarring at his temples, likely from burns. Those scars concern her significantly more than the chance he somehow knows about her night job.

Jason and Cassandra, neither of whom she’s officially met, are sitting on the couch in the dark. She brings the pain pills and a glass of water over without turning on the lights.

“Hey. Your brother said you had a headache?”

“Thanks, Di,” he says. Then he looks up, meets her eyes, and they’re both frozen for a moment. He said that like he knew her.

“You are marrying Ollie?” Cassandra asks, distracting her.

“Yes, in the spring.”

“I like him. He knew my dad when they were my age.”

Dinah lets herself be drawn into a conversation with Cassandra, and after a few minutes Jason wanders away, joining his brothers in front of the TV.

She’s certain she’s never seen that boy in her life.

- 

Alfred loads the luggage into the car while Bruce loads the children, just as the sun is rising on Sunday morning. The trunk is significantly fuller than it was at departure.

At some point, he thinks, Bruce will have to learn to say no. Not that it’s easy, especially early on; Bruce would have grown up horribly spoiled if he hadn’t been too miserable to want anything, those first few years after his parents died.

There are seventeen new stuffed animals coming home with them; Dick and Damian are both fond of toys, making up for lost childhoods, though Dick will admit to it much more willingly. A few of the animals are probably for Cassandra, as well, though Tim and Jason have never had much use for them. All five children have obtained sea monkey kits, and Tim and Jason have several new books each. Damian has nearly as many. Dick has one book on circus animals that he found at the zoo. Cassandra has a large book full of glossy, aquatic photos, and six pieces of pottery from the history museum; Damian has four.

Alfred has no idea how the trip to Star City led to the purchase of a PlayStation, but finds it something of a relief—teenage boys are supposed to play video games. They are not supposed to sit in chandeliers or track movements of the mob in the east end when their fathers think they’re in bed.

“Ready to go?” Bruce asks.

Alfred shuts the truck and herds Damian, still half asleep, into the car while Bruce slides into the driver’s seat.
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

"Bruce wouldn’t hurt a fly. Hell, Bruce couldn’t hurt a fly—you put the two of them in the ring, my money’s on the bug."

Chapter Notes

We’re back to one chapter a week until I can get caught up; crazy time of year. And I promise I’ll reply to all the comments eventually.

“You think Bruce Wayne is hurting these kids?"

“No. Bruce wouldn’t hurt a fly. Hell, Bruce couldn’t hurt a fly—you put the two of them in the ring, my money’s on the bug. But something strange is going on in Gotham."

“Something strange is always going on in Gotham,” says Hal. “But that’s Batman’s issue.”

“I have had abused kids in and out of my office and my home all week. Only one of them has parents that actually exist, and there’s not a single photo of any of them online before their adoptions. They’ve all come out of thin air, and they’ve all been taken in by the richest and most clueless man in the only city the Justice League never enters. It’s fishy.”

“Can we see them?” Diana asks.

Vic pulls up the photos.

“Hey,” says Clark, “I know that kid. Tim. He’s been at my house three times now, with some other kid. Says the other kid is Superboy. A clone or something.”

“Clark!” Diana says. “Why didn’t you mention this sooner?”

Clark shrugs. “I figured it was Luthor or someone trying to make me admit I was Superman. I had it handled.”

“He’s the most suspicious,” Ollie says. “The other boys are street kids, and the girl is foreign—their identities could be legit, maybe. But this kid definitely isn’t who he says he is, and if he knows you’re Superman…”


“So what do we do?”

“We reach out to Batman.” Dinah stands. “I’ve got connections in Gotham. I’ll see if I can get him to talk to me.”
Cassandra watches as two boys and a girl approach Dick at the end of class. This hasn’t happened before.

Bruce sends Dick to gymnastics to socialize, but Cassandra knew as soon as someone told her what socialize meant that Dick was not ready for that. It is good for him to be around other people, and it makes him happy. But he is still scared of people, too. He doesn’t understand the rules, and he isn’t ready to actually talk to people, to make friends with them.

It has been months, though. Maybe he is ready now.

Cassandra watched the other kids decide about Dick, when they first started coming. They decided he was little and weird, better than them at gymnastics but probably a lot younger. They decided the best thing to do with him was to leave him alone.

This was a good choice, Cassandra thinks. They are never mean, but they mostly ignore him, and he can enjoy being near other people without feeling overwhelmed.

Now, though, three of them are walking toward him.

“How did you do that?” one boy asks.

“Do what?”

“That flip. That wasn’t the flip the teacher showed us.”

“Oh! Like this.” Dick does his flip again, and the kids crowd around him.

Cassandra worked very hard for a very long time to learn English without her dad knowing, and she is proud. But it is not perfect. When there are too many people, or they talk too quickly, or they face the wrong direction, it is very hard to understand them. She stops trying to understand the words and just focuses on them instead.

They are impressed, now. When they first walked over they were determined and a little reluctant—Cassandra couldn’t tell why right away, but now she can. They like Dick, and are surprised to like him. They must have decided that talking to him was something they should do, to be nice; they did not expect it to go well.

Dick, at the center of the little group, is not nearly as animated as he can be at home, but he is happy. Excited.

“My sister has a cell phone,” he says—Cassandra is not listening for words, but her brain picks them up automatically for her little brothers.

Dick runs over to her, the other kids trailing behind. “Cass, can we give my friends your phone number, so they can text me on your phone?”

The others look amused, in a nice but puzzled sort of way. Dick looks like he isn’t entirely sure what texting is. (Cassandra likes texting, especially Bruce. She texts Bruce a smiley face when they get to gymnastics safely. She texts a heart when he is on patrol, so he’ll remember to be safe, and another heart if she hears him come in, so he’ll know she’s glad he’s safe.)

She gives Dick’s new friends her phone number, and then they walk to Bruce’s office. Well, Cassandra walks. Dick bounces the whole way, like he does when he is very happy. When they get
there, he will tell Bruce he made friends, and probably by the time they come back next week, he will have a cell phone of his own to talk to them.

“Batman,” Dinah calls softly.

He looks up at the fire escape she’s perched on; he doesn’t seem surprised to see her.

“Black Canary,” he says. “I didn’t expect to see the League this soon.”

But he did expect to see them, she notes. “We’re protective of our identities.”

Batman sighs. “Let me guess, Superman met a boy named Tim.”

Dinah doesn’t answer.

“The same Tim you and Green Arrow met last week?”

“How is it that you always know everything?”

He doesn’t answer the question; she didn’t really expect him to. “The situation is handled; you have nothing to worry about. But I have been thinking about working more with the League. Figure out how to call me at home and we’ll talk.”

He takes a step forward and vanishes. All their data says Batman doesn’t have superpowers, but some days Dinah swears he’s a teleporter.

“Jason!” Dick says. “Jason, I got a text. Will you help me read it?”

Bruce watches as Jason takes the phone from Dick. He frowns. “Did you try to read this?”

“No,” Dick says.

“Try.”

Dick takes the phone back. “Hi, Dick. What’s up?”

“I’ll help you if you need it, Dickie. But I wanna see at least two syllables on that screen next time, okay?”

“Okay,” Dick says. He wanders away, but comes back seconds later to ask, “What should I say back?”

Jason smiles. “Tell him you’re bugging your big brother.” He leans forward to read over Dick’s shoulder. “Are you actually—two g’s in bugging, Dickie.”

Bruce leaves the room before they notice him. He’s so glad Dick’s gotten over his irrational fear of Jason.
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

“I couldn’t say no to them.”
“You’re a hardened criminal, Selina!”
“Not that hardened!”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“We have to be quiet,” Bruce says. “Don’t wanna wake the kids.”

“Sure,” Selina says. She kisses him again. A moment later she steps away, eyes narrowed dangerously. “Bruce, are you hiding me in a guest room?”

“I don’t want the kids to walk in on anything.”

“Fine,” she says, and kisses him again. This time he finally shuts up and just kisses her back—she swears he wasn’t half so chatty back when she thought he was an idiot.

Five minutes later, Bruce stops what he’s doing to say, “You know, if we’re going to do this again, you should really get to know them better.”

She sits up. “Bruce. Darling. I will do whatever you want if you will just shut up about the kids right now.”

Selina returns to the manor the following afternoon with Dick, Damian, and two large dogs.

“I just—I don’t understand how this happened,” Bruce says.

“You told me to include them in my normal routine.”

“So?”

“On Wednesdays I volunteer at the animal shelter.”

“And adopt dogs?”

“I couldn’t say no to them.”

“You’re a hardened criminal, Selina!”

“Not that hardened!”

Bruce sighs. “Tim! Cassandra! Come downstairs. We’re going to the pet store.” He turns back to Selina. “I can’t have them left out if all the other kids have pets.”
Cassandra gets a betta fish, for which Bruce is absurdly grateful. Two dogs and a cat. And all of them Selina’s fault.

“Tim? What do you want?”

He thinks it over. “Rain check. Get the dogs settled first.”

Bruce is even more grateful for that.

“Time to talk about Dick,” Tim says, coming into the office and closing the door behind him.

“What about Dick?”

“I know you don’t trust my judgment on stuff like this, because I think about what’s convenient or right before I think about what people want or deserve. So I checked with Jason, since he knew a normal Dick too, and he agrees with me.”

Bruce is so glad they had that conversation about how informed consent is important before throwing aliens into people’s minds. “What’s wrong with Dick, Tim?” he asks again.

“You have to stop trying to make him understand that he’s always been a person. Talons don’t have to take responsibility for what they’ve done. People do. And as a teenager struggling to cope with the guilt of a murder committed when I wasn’t in control of myself, I can assure you it is not a good idea to put that, times a thousand, on Dickie. He’s coping so well, Bruce. You can let him have this weird thing about his personal identity, or you can break him.”

“Tim—”

“My Dick killed the Joker once. You resuscitated him. The Joker. You saved the Joker because my stable, sane, healthy, grown up Dick couldn’t deal with having that on his conscience. You can’t take away the only thing protecting my traumatized baby brother Dick from that, even if it is weird and unhealthy.”

“Tim,” Bruce says again. “Calm down, okay? I’ve been wondering why Dick was having so much trouble grasping his own humanity—thank you for explaining it to me. I’m not going to do anything to hurt him. Okay?”

“Okay,” Tim says quietly.

“Are you all right?” Bruce checks. It always worries him when Tim gets like this, abruptly not just quiet but meek.

“I miss my Dick,” he says.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s nothing to do with you, B. I mean, you didn’t take me away from—Ivy’s not bad, you know. Not really. She didn’t mean for me to be left in Arkham; she just thought dropping me off there would be the most direct way to get me to Nightwing. But I guess he didn’t want me anymore, because he never came to pick me up like she said he would.”

“Tim…”
“You want me here, right? Even though I killed him?”

“I want you here,” Bruce confirms.

“I know it’s only because you’re kind of crazy,” Tim says, “but I’m really glad I’m here with you.”

“I’m glad too, Tim.”

- 

It’s too much to hope, Bruce thinks, that he and Tim could be on good terms for more than a couple days. It’s his fault—it’s always the adult’s fault, dealing with traumatized children, and Bruce seems to make more than his fair share of mistakes. Alfred is so much better at this. He hasn’t even made any of the kids cry.

He was just surprised to learn that, two months after their original conversation, Tim still didn’t know if he was dating Superboy.

“Timothy Drake! Call Kon! Get out of here! Don’t come back until you know if you’re dating him.”

“Are you—are you kicking me out?”

“What? No?” Bruce is horrified. “This is why I make Cass talk to you—I always say the wrong thing.” He takes a deep breath. “Tim. I’m not kicking you out. I just think that it would be a good idea if you took a break from whatever you’ve been doing up here—”

“Online trigonometry class.”

“Okay. You’ve been working nonstop for four hours, on math apparently, and I think you should take a break, go hang out with your friend, and maybe consider talking about your feelings while you’re at it.”

“Oh,” Tim says. “My Bruce always said the wrong thing, too. Cass didn’t translate for him.” He takes a few steps forward, then hesitates at the door. “I didn’t want to kill him.”

“I know, Tim.”

“I don’t want to hang out with Kon right now.”

“Okay. You don’t have to.”

“I don’t want to work on trig, either. Can—can I just stay? With you?”

“Of course, Tim.” He checks his watch. “I have three hours before I need to head into town. And if you want to, you can come to my board meeting, too. What do you want to do?”

- 

I didn’t want to kill him, Bruce remembers later. Not “I didn’t mean to.” It’s a distinction that doesn’t matter much to Bruce, but that is likely very important to Tim. As if intention matters at all when you’re hurt that badly, and a child on top of it. He just can’t find a way to make Tim understand that.

Also. Online trigonometry. None of these kids are going to school. Beyond teaching Dick and Cassandra how to read—

Tim is apparently handling it on his own. Bruce needs to do something about the continued
education of Damian and Jason.

Crap.

Chapter End Notes

Merry Christmas!
“Hey, Jay,” Bruce says when he wanders into the room. “How are you feeling today?”

“Bad,” Jason says.

“Yeah? What’s wrong?” Bruce slides over on the couch so there’s room for Jason beside him.

“My…head. Running away from me.” He sits down, head on Bruce’s shoulder, and Bruce wraps an arm around him. He’s more coherent than usual when he’s this out of it.

“Does this happen a lot, Jay?”

He nods. “Can’t keep up with myself.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?” he asks.

“Read? Just that.” He taps the cover of the book Bruce is holding. It’s not particularly interesting, but Bruce has a feeling it’s not really about what he reads.

It is important, though, to be consistent and honest with Jason, no matter where he is in his head. Leslie was very firm about that last time they spoke.

“You remember I’m Bruce, right?” he checks. “Not Dad?”

“Bruce,” Jason says, in what is probably acknowledgment.

They sit together, reading, for about half an hour before Tim comes into the room.

“You’ve got a video call in the cave, B. Don’t worry; we put on domino masks before answering.”

“Who is it?” Bruce asks. He’s annoyed and a little worried that the kids would take a call in the cave, but he’s careful to stay calm. Jason is half asleep on his shoulder, and it’s rare for him to be sure exactly who Bruce is and still be comfortable with him.

“Justice League representative. Cass can’t get a read on him at all.”

Bruce closes the book and sits up. “You didn’t recognize him?”
“No,” Tim says. “But I think it’s the Martian Manhunter. He’s a shapeshifter, and alien body language is probably different.”

“J’onn?” Jason asks.

“J’onn,” Tim confirms.

“Bruce? Is he gonna…” Jason trails off, gesturing to his head.

“Do you want him to?”


“You decide,” Bruce promises. It’s the only possible answer, but he really hopes Jason doesn’t decide to let an alien into his brain.

He goes downstairs to meet the Martian Manhunter. When he leaves, Jason is tracing the embossed letters on the cover of the book. Tim is sitting quietly beside him. It’s been a long time, Bruce realizes suddenly, since he’s worried about Tim being with the others unsupervised.

- 

Alfred is working in the kitchen for nearly half an hour before he realizes he isn't alone; there is a child on top of the refrigerator.

“Dick? Are you all right?”

He nods slowly, holding up his pencil sharpener and tiny stub of pencil as some sort of proof; Alfred might never forgive Damian for introducing him to the joy of pencil sharpeners. There are pencil shavings all over the house.

“Would you like a snack?”

Dick nods again, but won’t come down. “Bruce is talking to a green man,” he reports.

A member of the Justice League, Alfred assumes. “Did the green man see you?”

Dick shakes his head. “I was in the ceiling.”

Alfred dreads the day Dick finally has a growth spurt—he’s just small enough to fit in all of his favorite places. Bruce can hardly buy a larger chandelier to accommodate a growing boy. Large enough to seat an adolescent is more than opulent enough.

“Where are your siblings?” Alfred asks. Jason said something this morning about helping with lunch, but it’s not unusual for Jason to forget plans like that.

“Cass and Dami are walking the dogs.”

“And why aren’t you helping walk your dog?”

Dick shrugs. “Dami’s mad at me.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”
Dick’s not being evasive; he genuinely doesn’t know why Damian’s upset. He doesn’t seem frightened to have someone angry with him, which is unusual but a good sign of progress. That Damian is angry at all is somewhat concerning, but then Bruce has said before that Damian’s general agreeability is likely more about being unsure of his place than an actual personality trait. (Bruce, of course, cheats; Alfred is not in the habit of spying on alternate versions of the children for hours on end.)

Regardless, this is his problem to solve. If Bruce is actually making friends downstairs, he absolutely can’t be interrupted. Alfred will worry about it when they come home with the dogs. (Dogs. What was Bruce thinking? As if five children and a cat weren’t enough to deal with.)

“Dick, would you like to help me make lunch?”

He narrows his eyes suspiciously. “Do I have to read?”

“Only the numbers on the measuring cups.”

“Okay.”
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

"Bruce invents time travel, and he'll start by saving his parents. Then he’ll adopt baby Hitler and raise him right, and the next thing you know he’s convincing Brutus not to stab Caesar and preventing the crucifixion of Christ. You give Bruce a time machine and he’ll destabilize the entire multiverse. The man has no self control."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cassandra drops three pellets of food in the fish tank, then watches him swim to the top. Damian is listening to an audiobook in the next room; she can hear muffled words she recognizes but doesn’t understand. It’s one of the languages most commonly spoken in the League of Assassins—Cassandra had chosen to learn English instead because of Ra’s helpful sometimes-allies like Cheshire and Deathstroke, and because she could get farther away and still be mostly understood with it.

Damian has been moody for the last week or so. Bruce is worried about it, but that’s because Bruce spends too much time spying on different versions of them all. Damian is just finally comfortable enough to test his boundaries, like Dick did a few months ago. Also, it’s probably just now sinking in that, as bad as some things were before he came here, that’s a whole world he’ll never see again. Cassandra remembers being sad when she really understood that, but not too sad, because it’s better here.

He just needs time. Miraculously, none of Bruce’s assassin children have tested their boundaries with physical violence. (Well, there was that time Dick bit Tim, but Tim says that was his own fault, for sneaking up on a panicking zombie assassin child.) She’s so proud of her little brothers.

The fish swim to the top of the tank again, following her finger. Cassandra is careful not to touch the glass. When he loses interest in her again, she moves on to feed the Sea Monkeys. There are muffled voices and a few barks next door—Dick, Ace, and Titus have found Damian, and Dick is convincing him to come out to the backyard. They don’t ask her to come, because her door is closed.

Everyone leaves Cassandra alone when her door is closed. Bruce said they needed to, and they listen. Her bedroom is the first place she’s ever had that’s really hers, and she loves it. Alfred doesn’t even come in to clean, like he does for the boys. It’s only for her.

She has a bar for stretching on one wall, and some yoga mats on the floor. There are posters on the wall, from when Bruce took her to the museum and the ballet, and from when they all went to the zoo and the aquarium together. She has a desk and books and notebooks from Alfred teaching her to read, a few drawings Damian made for her, and some photos of her with Bruce and Alfred and her brothers. One of her and Kate, too. But her favorite parts are definitely the bed, which is three times bigger and more comfortable than anything she’s had before, and the fish tank. She likes to watch him swim when she’s stressed, and when she wakes up in the morning, and while she’s falling asleep.
“Don’t you ever want to go home?” Jason asks.

Tim doesn’t answer right away. “Come downstairs with me,” he says, finally.

They go down to the cave, and Tim pulls up the file on his universe. “How much did Bruce tell you about where I came from?”

“Not much. Just that your Bruce was dead, and you’d been tortured by the Joker.”

“Do you remember when I was staying in a cell down here?”

Jason frowns. “Not really.”

“Great.” Tim pulls up a folder full of newspaper articles, letting the headlines fill the screens. “This is my home,” he tells Jason.

“Robin Kills Batman!”

“Batman Identity Confirmed—Bruce Wayne!”

“Joker Confirmed Dead—Legacy Continues in Ex-Robin Tim Drake!”

“Joker Junior in Arkham—Harley Quinn and Poison Ivy Still at Large!”

“Wow,” Jason says.

Tim closes the articles, looking carefully away.

“So I’m dead, right?” Jason asks.

“Well, you were. Bruce says you’re in Hong Kong with Cass now.”

“So where’s Dick?”

“He pretty much lives with the other Titans. I blew his cover, too.”

“Okay, rephrasing that. Why are you not with Dick?”

Tim finally dares to look up; Jason doesn’t seem mad at him. “I don’t know—because I killed his dad?”

“No, you didn’t. The Joker killed Dad. Using you.”

“Well, I guess no one else saw it that way, because I called and called and called for help, and I was still in Arkham for two years.”

“I’m sorry,” Jason says.

Tim shrugs.

“So. Not much of a home to go back to, huh?”

“Not really.”

“What about Alfred?” Jason asks.

“Back in England. Yours too.” Deciding they’re past due for a subject change, Tim closes his
multiverse file and opens Jason’s. “Your Dick is living in New York. You—they miss you, I’m sure. But it’s been three years. They’ve mourned you. They’ve mourned Bruce.”

“I miss them.”

“Dick has a daughter,” Tim says, still digging through the file. “With Starfire, it looks like.”

“He could send me back if he really tried,” Jason says, ignoring him. “He’s Batman. If he really tried, he could probably send me back to before he died.”

“Shut up,” Tim says, glancing around the cave. “You’ll give him ideas. Bruce invents time travel, and he’ll start by saving his parents. Then he’ll adopt baby Hitler and raise him right, and the next thing you know he’s convincing Brutus not to stab Caesar and preventing the crucifixion of Christ. You give Bruce a time machine and he’ll destabilize the entire multiverse. The man has no self control.”

Jason thinks this over. “I do not want Hitler to be my baby brother,” he says.

Tim decides not to mention the file with three times the security of anything else on the computer. He could get it open if he really tried, but he doesn’t need to open it to know it’s Bruce’s effort toward re-entering Jay’s world.

Of course Bruce is looking for a way to send Jason home, and of course he hasn’t said anything about it, just like he hasn’t said anything about the masking technology for Dick, in case he fails.

Tim doesn’t know if Jason, given the choice, would rather be with his Dick and Alfred or someone else’s Bruce. He doesn’t look forward to finding out.

It isn’t fair, he thinks, later, watching Jason talk to Alfred, watching him help Dick to read a text on his phone. Jason misses his Bruce and Dick and Alfred, but this is his family, too. He shouldn’t have to choose. Bruce has him, so Bruce should keep him, and not even mention the possibility of going back. It’ll just make things hard.

And it’s not fair to Dick, either. He’s twenty four, recently married, and a member of the Justice League. He has a full time job and an infant daughter. Bruce—his dead dad from another reality—has no right to just pop in and demand he take custody of a teenager with severe brain damage. There’s not a Dick Grayson in the multiverse who would refuse (except maybe Tim’s Dick), but that’s way too much responsibility to put on his shoulders.

Tim sighs. He’s still Robin, even if this Bruce keeps him inside at night. It’s Robin’s job to make sure Batman isn’t being an idiot. Tim’ll have to talk to him about this. Eventually. He can’t stop thinking about those stupid newspaper headlines, even if Jason doesn’t think it’s his fault, either, and talking to Bruce—any Bruce—sounds much too hard right now.

-When Bruce is on patrol, and the rest of the house is sleeping, Tim returns to the computer. Carefully, he pulls up more newspaper articles from his world. The ones from after he left.

“Tim Drake Missing?”

“Arkham Officials on First Breakout in Two Years: No Comment”

“Harley Quinn and Poison Ivy Break INTO Arkham!”
“Nightwing Seen With Harley Quinn and Poison Ivy”

Harley looked for him. She still cared. And Dick—maybe Dick did too? If he found Harley after Bruce took Tim, if he at least wanted to know where Tim was if he wasn’t in Arkham…

Tim shuts down the computer and goes back to bed.

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year!
“Let me talk this time, okay?” Tim says.

Kon nods, then knocks on the door. Martha Kent opens it.

“Hi, Mrs. Kent. My name is Tim, and this is my friend Kon. We’ve been learning about our family histories, and, um…we’re pretty sure you’re his grandma? And he doesn’t know his family, so we wanted to come meet you.”

Martha lets them in, because she’s a nice person who definitely would have rescued Tim from Arkham if she had super hearing.

“Hey, Kon?”

“Yeah?”

“Are we dating?”

Kon goes red. “Do you want to?”

“Um…yeah. But just like this. Okay? Not more.”

“Sure,” Kon says, smiling. “Would you get away from the edge? You’re gonna fall off.”

“I’m not gonna fall. And if I did you’d catch me.”

“Tim.”

“Fine.” He walks back to the center of the roof, sitting down beside Kon. “Have you heard from Lex lately?”

“Nah. He really only calls if I do something big, like evacuate a burning building or prevent a landslide. Average, daily heroics don’t rate—mostly he just pays my lease every month. Is he really my dad?”

Tim shrugs. “Probably. He is in my world.”

“I don’t wanna go bald, dude.”

“Sorry.”

“At least he, like, acknowledges that I exist. Remind me again why we can’t meet my baby brother?”

“Because stalking preschoolers is wrong. Hey, maybe we could meet your grandparents.”

Kon sits up straight. “I have grandparents? Why didn’t you tell me I had grandparents?”

“Um. Just didn’t think about it, I guess. Sorry.” He pulls out his phone and checks the time. “We
can’t do it before Bruce expects me back tonight. Next time?”

“Can next time be tomorrow?”

“Yeah, but not until ten. I have an online test in the morning.”

“Deal.”

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“Let me talk this time, okay?” Tim says.

Kon nods, then knocks on the door. Martha Kent opens it.

“Hi, Mrs. Kent. My name is Tim, and this is my friend Kon. We’ve been learning about our family histories, and, um…we’re pretty sure you’re his grandma? And he doesn’t know his family, so we wanted to come meet you.”

Martha lets them in, because she’s a nice person who definitely would have rescued Tim from Arkham if she had super hearing. (Tim has pretty much decided everyone is probably right about how he shouldn’t have been left in Arkham. Now that he’s decided to be mad about it, it’s a lot easier to separate the two versions of Kon and Dick than the two versions of Clark.)

She asks Kon, “Do you know who your parents are, sweetie?”

“I think my dad’s name is Clark,” he says, like Tim told him to. “I don’t have a mom.”

Martha frowns. She finds a plate of cookies for them, then goes into the other room, probably to call Clark.

“That’s my grandma?” Kon asks.

“Talk later. Eavesdrop now. Is she calling him?”

Kon concentrates. “She’s telling him about me. Um—you let them into the house? Clark, he looks exactly like you—is there a youthful indiscretion you should tell me about?—okay, now he’s embarrassed. He says he’s a clone, Mom—I don’t know, it’s not some program I signed up for—no, I didn’t ask. Oh! I think she’s mad at him!”

“So I hear you’ve met Clark,” Martha says when she comes back. “I’m sorry that didn’t go well for you.”

“He didn’t want to deal,” Kon says. “I didn’t even tell him about Lex Luthor being my other dad or anything.”

“Crap,” Tim says. This is why he was going to do the talking.

Martha looks mildly surprised. “I…see. That’s interesting.”

“Not, like, his dad-dad,” Tim says quickly. “He didn’t raise him or anything. Kon just has two bio dads.”

“So when you said you didn’t have a mom—”

“At all,” Kon says. “Yeah.” He takes another cookie. “Hey, can I meet my grandpa?”
“He’s in town right now, but he’ll be back in time for lunch. Would you boys like to join us?”

“We’d love to,” Tim says. “Thank you, Mrs. Kent. I assume Clark will be here as well?”

Martha smiles at him. “I’m afraid he’ll probably insist. He worries, you know. As if any other teenagers could ever pose a threat after I survived raising him.”

Things go surprisingly well for the hour before anyone else reaches the house. Tim appreciates the horror in Martha’s voice when she says things like, “You live in an apartment alone?” and “You’re only two years old?” and “You didn’t even have a real name until you met Tim?”

Coming to Smallville was a good idea.

Clark gets to the house before his dad does, and before he can get a word out Martha is telling him to show his son around the farm. Kon and Clark look identically baffled at being sent outside alone, and Tim finds himself in the kitchen with only Martha.

He’s safe and sane and it’s very unlikely that he’s going to snap and kill somebody without Kon as a super powered buffer. He tells himself this very firmly as Martha turns her back to him and starts preparing lunch.

“Tell me a little about yourself, Tim,” she says without turning around.

“I’m Kon’s boyfriend,” he says. “My dad is Bruce Wayne.”

“That’s nice, dear, but I want to know about you. What do you like to do?”

“Oh,” Tim says. No one’s asked him that since before Arkham. It takes him a minute to think of something. “I like taking pictures.”

“That’s nice,” Martha says again. “Would you mind helping me set the table?”

Tim gets up and goes to the right cupboard without prompting; he’s spent plenty of time in this kitchen back at home.

“What kind of pictures do you take?” she asks as he takes out plates and forks.

It goes well. Clark seems to be avoiding Tim, but Kon tells him later that he agreed to let him meet Jon if Kon would tell him how he knew about them.

“I’ll ask Bruce if it’s okay,” Tim says. It shouldn’t be a problem; Bruce is already talking to the Justice League, though he hasn’t revealed his identity yet.

A small figure appears at the stairs just as Bruce finishes changing out of the bat suit.

“Dad?”

Tim looks dead tired, and has the beginnings of a black eye. He probably has no idea what he just called Bruce.

“What’s wrong, Tim?”

“Jay’s having—I can’t wake him up. It’s really bad. I was just coming to get Alfred—didn’t know you were home yet.”
He continues, as Bruce follows him upstairs, “It’s not really nightmares. More like flashbacks. I woke up when the Joker was beating him. Went all the way through coming out of the grave, then cycled back to his mom bringing him to the warehouse. It just blew up, and now he’s in the coffin again. Most I’ve ever heard him talk, and he’s not even awake.”

The other three kids are all in the room, Cass and Damian standing close enough he suspects they want to be shaking him awake, would be trying if Tim hadn’t already got a black eye for his troubles. Dick is sitting in the corner, noise-cancelling headphones pressed tightly to his ears, Jason’s cowl pulled over his head beneath them.

“Dad, Dad, Bruce, Dad,” Jason is calling, clearly caught in the memory of his grave.

Bruce moves quickly, sitting on top of Jason’s legs and restraining his arms. “Jason. It’s okay, Jason. It’s okay. I’m here.”

Despite Bruce’s best efforts, Jason isn’t able to wrench himself back into consciousness until the cycle has completed, until he has, as far as those outside his head can tell, made his way out of the coffin. He wakes suddenly, and sits shuddering in Bruce’s arms; he’s not speaking, and Bruce can’t see his face to know how present he is. It doesn’t matter.

Alfred has taken the youngest two boys to bed. Cassandra is watching Bruce and Jason. Tim has fallen asleep with his head down on Jason’s desk.

“Cass?” Bruce says quietly. She goes to wake Tim.

“’m fine,” he mumbles. “Wanna stay with Jay.”

“All right,” Bruce says. “Come up on the bed at least—there’s room. Cass, honey, go get some sleep.”

Cass leaves. Tim climbs onto the mattress behind Bruce. Bruce gets Jason to lie back down, at least, though he doubts he’ll get any sleep. It’s a long night, and the morning isn’t much better.

Jason is about as checked out as he’s ever been, leaning listlessly into Bruce’s side. He’s not reacting to anything, except for Bruce’s attempt to leave the bed, which has him curling his fingers into the hem of Bruce’s shirt. His grip is weak.

Really, Bruce thinks, if there was ever a good time to leave the building, figuratively speaking, it would be after a night like this.

“Tim,” he says, “could you pick out a book for us to read?”

Tim kneels down in front of the bookshelf, giving the task more time and attention than it deserves, given how little awareness Jason will likely have of the story.

“He was reading this when he died,” Tim says, finally. “It was still on the floor by his bed when I moved in. Bookmark at chapter five.”

“Thank you, Tim. Can you do one more thing for me?”

“Sure,” he says. Bruce knows he likes to be useful, especially to Batman.

“I was supposed to meet with the Justice League today. Will you please go down to the cave, call the frequency they gave me, and tell them I can’t make it?”
“I can do that.”

“Thank you, Tim. Make sure you’re wearing a domino mask.”

“I’m not stupid, B,” he says, but he doesn’t sound upset at all.

Tim leaves, and Bruce settles in for a long, slow day. It’s early evening before Jason rouses at all, sitting up and looking around a little.

“You hungry, Jay?” Bruce checks. Alfred had brought up breakfast and lunch for them; Jason had been too far out of it to touch the food.

He shakes his head.

“Okay. Do you need anything else? Your cowl?”

A few minutes pass before he shakes his head again, a much longer delay than usual between hearing, comprehension, and response.

“Do you want me to keep reading?”

He nods, more quickly this time.

“All right, Jay. Let me know if you need anything.”

A couple more hours pass before Jason says, quietly, “My head hurts. And my throat.”

Bruce looks up, surprised. He hadn’t expected Jason to pull himself together enough to speak for a few days, at least. “Yeah? Well, it was a rough night. Lots of screaming. Do you remember?”

“Kinda.”

“Do you want some water?”

He shakes his head. “Wanna sleep.”

“All right. Do you want me to stay here?”

“Please.”

“Of course, Jay.”

- 

It’s the middle of the night again the next time Jason wakes up. Bruce is sleeping in a chair beside his bed. His head is killing him.

He considers waking Bruce, but he probably hasn’t had any more sleep than Jason has. He gets up slowly, planning to go to the kitchen—he never ate anything yesterday.

“Jason?”

“I’m fine, Dad. Go back to sleep.”

Bruce ignores him. “Are you feeling better?”

“A little. I’m hungry.”
“Stay in bed. I’ll get you something.”

“You can’t cook, Dad.”

“I can reheat leftovers.”

He leaves before Jason can object again. Jason considers finding something for his headache while he waits, but that sounds like too much work. He’ll just wait for Dad.
“You’re weirdly honest,” Tim says, “especially for Batman. And it makes things harder than they need to be.”

Extra mini-chapter, cause why not.

Tim finds Bruce in his office, reading over his shoulder as he fills out applications for an online high school.

“Have you considered lying?”

“Hm?” Bruce doesn’t look up.

“You’re weirdly honest,” Tim says, “especially for Batman. And it makes things harder than they need to be. You should have given Dick brown eyes instead of blue. And when you fabricated our documentation, you should have made him eleven instead of fourteen. You should have made me fourteen instead of sixteen. It would have made our current physical development, our emotional states, and our education levels less suspicious. We’re the problems, you know—me and Dickie. No one thinks anything of Cass and Damian. Jason’s at least where he should be physically, and they worry less now that they have a firsthand report of head trauma, even if they can’t confirm it.”

“The eye color thing was stupid,” Bruce concedes. “If I’d given him green, a glimpse of his natural eyes could have passed for a trick of the light. And it wouldn’t have hurt to make him younger—he isn’t going to catch up from six years of torture fast enough to know the difference. But you, Tim. You definitely don’t want to be younger than you are.”

“Why not?” Tim asks. Someday, Bruce hopes, Tim’s first instinct won’t be to be suspicious of him.

“Because I’ve scheduled you to test for your driver’s permit in a week.”

“What? But I haven’t studied. At all. We haven’t even talked about driving.”

“Do you need more than a week to study?” Bruce asks.

“No.”

“Then there’s no problem, is there? Go study. I left the handbook on your bed.”

Tim races away, and Bruce gets back to work—he has a murder to solve yet tonight, after he gets his kids enrolled in school.

He’s signed Damian up for a driving instruction class, too; Tim is old enough to skip straight to the test, Cassandra needs to learn to read well enough to pass the written test, and Bruce isn’t confident enough in Dick and Jason’s mental states to put them behind the wheel. Tim will be the first of his children to get a driver’s license. Bruce is hoping this display of trust in his part will help the kid to trust himself a little more, too. He also hopes it will be an incentive for Cass to put some real effort into her lessons with Alfred.
Chapter Summary

It’s a long time later that a man in blue and red shouts, flies up—actually flies—and grabs him. Dick holds very still and doesn’t make any noise. He remembers the rules. He remembers how to be a Talon.

But this man doesn’t look like an Owl at all.

Dick is particularly clingy on the day of Bruce’s rescheduled introduction to the Justice League. He’s been following Bruce around the house since he woke up, dragging a quilt along for when they go into the slightly cooler cave. The clinginess probably means he’s upset about something, but Bruce doesn’t know what; he’s on good terms with all his siblings, he’s making friends in gymnastics, and if he had any nightmares last night they weren’t audible from down the hall.

Bruce considers rescheduling again, but, well. It’s not as if he was planning on hiding his identity from the League anyway, as entertaining as that would be.

(It will be entertaining no matter what—he’s triple-checked his cowl camera to make sure he’ll have footage of Ollie’s face.)

“Dickie, do you want to come with me to meet some people?”

“Nice people?” he asks.

“I hope so. Ollie and Dinah will be there, and Tim’s friend Kon’s dad.”

“Okay,” Dick says after only a moment of consideration. He drops his quilt, and fishes sunglasses out of his pocket—he doesn’t need to wear them in the cave. (The specially tinted contacts are almost ready, and then they can abandon the glasses entirely.)

It’s about an hour drive to get far enough out of Bat territory to reach the League’s closest zeta tube —some sort of teleportation device, as Bruce understands it. Dick grabs Bruce’s hand when they start to move.

It feels about like shifting universes, and they land in a room full of brightly colored people. Dick’s grip on his hand tightens for a moment, then loosens completely. Bruce glances over; his grayish skin is even paler than usual.

Bruce crouches down. He pushes back his cowl without even thinking about it—Dick likes being able to see people’s faces.

“Dickie?”

Dick tugs his hand away and runs. He’s out of sight almost instantly.

Bruce stands up, turning to face the League.

“Bruce?” Oliver says. Bruce ignores him. His attention is focused on Hawk Girl. Hawk Woman?
He’s heard both, and isn’t sure which she prefers. It doesn’t matter right now. She’s wearing a bird mask. Of course.

He’s such an idiot. He knows Dick was already having a bad day, knows what Dick’s afraid of, knows what the current Justice League line-up looks like. What was he thinking, bringing Dick here?

“Oliver, Dinah, he recognizes you—I need you to help me find him.”

“Bruce,” Oliver says again, “what the hell are—”

“Later.”

“I thought you said Bruce Wayne couldn’t hurt a fly,” says Hawk-whatever-she-is.

“Ollie’s an idiot. Could you—the mask? My son is—he was tortured by an organization of people in bird masks.”

She removes her helmet hastily.

- 

He shouldn’t have run. Bruce didn’t know there was an Owl here—he couldn’t have. He wouldn’t—he wouldn’t do that to Dick. Because Dick is his son and he loves him. He shouldn’t have run. He should have stayed, so he could protect Bruce, or maybe so Bruce could protect him.

Now he doesn’t know where he is, and he doesn’t know where Bruce is, and he doesn’t know where the Owl is.

What if there are more Owls? What if it’s a trap?

He goes as high up as he can, because Owls can’t really fly, and they can’t climb as well as him. No one can climb as well as him.

He’s very scared, and he wishes he was still with Bruce. And he wishes he had a blanket. Or his pencil sharpener. Or his dog.

But Ace can’t climb. That’s a bad idea. The Owls would get Ace for sure.

What if the Owls have Bruce?

It’s a long time later that a man in blue and red shouts, flies up—actually flies—and grabs him. Dick holds very still and doesn’t make any noise. He remembers the rules. He remembers how to be a Talon.

But this man doesn’t look like an Owl at all.

- 

Jason finds Cassandra upstairs. She’s in her room, but the door is open, so she won’t mind him coming in.

“Dami’s in a mood.”

Cassandra looks up; she’s on the floor, doing the splits. “What happened?”
“I suggested that walking the dog seven times in one day was excessive. Kid bit my head off.”

Cassandra hums. “He feels…trapped.”

“You talk to Bruce about it?”

She sits up, pulling her knees to her chest. “Not yet. He’s busy.” She waves a hand dismissively. “Justice League.”

“That’s today?”

Cassandra nods. Jason frowns. He’s missing time again, but only a couple days. Not too bad.

“He took Dick.”


“Robin?”

Holy shit. She doesn’t know? “Cass, I have so many stories to tell you.”

Dick starts crying as soon as Superman deposits him in Bruce’s arms. It has not been a great start to his relationship with the Justice League.


Introducing him to everyone and explaining the difference between a Hawk and an Owl is going to have to wait for another day. And now he has an hour drive to get a terrified Dick home, and he doesn’t even have a blanket in the car.

The Flash nods quickly when Bruce explains, and returns five minutes later with a weighted blanket, a sharpener, and a twelve-pack of pencils. They reschedule, again.

“I’m sorry, Dick,” Bruce says again when they’re safely through the zeta tube and back in the car. Dick isn’t heavy enough to be sitting in the passenger seat, technically, but even Bruce’s non-Batmobile cars aren’t exactly standard, and he’s perfectly safe up here where Bruce can see him.

“I wish I hadn’t run,” Dick says quietly. “I got lost and I wanted to be with you.”

“It’s okay,” Bruce says again, because he doesn’t know what else to say. They don’t speak for the rest of the drive. Dick, safe beneath his new blanket, works his way silently through the entire pack of pencils, leaving a small mountain of shavings at his feet.

“Being safe and loved is nice and all,” Tim says, holding up a set of paints for Damian’s inspection, “but it’s not much of a hobby.”

In the three days since he got his driver’s permit, Tim has racked up fifteen hours of practice driving. At least, that’s what he said when Damian was nervous about riding with him. Alfred was the supervising adult—Father is busy. Again.

Damian is glad Tim suggested coming to the art store. Father has taken him, like he promised to, but that was weeks ago, and the only interesting thing he’s done since was going with Selina and Dick to
“I shouted at Jason,” he admits to Tim.

“I heard you.” Tim turns back to the shelf. “Here, how about these? If you really want to piss Bruce off, use them on the walls in the dining room.”

“I do not want to…piss Father off?” He isn’t quite sure what that means, but it sounds unpleasant.

“Right. So you’re just yelling at the most messed up kids for fun?”

“I didn’t mean to.” He knows he’s been awful lately. He feels bad enough about it without Tim’s input.

“Chill, Dami. Bruce is just distracted, that’s all. He cares, but if you want him to pay attention to you, you have to, well, you have to get his attention.”

Damian moves to the next aisle. He appreciates Tim trying to do whatever it is Tim is trying to do—help, he supposes—but he doesn’t think an unauthorized oil painting in the dining room is going to solve anything.

“Or,” Tim says, catching up to him a minute later, “you could talk to him. Of course, then you’ll have to deal with him feeling guilty and getting all broody about it, but afterwards he’ll probably sign you up for an art class at the community center or something, so you can interact with your peers.”

Damian looks up in time to see the air quotes around “interact with your peers.” He rolls his eyes.

“Yeah, I know. They’re amateurs, it would be a waste of time, you wouldn’t learn anything, whatever. It works for Dick.”

“Anything works for Dick, as long as he’s warm and has room to back flip.”

Tim shrugs. “Hey, can we go to the camera store after this?”

“You’re driving,” Damian points out. “And Alfred’s in charge.”

He appears at the end of the aisle when Damian says his name; Alfred’s better than a lot of the ninjas he knows.

“Have you found what you need, Damian?”

He holds out his selections. “Is this all right?”

“Of course,” Alfred says, barely even glancing at the supplies. “I take it we’re going down the street for a camera next?”

“Will Father mind us buying all these things?”

“Your father chose not to give you an allowance because he felt it would imply a financial limit to his affections for you.” Alfred’s expression suggests he disagrees with this, but doesn’t mind much about it. “However, I am applying the limitation that you must be able to carry all of your own acquisitions. We are not making two trips to the car in this weather.”

Damian looks out the window; it’s finally started raining in the last half hour, as it’s been threatening to do since dawn. Fortunately, the dogs have already been very thoroughly walked today.
Tim is right. He really needs to find a better outlet for his energy than walking the dogs and getting mad at his brothers over nothing.

Bruce finds Jason and Cassandra in her room, sitting on the floor, talking quietly. The rest of the house is empty. He kneels down in front of them, transferring Dick carefully to Cassandra’s lap. He sits listlessly where Bruce puts him, and both of the older children lean forward to examine his red eyes and tear-stained cheeks.

“What happened?” Cass asks Bruce.

“We met Hawk Woman,” Bruce says, deciding to err on the side of more respectful. This means nothing to Cass, of course, but Jason’s eyes widen in understanding.

“Shit, Dickie.” He pulls him from Cassandra’s lap into his own, hugging him tightly. Dick mumbles something Bruce can’t hear, then starts crying again.

Cassandra stands and ushers Bruce out of the room. “Jay has this. Tell me about your new friends?”
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

"See, the thing is, you and Talia don’t always exactly conceive Damian the traditional way. So, um, just because you never slept with Talia doesn’t necessarily mean you don’t have kids with her. Right here. In this universe."

Bruce feels a sudden and powerful need to sit down. “I should talk to Talia,” he says from his new position on the floor.

“A jewel thief?” Kate says, laughing a little. “Really? Honestly, Bruce, you have the worst taste in women. Do you remember when you were pining over that assassin?”

“You mean Damian’s mom?” Cassandra says.

“Alternate you had babies with that woman?”

“Just the one,” Bruce says defensively. He sees Tim make an abortive movement in the corner of his eye, which usually means he knows something Bruce doesn’t. A problem for after Kate leaves.

“Do you really have room to judge my taste, Kate?” He can’t believe Cass told her about Selina. And Selina’s criminal tendencies.

“Hey! I am dating a cop. That’s respectable.”

“A cop who doesn’t know you’re a vigilante.”

“I’m going to tell her. I’m just…working my way up to it.”

“Sure. And what about that time in college?”

“Bruce! We weren’t supposed to ever talk about that again. We signed nondisclosure agreements. And there are impressionable children in the room.”

“See?” Bruce says, triumphant. “You’ve never had to sign a nondisclosure agreement over my bad taste in women.”

When Kate leaves, Bruce corners Tim in the cave. “You’re hiding something.”

Tim smiles brightly. “I’m finally dating Kon?”

“Congratulations. I’m happy for you. Now tell me what you’re really hiding.”

He sighs, leading the way slowly to Bruce’s multiverse equipment. “I wouldn’t know anything you didn’t if you hadn’t been slacking off on your multiverse research since bringing home Damian.”

“I haven’t been slacking off,” Bruce says. “I’ve been parenting.”

“I know,” Tim says quietly, “and you’ve been doing a good job. Mostly. But there’s more of us.”
Bruce tries, and fails, to imagine handling a sixth child. Crap.

“No one I’ve seen that you desperately need to pick up, or anything. But there is a girl with Talia, a few times.”

Bruce frowns.

“And, okay. See, the thing is, you and Talia don’t always exactly conceive Damian the traditional way. Or this girl. So, um, just because you never slept with Talia doesn’t necessarily mean you don’t have kids with her. Right here. In this universe.”

Bruce feels a sudden and powerful need to sit down. “I should talk to Talia,” he says from his new position on the floor.

“Not yet,” Tim says sharply.

“Why not?”

“Damian. You’ve been neglecting him. Cass and I have both noticed it. He’s acting out and he’s constantly in a bad mood, because he has nothing meaningful to do with his time and you’re always too busy for him. He’s not falling apart like the rest of us, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t need you, and if Talia finds out about him now, he’ll probably agree when she wants him to come with her instead of staying here.”

Bruce knows he’s been busy, trying to coordinate things with the League, work out what to do with Jason’s situation, deal with Dick’s latest setback. But he didn’t think…”It’s really that bad?”

“She died when he was a toddler. Right in front of him. Whatever memories he has are going to be practically sacred. If you can’t appreciate the appeal of a surprise mom, you have not been paying nearly enough attention to how Jason got the way he is.”

“I really need to talk to Talia.”

“Are you even listening to—”

“I’m not going to keep him from his mother just because he might like her better.”

“Bruce—”

“She’s not like whatever Talia you know, Tim. She would never hurt him, and she deserves to know he exists. I should have thought about it sooner.”

“Fine,” Tim says. “You should still try harder with him. And make sure she hasn’t already genetically engineered her own version of him. That’ll just be awkward.”

-Damian goes with Father the next time he meets the Justice League. He does not care much about the Justice League, but they are going early in the morning, and Father has promised that they will spend the rest of the day together.

He stands quietly by his father’s side, but watches the woman who frightened Dick carefully. Father says it was an accident, but Dick has been quiet and twitchy and miserable for days, and Damian is not taking any chances.

Then a man who is also a robot offers to show him the satellites. His name is Victor, and he’s barely
a man, only a few years older than Damian. Father says it’s fine, and the bird woman has done
nothing suspicious, so Damian goes.

“Okay, kid. We can see anything in the world. Where do you want to look?”

Damian almost—almost—asks to see his grandfather. But he panics at the last second. He has no
idea what kind of man Ra’s al Ghul is in this world, and he’s afraid to find out.

Also, he hasn’t worked up the courage yet to ask Father if his mother is alive in this world, and he
intends to find out, someday, by asking, not by spotting her in conversation with his grandfather.

“Can we check on my little brother?” he asks instead.

Dick is outside playing with the dogs. Jason is with him. Unsure what else to ask for, Damian
suggests that Victor show him what he finds most interesting, and is quite surprised when Father
finds him and informs him that three hours have passed.

Victor gives Damian his cell phone number. Damian is somewhat baffled, but not displeased—he
seems to have acquired a friend. One who is not also a sibling.

- 

Bruce is surprised by how well Damian gets along with Cyborg, but spends an extra hour discussing
the Superboy situation with Clark Kent to allow them more time together.

“He’s a very nice young man. He’s been dating my son for some time now.”

“Is this the son who murdered several people, or the other son who murdered several people?”

It’s at this point in the conversation that Wonder Woman is forced to intervene before anyone winds
up with Kryptonite in places where Kryptonite should never be. Tim has only murdered two people,
anyway. (As far as he knows—they don’t really talk about his time with Harley.) And that was
under duress.

Still, Bruce is feeling tentatively positive about his relationship with the League by the time he and
Damian get back to the car. Time, then, to work on his relationship with Damian. He starts by letting
Damian practice driving, even though he technically hasn’t even started his driver’s ed class. They’re
in the middle of nowhere, and Bruce definitely remembers that teenage boys like cars.

Teenage boys also like surviving, apparently, because Damian is quite willing to abandon the
driver’s seat five minutes and one rather alarming near miss with an oak tree later.

They go out for lunch. They go to an art museum. They watch a movie, and then they go out for
dinner. Bruce tries hard to communicate. He still doesn’t think he’s very good at it, but he’s had a lot
of practice in the last year or so, and Damian seems happier when they get home than he was when
they left.

- 

Cassandra shoves her workbook away, clearly frustrated. She’s been working harder at her lessons
since Tim and Damian started working toward their driver’s licenses, and she began to realize how
many things required being able to read and write.

It’s not going nearly as badly as Alfred suspects she thinks it is.
“He never gave me a chance,” she says. It’s the first time he’s ever heard her sound bitter. “A girl who can’t speak. What a useful tool. What a useless life.”

They’re talking about her biological father, Alfred assumes. “You speak quite well, despite him. And you’ll learn this too.”

Cassandra sighs, but pulls the workbook close again. She’s a smart girl; she just needs time. She’s already nearly caught up with Dick, though to be fair that’s partly due to the combination of his dyslexia and general disinterest.
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

It’s a very pleasant conversation until Barbara says, “You know, my boyfriend works with a travelling circus—amazing trapeze artist, his name’s Dick Grayson. I came back into town with them; they’ll be stationed in Gotham for a couple weeks.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

On Monday Bruce goes to the police station to pay a parking ticket. (Tim’s ticket, Bruce’s fault; he should have been paying more attention to his student driver’s driving and less attention to the stories he was telling now that Bruce had finally got him to admit that he and Superboy had been stalking Superman.) While he’s there, he stops to see Jim, because if he’s been doing a less than excellent job, over the last few months, of juggling five children, he’s been doing an absolutely abysmal job of maintaining any casual relationships outside of his children and this new thing happening with Selina.

Jim has a guest already when Bruce arrives, who turns and stands to greet him, smiling. Not many people who don’t know about Batman are genuinely pleased to unexpectedly encounter Bruce Wayne.

“Oh! Hello, Mr. Wayne.”

“Bruce, please.”

He’d spent a lot of time with Barbara Gordon when they were kids, when Barbara was eight or nine and Bruce was sixteen or seventeen, in the middle of his rebellious stage. They’d played cards together after school while Bruce waited to be collected from the station by Alfred after getting into various kinds of trouble, and Barbara waited for her dad to finish work and take her home.

“Oh, then.” She hugs him, quickly, then sits back down, gesturing for him to sit beside her across from Jim at his desk. “I just got in last night—Dad’s been telling me everything I’ve missed since Christmas. I can’t believe you have kids!”

Without the distraction of his kids, Bruce can easily balance his Brucie act with the more genuine behavior that lets him enjoy time with people like Jim and Barbara without getting on their nerves. It’s a very pleasant conversation until Barbara says, “You know, my boyfriend works with a travelling circus—amazing trapeze artist, his name’s Dick Grayson. I came back into town with them; they’ll be stationed in Gotham for a couple weeks.”

Crap.

“You should come next weekend. Bring your kids. Kids like circuses, right? And I’d love to meet them.”

Shit.

“Your youngest is named Dick, too, right? Weird, it’s such an old fashioned name.”
Shit, shit, shit.

“Bruce? You okay?”

“Fine,” he says. “Sorry. I’ll ask the kids. We’ll come if they feel up to it, but they’ve got some weird hang-ups sometimes.”

What is he going to do?

“I’ve been doing better,” Jason says, without looking up from the carrots he’s chopping.

“You have,” Alfred agrees.

“I just—you’re still you, and Bruce is still Bruce, but Dick is really different. What if the Martian Manhunter is different too?”

Alfred exchanges Jason’s carrots for a few cucumbers. “You don’t have to decide right away, and I’m sure you can always change your mind.”

Alfred isn’t sure what to think, himself. Making changes to the mind, in any way and for any reason, is serious business. Tim is strongly in favor of it. Bruce is wary, though he seems to get on well enough with this Martian.

“I don’t miss being Robin,” Jason says. “Not really. It’s weird. I thought I would. I know Tim does. But mostly I miss the extra time with Dad every night.”

“I’m sure he’d be willing to rearrange his schedule to spend more time with you.”

“No,” Jason says. “I mean, yeah, that’d be nice. But I mean, it doesn’t matter if I’m getting better slow, right? No one needs me for anything.”

“No one needs you to do anything you’re not ready for,” Alfred says. He can’t quite say that no one needs him; they’ve had Jason less than half the time they did in his old universe, and already Alfred can’t begin to imagine the devastation of losing him. It’s no wonder Bruce killed the Joker—Alfred would have done the same thing.

“Are the cucumbers ready?” he asks instead of saying any of this.

“Yeah. What’s next?”

The next time Bruce meets up with the Justice League, he brings Tim and Cassandra; Jason isn’t ready, he says. Bruce thinks it will be a good idea to have his three most stable, mature children meet the other heroes (Dick was a disaster, and he’s not exactly expecting Jason to go well), and then he wonders when he started thinking of Tim as stable and mature.

Granted, Tim is a questionable driver with a persistent .8% Joker venom level in his bloodstream and an unfortunate tendency to pester super-powered aliens, but Bruce relies on him a lot. He can’t imagine life without the kid rolling his eyes at his best parenting attempts, calmly correcting all his mistakes, and then trying to pretend he doesn’t care about any of them.

Also, if history is any indication, Tim is going to run circles around the League, and it’s going to be hilarious.
Dick’s mostly doing better after what happened when he met the Justice League, but Damian knows he’s been having more nightmares lately. He mostly knows this because Dick’s been sleeping more during the day. Like right now, with his head on Damian’s shoulder, his favorite blanket slipping onto the floor.

“Jay?” Damian asks.

Jason, sprawled on the floor a few feet away, looks up from his book, but he’s got that empty look around his eyes that means he’s not going to be much help with anything.

“What do you think about the circus?” Damian asks, anyway.

There’s a short pause before Jason says, “Dick’s circus?”

“Yes.”

The cat chooses that moment to walk across Jason’s book, effectively scattering the small amount of attention Damian’s managed to get. He waits a few minutes before giving up on Jason coming back to the conversation himself, then kicks the cat toy near his foot.

It jingles. She comes running toward him, and Jason looks over again.

“Can you come over here please, Jason?”

He does, grabbing another book off the floor on the way, and handing it to Damian before sitting down on the other side of Dick. He snags the cat as she passes, pulling her into his lap.

Damian sighs, flipping open the book. He’d rather have his sketchbook, but he doesn’t want to disturb Dick, and if he’s going to be stuck here for a while it’s nice to have something to do. Father and the others will be gone for at least a few hours. Maybe when Dick wakes up he and Jason will play a video game with Damian.

Jason was right. Wonder Woman is very cool. Cassandra never wants to fight for real again, but it is fun to play fight with Wonder Woman—with Diana, she says call me Diana—and then with Dinah, and then with Shayera, who is very nice even though she has upsetting headgear.

Diana tells her all about the island she comes from, and Dinah promises to teach her how to drive a motorcycle soon. Shayera mentions flying, but Cassandra can tell that makes Bruce nervous, so she says maybe some other time. (She is not going to be the one to tell him how often, and how far, and how high, Tim goes flying with Kon.)

Last time Cassandra saw Tim he was trying to decide if he would rather bother Superman or Oliver Queen. Last time she saw Bruce he was talking to a man from Mars and a man called Green Lantern. They are both having a good time.

Hal thinks there are a couple people connected to the League that might have the qualifications for therapy. He promises to look into it. J’onn is willing enough to look at Jason’s brain, though Jason hasn’t decided if he wants that yet.
J’onn is a good guy. Bruce is trying really hard not to be nervous.

He collects Cass from a training room where she’s having the time of her life with a few women from the Justice League, then drags a second son away from Cyborg—Tim seems to like him just as much as Damian does.

It occurs to Bruce that aside from the gymnastics kids Dick texts, none of his children really have friends outside the family. And he doesn’t think Dick is close to anyone from gymnastics. Certainly not close enough that he could even think about seeing them without first caking on layers of make-up.

That’s a problem. Children should have people to talk to, people to spend time with.

Maybe they should go to the circus.

Chapter End Notes

So I think this is going to end up being around 55 chapters? I've got things written through chapter 45 and plotted through chapter 51, with a few other things I know need to happen.

A few weeks after this finishes, I'll start posting a fic about when Talia finds catatonic!Jason in Gotham, and after that it'll be a story where Jason and Tim end up as roommates in the juvenile ward at Arkham after the whole Joker Junior thing. I'm really excited about both projects, and also about finishing Flightless Birds.
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

Dick has almost no understanding of the multiverse, which is entirely Bruce’s fault, he knows. He hasn’t made any attempt at explaining after the first time, when he was still too frightened to understand much of anything. It just hadn’t seemed important, when Dick’s experiences in his old world were so completely dominated by the Court of Owls.

It’s when fifteen year old Dickie Wayne tells twenty seven year old Dick Grayson, “You look just like my dad!” that Bruce realizes how big an oversight this was.

Chapter Notes

Update is several hours late; sorry!

Dick’s special tinted contact lenses are finally finished on the morning of the day they go to the circus. Barbara meets them out front with the tickets; she’d refused to let Bruce buy his own, despite the fact that he’s a billionaire. Her Dick joins them for just a few minutes before the show. Tim manages to behave himself—for once—upon meeting people he already knows, and Jason is present enough to be charming and not give anything away. Damian and Cassandra are polite as always; Dick is too excited about the circus to take much notice of the people they’re meeting.

They sit with Barbara. Dick is completely entranced throughout the show. There’s one difficult moment, when the first clown appears and Bruce remembers Tim shooting his Bruce, Jason’s bashed in head, what the hell was he thinking—and then Dick, sitting between Tim and Jason, manages to remember the name of the clown in question, and spends several minutes whispering excitedly to them about his newly unlocked memories.

Bruce has put a reasonable amount of thought into this plan. He’s…nervous, perhaps, but not truly concerned. If no one says anything, he’ll leave it at that. But if they do, well. Barbara and Dick are both good people who he works with frequently in a variety of other universes. Meeting with the Justice League has gone well. Selina finding out about Batman has gone really well. If Dick could have someone else to talk to, someone who understands him in a way Bruce, or even Cassandra, can’t, that might be something worth investigating further.

Barbara leaves the Waynes for a few minutes to meet Dick in the changing room.

“How’d it go?” he asks.

“Great! I think the kids had a lot of fun.”

“Good. Hey, did that little one look familiar to you?”
“Yeah. I’m not—”

“Hang on a sec.” He ducks past her, stepping behind the curtain to get out of his costume. Barbara stares at the poster revealed when he steps away.

“Hey, Dick?”

“Yeah?”

He emerges in jeans and a t-shirt. Barbara points silently at the old Flying Graysons poster.

“Oh. Oh, wow.”

Dick has almost no understanding of the multiverse, which is entirely Bruce’s fault, he knows. He hasn’t made any attempt at explaining after the first time, when he was still too frightened to understand much of anything. It just hadn’t seemed important, when Dick’s experiences in his old world were so completely dominated by the Court of Owls.

It’s when fifteen year old Dickie Wayne tells twenty seven year old Dick Grayson, “You look just like my dad!” that Bruce realizes how big an oversight this was.

“You look just like me,” the older Dick says without missing a beat.

“Shit,” Tim and Jason say, almost in unison.

“We should talk,” Bruce says.

They end up in a diner a few blocks away, fortunately empty except for the cook, the waitress, the Waynes, Barbara, and the adult Dick. Dickie has helpfully scrubbed the makeup off one patch of skin on his forearm and removed one contact, and is now blinking rapidly in the bright florescent light.

“This is ridiculous,” Barbara is saying. “You’re telling us they’re the same person?”

Bruce wishes he’d at least tried to play it off as a weird coincidence. Dick—Bruce’s Dick—is upset, shifting closer and closer until he’s plastered to Bruce’s side, still blinking furiously. Tim and Jason aren’t doing great, either—Jay’s backed himself into the far corner of the booth, and Tim is sitting unusually close to Cassandra.

“Damian,” Bruce says, “can you take Dick to the restroom to put his contact back in?”

“Yes, Father.”

When they come back, Dick vaults over the back of the booth, squeezing himself in between Dick and Barbara, across from Bruce.

“How come you get to look like a real person?” he asks.

“Dickie,” says Bruce, “you are a person.”

“Yeah, but I don’t look like one.”
His older self looks thoughtful. “We left town in a hurry after my parents fell. I always thought it was so the social workers wouldn’t take me away; maybe there were other reasons.”

“Okay,” Dick says. He sits quietly for a few minutes while the adults continue discussing the multiverse, then ducks under the table, coming out the other side in his original seat next to Bruce. “Dad? Can we go home now?”

Dick’s never called him that before, and Bruce is pretty sure he’s only doing it now to make a distinction between himself and the other Dick, but it’s still nice.

“Sure, bud. Let’s go home.”

- Cassandra sits by Tim in the car, because she needs to. He’s upset. She’s a lot like the Cassandra in his universe, she knows. Dick is nothing like the version where he comes from, and he never actually met Jason and Damian there.

The Dick they just met is probably a lot more like Tim’s old one.

Tim has complicated feelings about his Dick. But they’re mostly not good.

Cassandra sighs. She can give Tim understanding, and hugs, but he needs words.

“Tim?” she says.

“Yeah?” He’s leaning listlessly into her side, and he doesn’t look up at her when she speaks.

“Look at me, Tim.” He does, and she nods toward Dick, sitting in front of them with Jason. (Bruce has invested in a minivan. He doesn’t want to talk about it.)

“That’s your Dick,” she says. “That’s your brother. And he loves you. Right, Dickie?”

He turns around. “What?”

“You love Tim, right?”

“Of course,” Dick says. He unbuckles his seatbelt and climbs back to sit between them.

“Seatbelt, Dick,” Jason says.

“I know.” He buckles himself into his new seat, then leans in until Tim puts an arm around his shoulders. (Cassandra is proud of Dick for figuring Tim out. Tim likes physical contact, but feels more comfortable when he’s the one to initiate it. Except he’s really bad at initiating it. Getting more and more in his personal space until he figures it out is an effective strategy, and one Cass herself has used many times.)

She leans forward to check on the others. Bruce is driving, and Damian looks fine in the passenger seat next to him. Jason looks—not exactly upset, but maybe uncertain? She’ll make sure Bruce works on that when they get home.
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

“I’m still mad at you,” Oliver says, sitting down beside Bruce. He looks up; he hadn’t been aware Oliver was mad at all. “Do you have any idea how much time I wasted worrying about you? What horrible thing must have happened to make you so stupid all the sudden? The crazy shit you started pulling?”

“It didn’t occur to me that you cared.”

Ollie shakes his head. “Still an idiot, Brucie.”

Chapter Notes

I meant to post this hours ago, but my computer is stupid. Sorry.

“Jason, are you ready to meet the Justice League?”

Jason looks blearily up at him; he’s still in bed. “Um, maybe?”

“We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. We’re just meeting people.”

“Gimme fifteen minutes.”

“Sure, Jay. I’ll be downstairs.”

“Do you like them so far?” Jason asks when they’re in the car. He seems nervous, asking to fill the silence more than anything else.

“For the most part,” Bruce says. He thinks it’s going really well, actually. He hasn’t gone on any missions with the League yet, but he helped them solve a case last week, and he’s considering inviting a few people to the cave, maybe having a zeta tube installed to cut back on all this driving time. He’s trying to work out if he can take a few shifts on the Watchtower, but it’s difficult—he’s not willing to cut back on time with the kids, Lucius will be mad if he cuts back on time in the office, and Alfred and Leslie will absolutely not let him cut back any more on sleep.

“There is one thing,” he says. “Are you sure I’m best friends with Superman?”

Jason glances over, and Bruce must look pretty damn skeptical, because he starts laughing. When he’s calm again he shrugs. “I don’t think he’s at his best when it comes to Kon. Something about your worst enemy stealing your DNA to make a kid. I bet you’re not much better, in worlds where Talia genetically engineers Damian.”
“All that talk about how I’m too honest,” Bruce says, “and Tim just tells everyone everything, doesn’t he? Does Damian know about that?”

“Nah, Tim knows better than that. He tells Cass stuff because she’s his big sister, and he tells Kon stuff because they’re dating. He tells me stuff because we’re both Robins. Not that that means much anymore, but he likes to get my opinion when he’s thinking about anything Bat-related. Anything else is just because he’s a little shit.”

Bruce sighs. “Just as long as he lets me handle this thing with Damian and Talia.”

“You can look,” Jason tells J’onn, “but don’t touch.”

“All right,” J’onn says. He smiles in a way that’s probably meant to be reassuring. “You don’t have anything to be afraid of.”

“I know.” He still grabs Bruce’s hand.

“Just tell me if you want to stop.”

“Okay.”

There’s quiet for several minutes. Jason focuses on Bruce, instead of on the faint rustling sensation in his head.

“Your brain is healing naturally after your injury,” J’onn says finally. “I think I could fix it, but I wouldn’t recommend that if you don’t urgently need to be fully healed.”

Bruce, Jason notices, looks relieved.

J’onn hesitates for a moment. “I could—if you want me to, I could take away some of the pain of losing your father. Make you forget the difference a little.”

Jason jerks away. “No! That’s mine.”

J’onn holds up his hands. “Nothing you don’t want.”

“I don’t want that.” Jason risks another look at Bruce—he still seems relieved. “I’m gonna go reintroduce myself to Wonder Woman,” he says, and flees the scene.

“I’m still mad at you,” Oliver says, sitting down beside Bruce.

He looks up; he hadn’t been aware Oliver was mad at all.

“Do you have any idea how much time I wasted worrying about you? What horrible thing must have happened to make you so stupid all the sudden? The crazy shit you started pulling?”

“It didn’t occur to me that you cared.”

Ollie shakes his head. “Still an idiot, Brucie.”

They watch in silence for a few minutes as Jason interacts with Clark and Diana. He’s more out of it than he was this morning, but these are people he recognizes, and he seems pretty comfortable even
“If he isn’t entirely sure what’s going on.

“At least you started with the one without a body count.”

Bruce hasn’t talked much about his kids’ pasts, but they’ve all been through now, communicating at various levels with the League, and he’s not surprised that Ollie’s heard things.

“I started with Tim, actually. He just wasn’t really in a frame of mind to cooperate with a cover story.”

Oliver doesn’t answer right away, probably calculating how long Tim was in an uncooperative frame of mind, from Jason’s first public appearance to his own. “What’s the story with those two, anyway? The other three, I think I’ve got the basic timeline down—what the fuck kind of assassins enlist children?—but no one’s heard too much on Tim and Jason.”

“They were my sidekicks.”

“Huh. I almost tried that once. Dinah talked me out of it.”

“Thank God for Dinah,” Bruce says. He hesitates, not quite sure how much information about his sons he has the right to share with a friend he didn’t quite realize he had. “They both got kidnapped and tortured,” he settles on eventually. “Mess up their heads pretty bad. Smoke inhalation and brain trauma for Jason. Electroshock and brainwashing for Tim.”

“Those scars on his temples?”

“Yeah. The Joker wasn’t exactly trained to administer that kind of therapy.”

“Fuck, Bruce.”

“I know.” He glances back up at Jason; Clark and Diana are gone, and he looks somewhat bored in the company of Aquaman. Bruce stands. “I better get him home. See you in a few days?”

J’onn had told him, after Jason ran off, that the physical recovery of Jason’s brain would likely be faster and easier without the emotional trauma. But Jason had seemed horrified by the idea of having his memories touched at all, and frankly so is Bruce. They’ll get by—they’ve been doing well enough so far.

On the drive back to Gotham, Bruce gets a phone call.

“Hi, Mr. Wayne? This is Dick Grayson. Babs got your number from her dad—I hope you don’t mind. I had an idea.”
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

Kon flies slowly from Metropolis to Gotham. A lot is happening today, and he’s a little nervous. Superman told him to fly safe, which was weird but maybe sort of fatherly? And he’s still got an hour before Tim expects him, so he’s being extra careful. Not because Clark asked him to or anything. Just because.

“Do you remember Zitka?” Dick asks.

He’s not a tall man—few professional acrobats are—but he still has nearly a foot on his younger counterpart, and is crouched down on the ground in front of him.

The elephant seems confused, at first, when faced with two Dick Graysons, but she rallies quickly. Bruce watches fondly as both Dicks play with her, Damian standing beside him with the stiff awkwardness Bruce suspects is often mistaken for aloofness in other worlds. (He’d insisted on coming along, and clearly doesn’t know what to do with himself now that he’s here. All three of his brothers had been distressed last time they were at the circus, but now Dick is sitting happily on an elephant’s head, and there’s nothing to protect him from.)

They’ve been there about half an hour when Barbara joins them.

“So,” she says quietly, “does my father know you’re Batman?”

“Batman?” Bruce repeats.

“I know you don’t think I’m stupid enough to believe Batman pulled a bunch of children across the multiverse and left them in the custody of a random billionaire.”

Bruce shrugs. He’d felt obligated to make at least a token effort at denial. “We’ve never talked about it,” he says in answer to her original question.

Barbara nods. “So he probably knows, but you’d appreciate it if I didn’t bring it up. Got it.” She stands on her toes to kiss him on the cheek. “I’m leaving for New York in the morning—the circus will be in town for a few more days. It was nice to see you again, Bruce.”

She shakes Damian’s hand, then goes cautiously toward the elephant, where she gets a kiss from her boyfriend and a wave from Bruce’s son.

Dick is having the best day ever. He is wearing his special new contacts, so he can be in the sun without hurting his eyes and without having to keep track of the stupid glasses that always fall off whenever he tries to do anything fun. And he’s at the circus, where he belongs. With Zitka.

Zitka!

And Bruce and Damian are here with him too, and they won’t let anything bad happen. (The last time Dick was at the circus—no, the time before last, when he was loud and little and happy—it was
very bad. But Zitka is here and the sun doesn’t bother his eyes anymore, and he’s not going to think about that right now.)

Zitka remembers him. She’s supposed to—she’s an elephant. It’s what they do. But she remembers him even though there’s two of him, and he’s the wrong one.
He missed her.

He missed a lot of things, but mostly he can’t have them back. Bruce made really sure he understood about the multiverse before they came over today. But an elephant isn’t going to tell on him for being in the wrong world. And before they leave, the other him gives him pictures and pictures and pictures. Pictures of his parents, pictures of Zitka and the other people in the circus, pictures of him with his parents, from the time before, when he was bright and loud and happy.

The other him also gives Dick his phone number, and then he hugs him. Then he lets Dick go back and hug Zitka’s trunk one more time.

- Kon flies slowly from Metropolis to Gotham. A lot is happening today, and he’s a little nervous. Superman told him to fly safe, which was weird but maybe sort of fatherly? And he’s still got an hour before Tim expects him, so he’s being extra careful. Not because Clark asked him to or anything. Just because.

He’s meeting Tim’s family today. He’s meeting Batman. (Tim turned bright red when he explained, “My dad’s complaining because I met your grandparents already, and you haven’t even met him yet.” Tim loves his dad, but sometimes he gets weird about him doing actual parent things. Which makes sense—Kon would be pretty weirded out if Clark or Lex started taking an interest in his social life. But it’s gotten better. When Kon first met Tim, when he was angry and miserable and slightly insane, he’d been baffled and kind of mad when his dad acted like a dad. Now he tends to be baffled and deeply embarrassed instead.)

Kon got to meet his brother this morning. It was weird. Jon is so tiny. Kon was never that tiny—he pretty much started life as a teenager. Jon looked a lot like Kon and Clark, just…smaller. Kon doesn’t think he’s ever interacted with someone that small before. He was a whole little person, who wanted to show Kon his toys and got excited when Lois said it was okay to use his superpowers in front of him. (Lois was nice, too. Kon didn’t talk to her much, but she seemed to approve of how he’s staying in Clark’s old room in Smallville, since his grandma didn’t like the idea of him being in an apartment in Hawaii by himself when he’s not even an adult. He doesn’t think Clark really knew what to think about Kon being in his old room, but he introduced him to Jon as “family,” which isn’t the same as “brother,” but it’s a whole lot better than nothing.)

When Kon lands in front of Tim’s house, Tim runs out the door and sort of flings himself at him. Which is nice, but really unusual. Kon likes what he’s doing with Tim, and he likes calling it dating, but Tim is…reserved. One time, when they were at his grandparents’ house, they sat together in the same armchair, and that was a pretty big deal. Plus Tim has been sort of getting more reserved as he gets less, um. Less like a crazy person. Which Kon figures is a pretty good exchange. Less touching, more sanity, overall definitely a good thing.

“Hi,” he says to the top of Tim’s head, and Tim pulls away.

“Bruce said my boyfriend was coming over and Dick asked what the difference was between a friend and a boyfriend—I know Bruce gave him the sex talk months ago at the zoo, but apparently he forgot the dating talk—and he made me explain, and I am traumatized, Kon. Traumatized.”
“What did you tell him?”

Tim blushes. “I said that boyfriends kiss and stuff.”

“Oh.” Kon feels vaguely alarmed. “But we don’t kiss and stuff.” He didn’t think Tim wanted to kiss and stuff—is he doing this wrong?

“I know,” he says, turning even redder, “but I didn’t want Dick to not know what to do someday because I’m abnormal. Besides, I think it might have been a test for Bruce to see what we were up to.”

“Oh. That’s okay, then. Are we going in?”

Tim sighs. “I guess so.”

Bruce watches his children and Superboy interacting, fascinated. Tim clearly neglected to mention that his youngest brother was sort of a zombie, but he takes it in stride and everything else goes smoothly. Tim is happy and open, once he gets past the initial awkwardness of his dad and his boyfriend meeting, in a way that Bruce gets to see, these days, with increasing frequency.

His only real concern about this situation is that Tim isn't actually seventeen—those two years spent mostly catatonic in a mental institution don’t count. But actually talking to Kon resolves that worry completely—the kid has the life experience of a particularly well-rounded toddler, so he isn't in any position to be taking advantage of Tim’s inexperience.

Still, Bruce is relieved for a variety of reasons to learn that he’s now staying with Jon and Martha Kent instead of unsupervised in his own apartment.

“I like Kon,” he tells Tim, later.

“I don’t actually need your approval, Bruce,” he says, but he’s smiling.
Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

There are few things in the world more awkward than travelling across the world to see a woman you dated for a few months in your twenties and asking her if she’s been using your DNA to genetically engineer children.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Bruce allows himself three days to talk to Talia. It won’t take too long to fly there and back with the jet, so he should have plenty of time to explain the situation. And find out if he and Talia have any other kids he doesn’t know about.

Alfred should be fine with the kids for that long, especially with Cassandra helping. It’s Diana’s idea to have them spend a day at the Watchtower while he’s gone—Bruce isn’t sure, at first. He joined the League for the kids, but he hasn’t even gone on a mission with them yet, so using them as a babysitting service seems…wrong. But then Clark agrees that it’s a good idea, and Bruce hasn’t gotten the impression, in general, that Clark even likes his kids, so he agrees. The older kids, at least. Dick is staying home with Alfred—Bruce doesn’t want him having some kind of breakdown while he’s halfway across the world.

Cassandra herds her brothers through the newly-installed zeta tube in the cave. Tim and Damian are arguing, but they’re both having fun, not mad at each other. Jason is wearing his cowl for the first time in several days, but these people aren’t new for Jason like they are for her, so she doesn’t think he’ll mind going on a bad day. If he isn't happy she’ll send him right back home to Dick and Alfred.

Cass and Alfred know where Bruce really went this weekend. (Tim probably does too, but that’s because he has a habit of finding things out, not because anyone told him.) They told the boys it was a business trip. Bruce business, not Bat business. Bruce wants to talk to Talia about Damian before he talks to Damian about Talia, in case it doesn’t go well.

Tim and Damian go to find Victor right away, which Cass thinks has the potential to end badly—they’re both far too interested in technology, and Tim is also far too interested in spying on people, and Cass isn’t sure she trusts a nineteen year old superhero to be a good influence on her little brothers.

She will let them have fun, though. Future problems will be Bruce’s problems. Right now it is more important to keep track of Jason. Cassandra wants to spend time with Dinah and Diana and Shayera, so Jason, she decides, will be spending time with them too.

“He’s a mini Batman!” Diana says when she sees the cowl. “It’s so cute!”

If Jason could hear her he would probably be embarrassed and take it off, even if he is hiding in his head today, but he can’t hear them with the cowl on, and it is cute, so Cass leaves it.
Since Bruce isn't here, she really wants to go flying with Diana and Shayera, but she isn't sure about Jason.

“You can leave him down here with me,” Dinah offers.

Cassandra considers this. There is nothing bad in Dinah’s body language. And Jason knows her. He called her “Di.”

“Okay.”

- 

It takes Jason a minute to remember that they’re not keeping secrets from Dinah anymore. When he does he takes off the cowl, because the cowl makes a lot of things easier, like thinking, but it makes talking a lot harder. Or getting talked to, at least.

“Hi,” he says.

She smiles at him. “Hi.”

“Is Green Arrow here?” he asks.

“No, Oliver had work to do in Star City today.”

“Oh. Is Roy here?”

“Roy doesn’t live with us,” she says.

Right. He forgot. Roy is a grown-up here. And something else, he thinks—he has to think for a while before he remembers it. “Did Roy used to live with you?”

“He lived with Oliver for about a week when he was twelve.”

“Oh.”

“Was Roy your friend, where you come from?”

“Dick’s friend. I didn’t really have friends. But Roy’s his coolest friend. Donna and Kory are cool, too. Tim says Dick married Kory. But Roy’s the best.”

“Dick’s your big brother?”

Jason frowns. “Little brother, now.”

“Do you want to tell me about him?”

“Which one?” Jason asks.

“Both.”

- 

Flying is the best. They fly everywhere for an hour, and even stop for lunch. When they get back, Jason looks better, and he is talking to Dinah and two other people. Diana introduces them to Cass as Aquaman and Captain Marvel.

“Arthur and Bill,” Dinah adds.
Cassandra watches them all for a few minutes, then goes to find Tim. She needs to ask him a question. Jason would know too, probably, but he’s busy.

Tim and Damian are still with Victor, and Superman and the Flash are there too. Cass pulls Tim away.

“Dami wanted to look for Bruce with Cyborg’s equipment,” he reports, “but I told them he was probably in some boring meeting in some boring conference room without cameras.”


“Yeah?”

“He looks like an adult. And they treat him like an adult. But he moves—I think—he is little, Tim.”

“Right, Billy. Best secret identity ever. Part of Captain Marvel is looking like an adult, but in real life he’s a kid. I’m guessing the rest of the League doesn’t know about that in this universe.”

“A kid Dick’s age?”

“Dick’s age being somewhere ambiguous between eight and fifteen? Probably; it’s a pretty wide range.”

“Good. You talk to him. You’re better at that.”

-

There are kids in the tower. Older than him, but still—kids. Closer to his age than Victor is, anyway, and he’s the next youngest. Not that anyone knows that.

It’s the first time Billy’s met any of Batman’s kids—he was there the first time, but that kid was too scared to talk to them or anything. Then he had a school thing, then he had to stop a mugging, and the last time it just took him forever to finish his homework.

He likes Jason, but he has to be careful not to have too much fun, in case everyone finds out he’s not really a grown-up. They’d kick him out of the League for sure. Clark told him Tim and Jason started being superheroes when they were about Billy’s age, and he sounded really upset about it. They absolutely can’t find out that Billy is Billy’s age—he’s already been in the League for two years.

He must have said something immature—Jason is laughing, but Diana is looking at him funny—so he leaves quick before anyone can get suspicious.

In the hallway he meets another one of the kids. Tim, he thinks.

“Hey, Billy,” probably-Tim says.

No one calls him Billy. Not here. It’s a kid name. When they all decided to tell each other their secret identities last year, he said Bill instead because it sounded more grown-up, and he didn’t think he could remember to answer to William. Bill Smith, because it was the first last name he could think of. No one had checked up on it.

“Hey, chill. I’m not gonna tell anyone. Not even my dad.” He frowns. “Especially not my dad. I just want you to meet my little brother.”

-
Dick is in the cave. It’s much too cold down here, but the climbing is very good. He is way up in the rafters, looking at the pictures the older Dick gave him. He had to take out his contacts first—the light is bad in the cave, and his night vision doesn’t work with the contacts. He was very careful and put them in the case with the funny water, just like Alfred said.

Tim and Cass appear in the cave, along with a man who looks around, then turns into a boy. Dick puts his pictures away and heads for the ground—this is interesting.

“Dami and I will fix the cameras tonight,” Tim is saying when he reaches the floor. “Cass, I’ll tell Alfie you’re back to watch Dick, then get him to take me driving.”

He taps Dick on the shoulder as he walks past, which means “I love you” in Tim, and then he goes upstairs.

“Woah,” says the kid. “Your eyes are really cool.”

There are few things in the world more awkward than travelling across the world to see a woman you dated for a few months in your twenties and asking her if she’s been using your DNA to genetically engineer children.

“What?” Talia says.

“Never mind,” he says. “That was—it doesn’t matter. I’m sure you haven’t been.”

“Bruce. What are you doing here?”

“Right.” He pulls the picture out of his wallet and hands it to her. She stares at it for a long time.

“Bruce, this is…is this—is he—”

“Ours. His name is Damian.”

“Did you ask me about using your DNA because you’ve been—”

“No,” Bruce interrupts her quickly. “No. That was just an idea Tim—sorry, that’s my next oldest—just something Tim said. Damian is—I’ve been rescuing children from other universes. In a lot of worlds we have a son. In some we have a daughter.”

“Damian,” Talia says softly. She takes a few steps away, clutching the photo. “He is—fourteen? Fifteen? I don’t know much about children.”

“Fifteen,” Bruce says.

“And we were not there for him? In that other world?”

“You’re dead. I never knew he existed.”

Talia comes closer again. Bruce doubts he’s ever getting that particular photo back. “Tell me everything,” she says. Bruce does.

She begins to pack a bag as he talks. Of course, she’ll want to meet Damian right away. She still hasn’t loosened her grip on the photo.

Ra’s walks in at one point, and Bruce braces himself for a fight, but he just raises an eyebrow and
turns to Talia. She pulls him out of the room, whispering furiously. She returns about a half hour 
later.

“I convinced him to stay here. He’ll want to meet Damian someday, but I expect the boy will need 
time to become used to the idea, if what you said—if he was that bad there.”

“Thank you, Talia. Are you ready to go?”

Chapter End Notes

FYI, there probably won't be a Friday chapter this week. I have a meeting or 
appointment after work every day this week, and there just isn't time. Sorry!
A door slams shut, and Bruce finds himself locked in the study with a furious Talia.

“You have a Talon living in the same house as my son? Are you out of your mind?”

“Dick is—”

“That thing exists only to kill, it can only be controlled by the people who made it, and you have it wandering freely about a house full of children.”

“Damian,” Bruce says, “I want you to meet someone.”

Damian, sprawled across his bed with Titus half on top of him, looks up, smiling. Bruce just got home; this is his first stop.

“All right,” he says.

“This weekend, I went to talk to your mother,” Bruce starts.

Damian’s smile falters, and he pales slightly. “My—she’s here?”

“She’s here,” Bruce confirms. “Would you like to see her?”

“Yes,” he says immediately. He sits up, displacing the dog, and slams his sketchbook shut.

Talia, waiting in the hallway through this conversation, steps into the room.

“Damian,” she says softly.

He scrambles to his feet, then stands stiffly in front of the bed, looking uncertain, until she steps forward to hug him.

It’s an awkward hug, between two people unused to physical affection, but neither seems to mind.

“Mother,” Damian says. “Mother, you died. I watched you die—it’s my first memory.”

He launches, then, into a stream of Arabic much too fast for Bruce to understand. Bruce steps out of the room, closing the door quietly behind him—they’ll both want privacy.

He goes to check on the rest of the family, getting hugs from Dick, Cassandra, and Jason, who’s mostly present but in a good mood, and a tired smile from Tim, who Alfred apparently found and shooed out of the cave at four in the morning. Bruce lets them all know that Talia is in the house, explaining who she is to Dick, the only one who’s never interacted with any version of her. Then he spends his afternoon following Talia and Damian around the house, struggling to keep a distance and let them bond as Damian introduces his mother to his siblings and pets.

“I think Dick is in the chandelier,” Damian says, still in Arabic—and why didn’t Bruce think about that? Of course Damian’s missed his native language, and Bruce isn’t fluent, but he’s not bad either.
He knows Damian’s been reading and listening to things in Arabic; why didn’t he think—

A door slams shut, and Bruce finds himself locked in the study with a furious Talia.

“You have a Talon living in the same house as my son? Are you out of your mind?”

“Dick is—”

“That thing exists only to kill, it can only be controlled by the people who made it, and you have it wandering freely about a house full of children.”

Bruce struggles not to lose his temper. Talia isn’t needlessly cruel—if she’s reacting this way to Dick, she has a reason for it, likely an encounter with a Talon in the past.

“Dick is a traumatized little boy who loves climbing and elephants. He adores Damian, he hates his English homework, and his sister whose first language is body language assures me he’s completely harmless.” He pauses as a terrible thought occurs to him. “He also has very sensitive hearing.”

“The Court of Owls wanted to work with my father once,” she says more quietly. “It was one of the first meetings he let me attend. I was seventeen. I was horrified. Father was horrified. The things those people do to their Talons, the things they make them do to themselves, to each other, to anyone who crosses them—Bruce, it’s the most disturbing thing I’ve ever seen. And you know what I grew up in the midst of.”

“The Court of Owls is gone. Batwoman and I destroyed it last year.”

“And you decided to bring home a souvenir?”

“I got Dick from another universe, just like I got Damian. He’s just a boy, Talia.”

“He’s a Talon.”

“He hasn’t hurt anyone since he got here.” Bruce considers this for a moment. “Well, he bit Tim once, but it didn’t even draw blood.”

If he was talking to Selina, Bruce would add that they’ve all been tempted to bite Tim at times, but Talia definitely isn’t going to be receptive to any joking right now.

“Did he even get out of the chandelier before you came to yell at me?”

She shakes her head.

“Good; he can’t hear us from there, and he probably won’t have come down on his own. Give him a chance, Talia—I can’t have you in my house if you’re going to cause problems for my kids.”

Talia nods. “If I had ever met a Talon that was also a child,” she says slowly, “I would have put it out of its misery. I would have meant it as a kindness.”

“I know,” Bruce says. “But you and I do kindness differently.”

“Perhaps that’s a good thing.”

Bruce smiles. “He’s a sweet kid. He’s not a Talon anymore.”

“I will try. For Damian. But I don’t like it.”
Talia finds Damian waiting patiently where she left him, at the top of the stairs. He’s looking up at the Talon that is apparently his little brother, but turns to smile at her when she approaches. (She’s only known him for an hour, and already it’s so clear he adores her. She finds herself very fond of him, as well, but can’t shake the uncomfortable feeling that she hasn’t earned his adoration, that what he really loves is another version of her, dead years ago.)

“I just needed to speak with your father for a moment,” she says. “This is your brother?”

“Yes,” he says. “Dick, come down and meet my mother.”

The Talon narrows its eyes, studying them, then swings out of the chandelier, landing gracefully in front of them. “Hi, Dami’s mom. I’m glad you’re not dead.”

He smiles at her, bright and happy and young, and it alleviates her concerns in a way none of Bruce’s words could. Talia has seen Talons that were like machines and Talons that were like feral animals, but never Talons that much resembled the people they might once have been.

Still, she watches him carefully as he and Damian lead her to the kitchen. She wonders absently if the Lazarus Pit could undo whatever it is the Court of Owls do to make Talons. But she’s never heard of a Talon being sane, and the Pit doesn’t have a positive effect on sanity as it is. It’s not worth the risk.

Now Jason, she thinks, meeting the older boy, who is polite to her and affectionate with his brothers, but drifts in and out of awareness, Jason would be a good candidate for the Pit. Bruce would never agree, of course—he can be so uptight about things.

Cassandra enters the kitchen quietly. Most of the family is there. Not Bruce. Bruce is hiding, because he feels awkward about Talia. And not Tim. Tim is hiding because he feels nervous about Talia. But Alfred is in the kitchen, and the other boys. And Talia, of course.

Cass isn't sure how she feels about Talia yet. She isn't sure what impact Talia will have on Bruce’s relationship with Selina, and that worries her, because she loves Selina, who gives her brothers pets and makes Bruce blush. She isn't sure Talia will be good for Damian, either. But this is the first time she’s been able to really observe.

Talia feels confusion and affection for Damian, and she feels a little intimidated, maybe a little not-good-enough, too. That’s good. Those are all good things for her to feel. Safe things. She is concerned about Dick. Concerned by him, not for him—Cass will have to keep an eye on that. She doesn’t seem to have any strong feelings for Jason and Alfred. Not yet. Cass will make sure, later, to watch her with Tim and Bruce. For now she needs to focus on herself, and how this is not the Talia she knew.

Cassandra spent her childhood wherever her father said, but often in and out of League of Shadows territory. She’d met Talia several times, sort of—Ra’s daughter hadn’t really bothered interacting with a girl that she saw as more a tool in her father’s crusade than a person. Cassandra had mostly avoided her, as Talia, her father, and her sister were among the few people outside of her own father that she was expected to obey.

Jade had plenty of bad things to say about Talia, but then Jade had bad things to say about most of their fellow assassins, at least when she was talking to Cass, who mostly couldn’t tell on her, even if
she’d wanted to. Which she hadn’t, of course.

Not my Talia, she reminds herself, and sits down across from her at the kitchen table.

- 

Tim sits on the roof, fiddling with the telescope lens for his camera. He was polite and introduced himself to Talia, but she makes him nervous—not really nervous, like the Joker would, but kind of like if Bruce invited the Riddler over for tea. It just makes him uncomfortable.

He focuses his camera on the house across the street. His house, once. There’s a car pulling into the driveway, much too nice to belong to anyone from the cleaning service that comes by occasionally when the Drakes are travelling. Tim watches as three people exit the car.

“Crap.”

- 

“Bruce,” Tim says, “I’m home.”

“Other me,” he adds when Bruce doesn’t look up from his work. Bruce is doing paperwork. Well, really he’s probably stressing about Damian and Talia, but he’s pretending to do paperwork, and between the stress and the fake paperwork, he’s not paying much attention to Tim.

“Bruce,” Tim says again, “the older, friendlier, less-traumatized me just got home, and he’s gonna want to meet his new neighbors.”

Finally, Bruce looks up, not nearly alarmed enough. “Does he know?”

“About Batman?” Tim shrugs. “I figured it out from Dick, but I’m not him.”

“You know yourself best, Tim. What do you want to do about this?”

“Research,” Tim decides after a moment of consideration.

- 

Tim is in the cave, researching. In the three days since his parents and other self came home, the other Tim has had two friends over almost constantly. They both seem to be superheroes in several other worlds, and he wants to know what he’s dealing with before the inevitable meetings.

He stiffens as Talia enters the cave. Not his Talia. She’s allowed to be here. There’s nothing to be nervous about; she’s just his brother’s mom.

Damian is at his driving class. Alfred took him, and Bruce is at work. Bruce, apparently, doesn’t mind Talia wandering unsupervised around the house when only his kids are home.

Not Tim’s Talia. Just Dami’s mom. If Bruce trusts her, she’s trustworthy.

“Is this the equipment that Bruce used to bring all of you into this universe?” she asks.

“Yeah.” Trying to be friendly, he adds, “I’m using it to look at other versions of my friends in this universe.”

“Can you show me where my son came from?”
She’s Dami’s mom, and she clearly loves him. He’s just going to have to adjust to her presence. “Sure.”
“Can I pet your dog?” an unfamiliar voice asks. Cassandra turns around—Dick has stopped several feet back, and is talking to a group of people about her age. She turns Damian and Titus around to meet them.

The one who spoke is a pretty blonde girl, crouched down now so Ace can sniff her hand. The other two, still standing, are boys—one looks a lot like Tim. These are the people he’s been stressed about all week.

Cass listens, amused, as Damian rambles about how wonderful his mother is. She’s been staying in one of their guest rooms for five days now. Cass, Dick, and Damian are walking the dogs, Dick’s makeup carefully applied before going out now that they have neighbors at home. He’s dragging behind, letting Ace stop to smell things every few feet. It’s getting cold again; Dick probably won’t be willing to come outside for dog walking much longer.

“Can I pet your dog?” an unfamiliar voice asks. Cassandra turns around—Dick has stopped several feet back, and is talking to a group of people about her age. She turns Damian and Titus around to meet them.

The one who spoke is a pretty blonde girl, crouched down now so Ace can sniff her hand. The other two, still standing, are boys—one looks a lot like Tim. These are the people he’s been stressed about all week.

They all look open and friendly; she doesn’t think Tim has anything to worry about.

“Hi,” the girl says, standing up. “You must be Bruce Wayne’s kids. Timmy’s been talking about you ever since he got home. I’m Steph, and this is Duke and Tim. Can I pet the other dog, too?”

Damian nods, and she turns her attention to Titus. Cass introduces herself and the boys.

“We have a brother named Tim,” she adds carefully, testing. “And Jason.”

She studies the other Tim. He’s enough like hers that his body language should be especially easy. It is hard to put him into words, though—Alfred says it is good to practice thinking in words, so she has been trying. Tim looks suspicious, but not like—he looks like he knows something weird is going on with their Tim. He doesn’t look like it...bothers him, or like it’s going to be a problem. He is aware but pleasantly indifferent, maybe. Except she doesn’t think it’s indifference, exactly. It’s that he doesn’t mind, not that he doesn’t care. It’s enough, anyway, to take the risk. And words are exhausting. Harder to think. She has earned a break.

She nods at Dick, who’s been staring hopefully at her for the last few minutes, he loves meeting new people.

“Do you want to come and meet our other brothers?” he asks, bouncing with excitement.

They glance at each other. “Sure,” Duke says.
Cassandra smiles. Tim is going to be mad at her, but he is going to have to just let her have this. It will be good for him. And this is the first time they’ve met potential friends who are her age.

Tim and Jason are watching a movie. It’s a quiet day. Bruce is at work. Alfred is—somewhere. Not in the house. Talia had to call Ra’s, which makes this the first time in days that Damian’s not plastered to her side. He went with Cass and Dick to walk the dogs.

And they’re back now—the dogs are barking, and Jason’s cat is climbing to the back of the couch, not that the height can protect her from a Great Dane.

A crowd bursts into the room, significantly larger than Tim’ expecting. A crowd that includes himself.

“Cass!”

She shrugs, completely unapologetic. “This is our neighbor Tim,” she says, “and his friends Duke and Steph. These are our brothers Tim and Jason.”

“Hey,” Jason says, like this is normal. Tim tries very hard to become one with the couch. Maybe the other Tim just…won’t notice him. Maybe he’s been changed enough by the Joker that no one will even notice the resemblance. Maybe he’ll develop superpowers in the next ten seconds and become invisible.

“So what are we watching?” the girl asks. Steph. Tim kind of recognizes her, thinks maybe they had a couple classes together before the Joker happened.

The other Tim makes eye contact with him, just for a second, then turns around and starts a conversation with Jason. Cass is talking, more animated and less careful than usual, with Duke and Steph.

Tim takes a deep breath, and bends down to pet Ace, who’s collapsed in front of the couch. Cass looks really happy. Cass deserves friends who aren’t her little brothers or superheroes ten to twenty years older than her.

It’s been a rough week for Tim, with Talia and the Drakes coming home. Really stressful. But these are good things. His siblings need this. It’s okay.

“Is my mother still on the phone?” Damian asks quietly, inserting himself between Tim and the arm of the couch.

“Haven’t seen her come down yet.” She’s been on the phone for a really long time now—hopefully Ra’s isn’t plotting something.

“I’m really glad she’s here,” he says.

“I know, Dami.”

“But I don’t think she likes Dick very much.”

“You thought I was a demon when you got here,” Dick points out from his position on the floor with the dogs. He says it a little too loudly, and Duke and Other Tim both turn to stare at him. Steph, at least, is caught up in conversation with Cass and Jason.
Tim shrugs. “Little brothers are a pain.”

It’s not a great excuse for the currently very normal looking Dick, but it’s good enough for now. Both visitors let themselves get pulled back into their conversation, though Other Tim’s gaze lingers a little longer.

“She says my grandfather wants to meet me,” Damian tells Tim.

“Ra’s?” Tim grimaces. “What do you think?”

“I’m not sure. She knows we had a bad relationship, but I haven’t told her details.”

“You haven’t told anyone details, Dami. But you should. She’d want to know.”

“Maybe,” he says, thoughtful. Because it’s Damian, and not Jason or Cassandra, he doesn’t say anything about how Tim is a hypocrite who never talks at all about the Joker, the Asylum, or his time with Harley.

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Bruce comes home to a large hoard of children in his TV room. Well, for a given value of children. Half of them are technically adults. And two of them are Tim.

“Hi, Mr. Wayne,” says the Tim that doesn’t belong to him.

The Tim that does belong to him looks up, slightly panicked but hiding it well. Probably only Cassandra has noticed. And maybe not even her—she looks fairly distracted.

“Hello, Timothy,” he says. “Tim, could I see you in the kitchen, please?”

Tim practically flees the room, looking grateful.

“They left with the dogs,” he says in the privacy of the kitchen, “and they came home with me. They’ve been here for four hours—we’ve been watching TV. And I haven’t seen Talia in five. I think she’s up to something.”

“Talia’s not up to something, Tim.”

“And I can’t tell if he knows!”

“Knows that I’m Batman, or that you’re him?”

“Both.”

“Okay. It’s okay, Tim. Do you need him to leave?”

He thinks for a minute. “No, It’s—they’re all nineteen. Cass needs—they’re Cass’ age, and Jason’s—Jason’s official age. They need friends their age.”

“You’re seventeen,” Bruce reminds him. “Only a year younger than Jason. They’re pretty close to your age, too.”

Tim shrugs, looking uncomfortable. Ages can be complicated in this family.

An hour later, their guests have been invited to stay for dinner, and no one has brought up Batman or the resemblance between the two Tims. Damian goes to the guest room to tell his mother dinner is
ready, and comes back downstairs to report the room is empty. Bruce calls her cell phone—it goes straight to voicemail.

“I told you she was up to something,” Tim hisses, too quiet for Damian to hear.

Bruce is a little worried now, but not ready to admit it. Where would she go without Damian?

“Stay calm,” he tells Tim. “We have company.”

Ten minutes into dinner, Talia enters the room from the direction of the library—the direction of the cave—looking disheveled, holding the tiniest baby Bruce has ever seen.
Chapter 49

Chapter Summary

In some universes they have a daughter. Talia hasn’t forgotten. It’s been years since she thought seriously about having children, and to find herself suddenly the mother of a fifteen year old boy is both wonderful and terrifying. But she hasn’t forgotten about the daughter.

It’s easy to convince Tim to show her how the multiverse travel equipment works. It’s easy to go down to the cave while Batman is out and Alfred and the children are sleeping and find what she’s looking for, easy to make the decision, easy to go down again and put her plan into action.

It’s hard to step into the tattered remains of a world where everyone she’s ever known is dead, to find the incubator holding a child nowhere near ready to come to term, with no one to care for her when she does. There’s no way to transport the device the baby is growing in, and no guarantee she’ll survive being transported without it. But she’ll definitely die in this world.

Talia was lucky to find her, she tells herself, ignoring the growing panic. She couldn’t have taken some other Talia’s child.

She gets the girl back to Bruce’s basement, and finds him upstairs, with the entire family and three people she doesn’t recognize. It doesn’t matter—she doesn’t have time for them.

“Bruce! We need to go to the hospital.”

Bruce stands immediately.

“I’m coming,” Damian says, following them down the hall.

“Did she just come from the basement?” Jason asks. “With a baby?”

He has. So many questions. But he’s at the table with people who probably—hopefully—have significantly less idea than him what’s going on.

“That baby was beyond premature,” says Stephanie, looking worried. Her mom is a nurse, she said. She would know.

It was a really tiny baby. A really tiny baby she must have taken from another universe, because he doubts Talia al Ghul just gave birth in the Batcave.

“Do we have a new sibling?” Dick asks.

“Where did they even come from?” Duke asks.
Jason goes to the kitchen to find Alfred—he thinks now would be a really good time for the adult in charge to suggest their guests head home. He likes Duke and Steph and other Tim, but he’s definitely not ready to explain Batman and the multiverse to them.

“T’aint not sure that baby is going to survive,” Tim says quietly. Dick is in bed. Bruce and Damian haven’t come home yet. Tim, Jason, and Cassandra are in the cave; they’ve worked out where Talia has been and what she’s done.

“She has a better chance here than there,” Jason points out.

“I guess. I’m gonna text Kate. Tell her Batman probably won’t be out tonight.”

They sit in silence for a while, the only sound the tapping of Tim’s phone.

“I’m sorry I sprung you on yourself,” Cass says.

“He seems nice,” Tim says, voice carefully neutral.

“You’re better.”

“Definitely,” Jason says. “He seems nice, but he’s not our brother.”

“I’m only your brother like Bruce is your dad,” Tim says, looking down at his phone. “It’s not real.”


“Okay,” Tim says quietly. His phone dings, and he looks back down. “Kate says it’s looking like a slow night, anyway.”

“Good job,” Cass says to Jason.

It’s a tense, quiet drive to the hospital, the baby wailing thinly. Athanasia, Bruce thinks. It must be Athanasia. His daughter.

It takes very little acting on anyone’s part to convince the hospital staff that Talia is too distressed and Bruce too confused to offer any explanation. Damian identifies the baby as his sister—that’s all the information they extract before rushing her away and leaving Bruce with Damian, Talia, and a large stack of paperwork he has no idea how to fill out.

He sends Damian to go find them some coffee before asking, quietly, “What were you thinking?”

“Well, I wasn’t thinking you would have company I’d need to explain myself to.”

“And did you bother to think of an explanation for the hospital? The public?”

“No,” she admits after a brief pause. “I wasn’t—I was curious, Bruce. You said I had a daughter. I wanted to see her, at least. And she’s—I saw her at twelve, at seventeen, at twenty-four. She’s beautiful, Bruce. Then I found this world where she—where everyone was dead. And she was being kept in some sort of incubator, but there was no one left to take care of her. I waited until the next morning to make my excuses and go collect her; I couldn’t afford to wait long enough to plan a cover story.”
“Why didn’t you tell me first? I would have helped.”

“Would you have? You’re such a hypocrite sometimes. You can bring home a zombie assassin on a whim, but if I did something like that you would decide I was selfish, or up to something, or not thinking it through. Like you always did.”

“I was a stupid kid when we were together, Talia.”

“You were in your twenties,” she counters stiffly.

“Fine. I was young, and stupid, and judgmental, and sometimes a hypocrite. But you were up to something, that time we—”

“Bruce.”

He sighs. “I’m sorry. That was a long time ago. I would have helped.”

“Then I’m sorry I didn’t ask you,” she says, still sounding stiff and distant. Damian returns with the coffee, and Bruce stares down at the forms. He writes down the date of birth—today—and then he’s stuck again.

She’s not Athanasia yet; she’s a newborn. Does Talia want to keep that name? Parents—does he dare to put down the truth? Does he dare not to? He’s very publicly with Selina. But if she grows up to look like him... Bruce dumps the paperwork in Talia’s lap and stands to pace.

A few minutes pass before Damian joins him on the other side of the room. “Father?”

He pauses, turns around, and manages to work up a smile. “Yes, Damian?”

“Is she—is the baby going to be all right?”

“The doctors here are very good,” he says instead of answering, because he knows nothing about premature babies.

“I asked Mother how old she was. The internet says she has an 80% chance of survival.”

“That’s good.”

Damian nods. “Are you mad at Mother?”

“Frustrated.”

“I look at little like her,” he says. “That’s going to be a problem now that she’s here, isn’t it?”

“We’ll make it work. All of it. Is she making any progress on the paperwork?”

Damian shakes his head. “All she did was circle F. I think she’s still trying to decide what name to put for herself. Since she’s sort of committing to—to being here? With the baby? With me? It has to be something she can keep using for a long time.”

Hours pass before the doctor calls them back to see their daughter. They’ve been working through the forms slowly, putting in their own information—family history, blood types. There are no names yet. Talia keeps going to write something down, then changing her mind—is that really the identity she wants to commit to? She needs to call her father. Badly. She’s in way over her head.
Bruce is probably just worried about the public backlash, but it’s not as if there’s any avoiding that now. If he didn’t want to claim the child, he should have dropped her off at the front door and stayed in the car.

She’s being unfair. Of course Bruce wants the child. If this last week, staying in the manor, has taught her anything, it’s that Bruce always wants all the children. This is just a complicated situation she didn’t give him time to prepare for.

Finally, a doctor comes, confirming first that Bruce and Talia are the parents. Talia knows she doesn’t look her best—she wishes she looked more like a woman who has just given birth, and less like one that’s just been wandering a post-apocalyptic wasteland.

It’s the first time all day she’s let herself think about the world her daughter came from. There were so many bodies. Her father. Bruce. A boy who might have been Damian—she hadn’t dared flip the body over to check. She doesn’t know what happened in that world. She doesn’t want to.

“Mother?” Damian asks.

Grabbing his hand, even though he’s far too old for hand holding, she attempts a smile. “Let’s go meet your sister.”

Damian stares through the glass at his sister. She’s hooked up to a variety of machines, and looks more like a doll than a person.

He wonders, suddenly, why his mother went looking for her—was he not good enough? Too old? Did she want a proper baby, from the beginning?

She’s still holding his hand. She loves him—she must. She crossed the world on a whim to meet him.

“What is her name?” he asks.

“Athanasia,” his father says, “traditionally.”

“I always thought, when I was a little girl, that I would name a daughter after my sister.”

“The one who died in the Holocaust?” Father asks.

She frowns. “You know too much, Bruce.”

“If I didn’t make it my business to know too much about everything, we would never have found our children.”

“True.”

“Nyssa is dead?” Damian says.

Mother turns to look at him. “You knew her?”

“Yes. She was—” He pauses, not sure how to describe his aunt. “As kind as she knew how to be,” he settles on.

“My father loved her very much,” Mother says. “Letting her be killed is his greatest regret.”
The grandfather Damian knew had no regrets about the deaths of Nyssa’s entire family—it’s why she hates him so much, though for some reason she still stands by his side.

“We have time to think about the name,” Father says. “It’s late, and there’s nothing more we can do here. The doctors say she’ll be fine through the night.”

Mother steps away, finally letting go of his hand. “I will stay in your penthouse—it’s near enough to the hospital, and will prevent awkwardness with your cat burglar. You will come to see the baby at least three times each week. You will bring Damian, so that I may visit him while you visit our daughter. You will keep us out of the news as much as possible.”

“I’m going to stay with Mother,” Damian announces quickly, not sure if he wants to so she won’t be alone, or so she won’t forget him in favor of the baby.

“Just for tonight,” he adds when he sees Father’s face. Father is afraid of losing him to Mother—he’s noticed this, but doesn’t understand it. Father is wonderful. Mother is also wonderful. And now that they share two children, she’ll definitely have to stay.
Chapter 50

Chapter Summary

Selina looks up. Dick is standing in the doorway in pajamas and a blanket cape. Perfect.

“Selina?”

“Hey, Dickie. Come sit with your dad, okay?”

Dick climbs into Bruce’s lap without questioning the instruction; it’s 5am, and he’s still mostly asleep. If Selina doesn’t have the heart to stand up when there’s a cat sleeping on her lap, there’s no way Bruce will be able to disturb a sleeping child. He’ll get some rest.

Chapter Notes

I typed this up really late last night while an excited puppy crawled all over me, so typos are a distinct possibility. Sorry!

“BRUCE WAYNE AND BIO SON SPOTTED IN MATERNITY WARD WITH MYSTERY WOMAN!”

Selina tucks the newspaper under her arm and lets herself into the manor; it’s her first chance to use the key Bruce gave her, but she picks the lock anyway, because she’s annoyed.

The papers got a clear photo, and she recognizes Talia al Ghul mainly from a sketch Damian showed her a few weeks ago—copied, he’s said, from a photo he’d found once in his grandfather’s study.

Bruce must have been at the hospital most of the night; he doesn’t even notice when she walks into the room.

“When were you going to tell me the mother of your child was here?”

Bruce looks up slowly. “Selina.”

She crosses her arms, waiting.

“Children, now.”

“I gathered.” She hands him the newspaper. “Is the baby all right? I assume it came from some other universe.”

“Yes. To both. We haven’t named her yet.”

“How long has Talia been here?”
“Five days. Six now? But she’s not staying in the manor anymore.”

“I don’t care where she’s staying, Bruce. You should have told me about her.”

He yawns. “Sorry.”

She sighs. “Go to bed. It’s no use being mad at you when you’re half asleep.”

“Can’t. Waiting for the kids to wake up—gonna tell them what’s happening, then go back to the hospital.”

“You’re ridiculous. There’s no way you’re safe to drive yourself there.”

“Bruce? I heard voices.”

Selina looks up. Dick is standing in the doorway in pajamas and a blanket cape. Perfect.

“Selina?”

“Hey, Dickie. Come sit with your dad, okay?”

Dick climbs into Bruce’s lap without questioning the instruction; it’s 5am, and he’s still mostly asleep. If Selina doesn’t have the heart to stand up when there’s a cat sleeping on her lap, there’s no way Bruce will be able to disturb a sleeping child. He’ll get some rest. She’ll tell the kids the baby’s all right. She’ll even call Talia and let her know Bruce is resting—her number must be his phone, and if it isn’t, Alfred knows all.

She’s annoyed with Bruce, but not concerned. He wasn’t actively hiding anything from her; he just doesn’t think about things sometimes. And she’ll need to talk to Talia at some point. It’s not her fault Bruce is an idiot.

Selina picks up the newspaper and settles into the armchair opposite Bruce. He and Dick are both already asleep.

Bruce and Alfred are very distracted. Cass takes advantage of this to go with Jason to the Watchtower, leaving a note to say Diana okayed the trip. She has an idea.

The first step in Cassandra’s idea is to convince Superman that he and his wife should spend some time with Kon at his parents’ farm. (Tim is not invited to this conversation because he gets worked up and makes Superman defensive.)

The second step is to convince him that this bonding time should be only for the grown-ups, and he should leave his little son at home with a babysitter.

“You should ask Captain Marvel,” Jason says, as planned. “Everyone in my universe says he’s the best babysitter ever.”

“I’ve heard that too,” Cass says, “from my friend who used to be Green Arrow’s sidekick.”

“I’m usually at the school when I’m not here,” Billy adds. “Lots of experience with kids.”

“We’re not actually leaving a kid in charge of Jon Kent, right?” Jason asks when Superman’s been convinced, and he and Captain Marvel have walked away.
“Tim says Clark doesn’t have cameras everywhere like Bruce, so it is safe for Billy to play with Dick there. Billy goes to babysit, I go with Dick in the Zeta tube, Dick and Billy play, I watch Jon, we leave before Clark is back.”

“What if Jon tells?”

“He is four, with superpowers. He must be good at secrets.”

“Okay. So are we actually going to see Diana while we’re here, or was that a lie, too?”

Cass smiles. “She said she will fly us in an invisible plane!”

Bruce wakes up in the study. Tim is sitting across from him, reading the newspaper. The newspaper that opens with a story about Bruce and Talia at the hospital together.

So much damage control to do.

“We talked to Talia,” Tim says when he notices Bruce is awake. He sets the newspaper aside. “She said to get some rest and start working on a cover story before you come back. You can watch the baby while she and Damian nap this afternoon.”

“Right. Cover stories. I think we’d better start with you and your friends.”

Tim nods. “I was talking to Cass and Alfred about it earlier. Any lie you come up with is going to be a really hard sell after last night.”

“I know. We can spin it for the press, but Talia very clearly—are you all right, telling them the truth? Other Tim is still your choice.”

Tim sighs. “Tell him. It’s the best solution, and it’ll be easier for everyone to be friends if we aren’t keeping secrets.”

“Do you want to make the call? I’m not in the mood to be dragged into a conversation with Jack Drake.”

“Sure,” Tim says. “I’ll just disguise my voice a little—they’d recognize that before my face, I think.”

He dials easily, from memory, and Bruce remembers suddenly that Jack Drake is Tim’s father. Tim has just been his for so long—how could he have forgotten that?

“Are you sure you don’t mind calling?” he asks, suddenly uneasy.

“Why would I mind? It’s—Hi! Mrs. Drake? I’m Bruce Wayne’s son, and I was wondering if I could talk to Tim? We met yesterday.”

There’s a brief pause; presumably Janet is finding her son.

“Hey, Other Tim,” Tim says in his normal voice. “My dad wants to talk to you.”

He hands the phone over and picks up the newspaper again; Bruce notices that he’s been taking notes in the margins of the article about him and Talia.

“Mr. Wayne?”
Right. He has another Tim on the line. “I was hoping if I could talk to you and your friends sometime soon.”

“About the baby?” Other Tim says. Of course he knows what it’s about—he’s Tim. “I’m free all day, but Steph is in class until noon. Duke is working right now, then he has class at 12:30. And Steph has class again at three.”

“Why don’t you come over now, and I’ll talk to your friends later.”

“Sure. See you soon.”

He hangs up, and Bruce turns his attention back to his son. “Do you have any ideas for the press?”

“Not if she grows up to look like you.”

“We’ll check some multiverse photos later. Do you want to stay in here when the other Tim comes?”

“I’d better. You need someone for back-up, and Cass and Jay went out.”

“Where are Dick and Alfred?”

“Walking the dogs, I think.”

“All right. But you don’t have to stay if you don’t want to. It’s not your job to protect me from teenagers.”

“I’m Robin,” Tim says. “If I can’t help with real threats, you have to at least let me run emotional support.”

Bruce smiles. “All right, Tim. You can stay.”

It’s strange seeing the two Tims side by side, without all the distractions of last night. Stranger than seeing the two Dicks, who had a whole decade of differences between them. Bruce’s Tim is smaller and sharper. His mouth is always curved just barely upward, but it doesn’t make him look happier or friendlier than his counterpart.

They’re only two years apart—they would look almost exactly the same if his Tim hadn’t been tortured and drugged and malnourished. It’s upsetting, and looking at the older Tim—the normal, healthy Tim—is jarring and unpleasant.

“Okay,” he says when Bruce tries to explain about the multiverse.

“Okay?” Bruce repeats.

“You’re Batman. Of course you can travel to alternate universes.”

Well. That answers the question of whether or not he knows.

“So does that make us the same person?” he asks Bruce’s Tim.

“Um. Yeah.”

The other Tim seems uncertain—and suddenly more Tim-like—for the first time today. “Do you want, like—do you want to see Mom and Dad?”

“No.”
He’s perfectly happy to be Tim’s only parent, but Bruce thinks he should probably remind him that his parents were actually trying to come for him when their plane went down. Tim never mentions his parents—it’s possible he doesn’t even know what happened to them. He obsesses over Nightwing not coming for him because he expected him to; if he didn’t have expectations for his parents, he might not have looked into them.

But that’s a conversation for when they’re alone, and this baby situation is sorted out.

Other Tim promises to explain things to Duke and Stephanie. He leaves quickly, probably noticing his counterpart’s growing discomfort.

“Tim,” Bruce says when they’re alone, “are you—”

“I’m fine. Let’s go find some pictures of Athanasia.”
Chapter 51

Chapter Summary

Talia walks Bruce’s cousin to the door, wondering if it’s normal how easily pleased Damian is. She remembers being sullen and disobedient at fifteen. Dozens of fights with her father, him complaining that Nyssa would never have acted like this, her countering that things were different in the 1920s, then storming off in a huff.

Talia doesn’t want to leave her daughter alone in the hospital, but she also doesn’t want to keep her son in the hospital all night, now that he’s decided to stay with her.

She remembers how paranoid Bruce can be—if he’s willing to leave the baby here, it must be safe.

They walk to the penthouse—Bruce gave her the key before leaving. There are clothes there for Damian, including pajamas. Talia is deeply uncomfortable in a sweatshirt that must be Bruce’s, but it’s better than sleeping in the clothes from her adventure this afternoon. She tries to call her father before going to bed, but he doesn’t answer.

In the morning she finds Damian at the table with an unfamiliar redhead.

“Good morning, Mother. Kate brought clothes for you. And breakfast.”

The other woman stands and offers a hand to shake. “Hey, I’m Bruce’s cousin. Alfred asked me to run over some stuff for you. Selina just put Bruce down for a nap, but he’ll be over as soon as he talks to the kids.”

Talia shakes her hand, then sits down beside Damian. “Let him sleep; I need him at his best when he’s coming up with an explanation for our daughter’s existence.”

“Sure.” She starts unpacking a small stack of takeaway boxes, revealing pancakes. “Dami, go find us some plates, okay?”

“I was just getting used to the thief,” she says while Damian is searching the cupboards, “and then he brings home an assassin. At least he’s not sleeping with you.”

“Could we please not discuss my parents having sex at breakfast?”

“Sorry, kid. Hey, are you okay? You seem even tenser than usual.”

“I’m fine.”

Talia looks at Damian—he does seem a little stiff, a little uncertain. She’ll ask him about it when Kate is gone.

“If you say so,” Kate says. She stands up. “Okay. You’ve got clothes. You’ve got food. Call me if you get bored at the hospital; I’ll come take you home.”

Damian turns to Talia. “I can go with Kate now, if you want me out of the way.”
Is that what he’s worried about? “You’re not in the way, Damian. I love being with you.”

“Oh. All right.”

He turns his attention to breakfast, pink and happy, and Talia walks Bruce’s cousin to the door, wondering if it’s normal how easily pleased he is. She remembers being sullen and disobedient at fifteen. Dozens of fights with her father, him complaining that Nyssa would never have acted like this, her countering that things were different in the 1920s, then storming off in a huff.

She needs to find out what Father did to make Damian so wary of him. And quickly—she’s never dealt with an infant before and she’s sure Bruce hasn’t either. Father has, and his help would be invaluable.

She waits until breakfast is finished and she’s wearing clean clothes that have never belonged to Bruce to bring it up.

“After you died, I didn’t see him until I was six or seven. I was staying with friends of yours, in China. They were ninja, too, and they made sure I could defend myself, but I was a child. They let me be a child. Grandfather didn’t like that, when he finally came to collect me. He killed most of them. I was never what he wanted. Not strong enough. Not vicious enough.”

“He hurt you,” Talia says.

“Only when I disappointed him.”

“And how often was that?”

Damian doesn’t answer.

Talia stands; it’s high time they went to the hospital. “My father would never hurt you on purpose,” she says. “But I understand that only seeing him may hurt you, when he wears the face of someone cruel. I think I will be calling him frequently, to ask for advice about the baby. Maybe someday you will let him say hello to you, from safely far away.”

“Maybe,” Damian agrees cautiously.

“There is no rush. He is old enough to be a patient man. Shall we go see your sister?”

Bruce is just pulling into the hospital parking lot when he gets a message from Lucius—the masking device he’d asked for is ready; maybe he’d like to test it out at the party tomorrow night?

Which is when Bruce remembers that there’s a party tomorrow night, which he’s supposed to be going to with Selina. And Selina, of course, didn’t bother reminding him this morning because she’s annoyed about Talia.

He can’t cancel. The press will be difficult enough as it is, and he needs to publicly confirm that he’s still with Selina.

Dick will enjoy the party. Especially when Bruce tells him he doesn’t need makeup.

He sets it all aside for now and goes into the hospital—he’ll pick up the device before going home tonight.

Damian seems genuinely happy to see him, which is a relief—he mostly knows he’s worrying
unnecessarily, but can’t forget Tim saying he can’t compete with dead moms.

The baby is still tiny, still adorable, and still nameless. Bruce will leave it to Talia to decide whether she wants to stick with Athanasia or use something different—she’d mentioned Nyssa, after her sister.

The doctors say she’ll be fine, but she needs to stay in the hospital for a few weeks. It’s best if no one holds her yet. Bruce settles for staring at her through the glass for several minutes, until he remembers that he, Damian, and Talia have a meeting at the courthouse.

The resurrection of Damian Wayne’s mother is a hastily thrown together plan, and leaves Bruce with no legal ties to his new daughter. He doesn’t like that part; telling Tim that Talia isn't evil is not the same as trusting her exclusively with the life of his child. If anything goes horribly wrong, he assures himself again, it’s never too late to order a paternity test and deal with the impact on his public relationship with Selina then.

Talia is not impressed with Damian’s established back story, particularly her role as a destitute and presumably deceased Gothamite. Bruce isn’t sure if it’s destitute or Gothamite that irritates her more—deceased, at least, they’re about to fix.

By the time they reach their destination, she’s embellished the story to her satisfaction, and Bruce and Damian sit back and watch as she spins the convoluted explanation for his poor, beleaguered social workers.

Her accent is much more pronounced than usual, and her English much less perfect, as she tells them about flying home to care for her sick grandparents, leaving an infant Damian behind with her cousins because he had a cold. Her description of these cousins consists mostly of swearing in a mix of Chinese and Arabic, and it is at this point that the social workers suggest bringing in an interpreter.

Talia is deeply offended by the implication that her English is substandard, and refuses the interpreter. Anything in her story that doesn’t add up will be blamed on miscommunication.

She explains that she didn’t leave Damian with Bruce when she left because he was rich and powerful and she was afraid he wouldn’t give him back. But when her grandparents died a few weeks later, she had been unable to get her visa approved to return to America. It is only now, with the backing of her father and the fortune he’s come into, that she’s finally been able to return to her son. And then she went into labor on the plane, so could they please hurry up and restore partial custody of her son so she can go back to the hospital and be with her daughter?

Half an hour later they have split custody of Damian, and Bruce is officially his daughter’s godfather. He should really go home and start preparing for that party tomorrow—he’s not sure Dick even has appropriate clothing. But he wants to see his daughter. He drops Damian and Talia off at the penthouse to rest, Damian promising to come home with him later tonight, and goes back to the hospital.
Chapter 52

Chapter Summary

“Are you sure,” Bruce asks, straightening Dick’s tie again, “that you’ll be all right with six boys?”

“Between the six of them,” Alfred says, “it might be almost as difficult as a night with you at that age.”

“I wasn’t that bad.”

“No, you were worse.”

Chapter Notes

This chapter ended up being longer than I thought it was. And I wrote most of it tonight, so I’m just posting it now instead of waiting until morning like usual; I’m not working in the morning and I intend to sleep in.

Unfortunately I have caught up with myself. The last 3-4 chapters ended up being mostly things that I hadn’t originally planned for, so we’re looking at closer to 60 than 55 chapters total, but I no longer have any buffer, so the next chapter or two might be late. I have three needy baby animals in the house and my parents, who sometimes come up to help me when I have trouble juggling Small Pets and Being an Adult, haven’t been over in several weeks because Weather, and everything is A Lot. But new chapters as soon as possible.

Cassandra and Dick go with Alfred to pick up their clothes for the party, because unlike Bruce, who is currently running a very hot shower to steam the wrinkles out of his tux, some people are prepared, and had their last fittings a week ago. Her dress is green, and so is Dick’s suit. He is very excited about having colorful clothes, but not nearly as excited as he is about not having to wear makeup. He keeps playing with the little masking machine, on a chain around his neck, though, and Cass keeps having to remind him not to draw attention to it.

She and Dick are the only ones going with Bruce and Selina tonight—the other boys are having their own party at home. Duke Thomas, Cyborg Victor, and Kon will be coming over. This was Tim’s idea—Cass is pretty sure he suggested inviting Duke and Vic over so that he could spend time with Kon without being bothered by Dami and Jay, because usually he doesn’t like being around a lot of people.

Alfred stops at the hospital on the way to pick up their clothes, so Cassandra finally gets a good look at her new sister. She is tiny and wonderful and there is nothing to see yet in her body language—Cass has never tried to read someone so young before. Talia she can read though. Talia is excited and proud and also stressed. She is still uneasy around Dick, but it helps that the baby is on the other side of the glass, and that Dick looks very human right now.
Dick presses his face to the glass and announces that she is a very good baby, and he’s glad she’s his sister. That makes Talia soften a lot.

“I’m glad Damian will be with friends tonight,” she tells Alfred. “I haven’t talked to my father yet, and I don’t want to do it when he’s here; Father was so horrible to him in that world.”

Cassandra has trouble imagining a Ra’s al Ghul that isn’t terrible, but Talia is definitely looking forward to calling him, so he can’t be all bad.

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“Are you sure,” Bruce asks, straightening Dick’s tie again, “that you’ll be all right with six boys?”

“Between the six of them,” Alfred says, “it might be almost as difficult as a night with you at that age.”

“I wasn’t that bad.”

“No, you were worse.”

“We’re going to be late, Bruce,” Selina says.

“Right. Dick, do you remember what not to talk about?”

“Yes, Bruce.”


Bruce is going to be spending most of the night saying “no comment” and getting just a little handsy with Selina. An official press release went out this morning, telling a simplified version of the story Talia spun for the social workers. Answering any further questions will likely involve outright denying that the baby is his, which he really doesn’t want to do. The point of tonight is to establish that his relationship with Selina is fine.

They’ve only been at the party for a few minutes—long enough to get a few pictures and tell a few brief stories that emphasize how much a part of the family Bruce’s girlfriend is—when Cassandra spots Stephanie Brown and the other Tim. She goes to talk to them, taking Dick with her, and Bruce turns his attention to Selina. The kids will be fine.

“I really am sorry about Talia,” he says.

“I know, Bruce.” She smiles. “Now. How can we make this night more interesting?”

Bruce sighs. “The answer is petty crime, isn’t it?”

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Jason isn’t sure how he feels about having all these extra people in the house. He’s not having a bad day—his thoughts aren’t running away from him—but he’s not having a good day, either. His head is killing him, even with the migraine pills Leslie gave him last month, and dealing with all of these extra people is just a lot. But not as bad as going to the party with Bruce would be, and he’s not going to be rude and go hide in his room.

He’s sitting on the floor with the dogs, because his cat has no problem with being rude and hiding in his room, participating half-heartedly in some multiplayer game Tim put up, though Tim’s not actually playing it. He and Kon are sitting on the couch, facing each other and not quite touching;
Tim is a lot more animated that usual, gesturing wildly as he speaks. Damian is telling Duke and Vic about Talia and the baby as they play. Jason knows he was a little freaked out about her at first, but he seems enthusiastic now.

Duke and Vic are both a lot closer to Jason’s age than to Damian’s—it should be easier than it is for him to talk to them. But he’s missing two and a half years of memories, and keeps forgetting he and Damian aren’t the same age. Duke and Vic feel three or four years older than him, just the right age for his brain to automatically file them as Dick’s Friends: Do Not Interact at Risk of Annoying or Embarrassing Your Brother.

Jason gives up for now, getting himself killed so he can go hang out with Alfred.

Dick does not like his tie. Bruce says he can’t take it off, because then people will see the thing around his neck that makes him not have to wear makeup. The tie is not as bad as the makeup, he decides. And later he won’t have to hide the no-makeup machine, but for now it is a Prototype.

He doesn’t like his makeup, but being around so many people without it makes him nervous. It wasn’t so bad at the tailor and the hospital, where less people were looking at him. The machine must be working, though, because Bruce carried him around for a while and let lots of people take pictures of them. He even let Dick tell one of the picture-taking people about going with Dami and Selina to get Ace, but then Dick and Cass left and went to the food table. Now they’re with the Tim who isn't his brother and his friend Steph.

“Do I look like a zombie?” he checks, because not having the makeup is weird.

“No,” says Tim, slow like he’s confused.

“Don’t worry—I’m not the kind of zombie that eats brains.”

Tim smiles. “That’s good to know.”

Jason and Tim—Dick’s brother Tim—have both called Dick a zombie before, but they didn’t want to tell him what it meant. So he had to ask his gymnastics friends, and they told him lots of things. Cass says his gymnastics friends think he is little and weird and theirs, which means they don’t understand him but they want to make sure nothing bad happens to him. This Tim looks like maybe he thinks Dick is little and weird and his, too. Dick will ask Cass later. For now, he wants to stop talking to Tim who is not his brother and go see Kate, who is on the other side of the room with her police friend Renee. He makes sure to tell Cass before he leaves.

Alfred looks up when Jason wanders into the kitchen. “Is everything all right?”

“Yeah. Sick of other people. Can I help you in here?”

Jason has been with other people for about half an hour; Alfred feels he would benefit from a bit more socialization. “I am making a treat for you boys—Tim has requested cupcakes. After that I will be preparing freezer meals for Talia at the penthouse; I know nothing about that woman’s cooking skills, and I want to know Damian will be well fed when he’s there. You may stay here until the cupcakes are finished, and then I want you to go back to the boys. If you are still sick of other people when I’m finished in the kitchen, you may help me vacuum.”
“I hate vacuuming,” Jason says.

“I know.”

He sighs, taking the whisk Alfred is holding out. “Fine. I’ll go be social after this. What kind of cupcakes are we making?”

A few minutes later he asks, “Hey, can I go over to Selina’s tomorrow? I forgot to ask Bruce earlier.”

“If it’s all right with Selina.”

“Yeah, I remembered to ask her. Do you think this tastes right? I’m not sure this tastes right.”

Alfred takes the spoon. “It tastes fine, Jason. Just tell your father when he comes home.”

“Oh, he’s not coming home.”

“What?”

“Come on, Alfie. Things have been weird since Talia and the baby, and Bruce hates it. The weirdness, not the baby. He’s gonna ask Other Tim to bring Cass and Dickie home, and spend the night at Selina’s place. You know, apologizing.”

Other Tim and Stephanie come in when they get back to the manor—Steph is going to drive Duke back to their school campus after she picks up her car from the Drakes. Vic will be going home by zeta tube, and Kon will be flying. A sleepover is more than they want to put Alfred through, with Bruce gone for the night. But before anyone goes home Steph and other Tim need cupcakes.

Cass is so happy. She has a friend! A person her age that she can spend time with without needing to take care of her or worry about her. The last time she had a friend was Jade, and she wasn’t even close enough to Jade to be sad about leaving the universe she lived in.

Steph talks so much, so Cass doesn’t need to talk at all. Except when Cass wants to say something Steph is so patient while she finds the words. Cass loves her little brothers but they are not good at remembering that words are harder for her, and she doesn’t get as much time as she wants to think through. Cass has had the best night—she got to spend time with Steph for almost five hours. Tim was also there sometimes, and he was also good, but he came and went and did other things, and Steph spent the whole night with her. It was the best. As good as flying with Shayera and Diana.

She is very tired, but she makes sure to talk to Damian after everyone leaves, before she goes to bed. “I saw your mother this morning.”

“Is she upset I wasn’t there today?”

“No,” Cass says.

All of Damian tightens up, small and miserable, and Cass realizes her mistake. She is too tired for this.

“Damian. She loves you so much. So much. She didn’t mind not seeing you today because she needed to talk to Ra’s, and she knows Ra’s is bad for you. She got the baby because the baby needed help. It is not about you. Okay? She loves you.”
“Okay,” Damian says quietly.

She might need to do more later, but it has been a long, happy night, and she wants to sleep. “I love you, too. But I need sleep now. Dick is tired and clingy—go get hugs.”

Cass goes right to bed, because in the morning is their playdate with Billy, and she has to get Dick up and out of the house before Bruce gets home, so they don’t have to answer questions, and to Superman’s house right after Superman leaves, so Billy isn’t in charge of the Super baby for long.

Billy waits until Cassandra and Dick are there to stop being Captain Marvel. He’s only been with Jon for about five minutes, which is good—he’s never babysat before. He was a little nervous about being himself, but Cass introduced everyone first, and then sat on the floor and asked Jon, “Can you keep a secret?”

And Jon nodded at her and she nodded at Billy, and Hal said Cassandra’s superpower was kind of like mind-reading, but not really? So he figures Jon really can keep a secret.

And this is so cool! Billy didn’t think he’d ever have a friend his age that he didn’t have to keep secrets from. Dick is kind of weird, and there are lots of really normal things he doesn’t know anything about—like he told Billy he probably went to school once but he doesn’t remember it, and Billy had to explain to him what recess was, and school buses, and hall passes. But he’s fun, and Billy doesn’t have to hide anything from him.

Only it’s going to be really hard to keep being friends with Dick without the rest of the Justice League figuring out he’s a kid. And he really likes being a superhero. His foster parents are really nice, and they’re talking about adopting him, which is awesome, but being a normal kid, even with a good family, sounds really boring. And the League are his friends, even if they are way older and don’t know it. He’d miss them.

Maybe he could pretend to be his own son when he’s hanging out with Batman’s kids? Only it would be weird that he’d never mentioned having a kid before, wouldn’t it?

He’ll have to figure something out.
Chapter 53

Chapter Summary

Cass thinks it would be weird to have his mother living at the house all the time because of Selina. But the obvious solution to this problem is for Selina to move in too. And all her cats. Damian would like that. Father should hurry up and marry Selina so Damian can have step-kittens. And if Selina was living with them, he’s sure he could convince her than he needs more pets.

Right now he’s pretty sure he could convince Father he needs more pets, too, but only because he’s so stressed about Mother, so that would be cheating. Selina is fair game.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is really long but, like, nothing really happens? Idk. It was supposed to go up this morning but I just finished writing it and it's like 10pm and I'm going to bed now because tomorrow is my early day at work. Again, I do not currently have any buffer written, so no promises on a Friday chapter.

Bruce checks that Dick and Cassandra both have their bags packed, and that the present is wrapped properly, before sending them off with Alfred. One of Dick’s friends is having a birthday party, and they really don’t like Dick going anywhere without family supervision. Bruce had offered to go—he feels bad that Cass spends so much time watching her siblings. But she’s apparently excited about the venue, which leaves Bruce a free day to spend with the rest of his boys.

He’s been at the hospital whenever he’s not working for most of the last week. Cass has been very clear about his sons needing a day. Bruce is glad she’s here to keep him on task—he tries his best, but isn’t always great at juggling so many responsibilities.

Tim is already up and ready to go, because Tim is an anxious sort of person, and has been obsessively tracking the movements of Killer Croc since four am. (Waylon is technically out on parole at the moment, and Kate has checked in on him already today, but Tim likes to keep track of things personally, and he’s still nervous. This day out will be good for him.)

Damian stayed with his mother last night, so Bruce will be picking him up at the hospital, and checking in on Athanasia. (Talia’s decided to keep the name after speaking with Ra’s; it apparently belonged to some beloved ancestor. But she’s in agreement with Bruce about the girl badly needing a nickname. They just haven’t come up with one yet.)

That leaves Jason.

“I’m getting your brother, Tim. I want you off the computers by the time we come downstairs.”

“But Croc is—”
“Croc is in the sewers, reading a book called Cannibalism: How to Quit. He’s been there for six hours. He’s fine.”

“Fine,” Tim says. “Go get Jay.”

Jason seems to be having a pretty good day, but it’s hard to tell for sure since he had a pretty bad night; the reason Tim got up at four am in the first place, before he found out about Croc, was that he heard Jason having a screaming nightmare. Bruce had gotten Jay back to bed in his room and Dick and Cassandra back to bed in their own rooms, but Tim had retreated to the cave and stayed there. Now, Jason doesn’t want to get out of bed, and he’s too tired for Bruce to get a good read on his mental state.

“Come on, Jay. We’re going to see the baby.” Tim and Jason haven’t actually met Athanasia yet, but this is apparently not enough to get him out of bed.

“We’re going to the bookstore after we pick up Damian,” he adds, and that does it. Jason is dressed and downstairs in fifteen minutes.

- Cass didn’t know until last week, when Matt invited Dick to his birthday party, that trampoline parks were a thing that existed. She thinks it’s the best idea ever. And Matt’s mom wanted other grown-ups to come along too. It’s so cool. They need to come back here with the whole family. Maybe the dogs. Definitely the cat.

Dick is having so much fun with the trampolines and the obstacle courses and the giant pits of foam, and the other kids are impressed, just like they are in class, by the things he can do. Cass isn’t entirely sure if some of the jumps he can make are because of being an acrobat or being a Talon—he should ask Bruce later. But Cass is very good at multitasking. She can keep track of Dick and also have lots of fun with the trampolines, obstacle courses, and foam pits herself. The other adults are boring; they’re all standing around eating pizza.

They’re parents. Maybe normal parents are just naturally boring. Bruce and Selina and Talia and David Cain are not boring, but they’re definitely not normal, either.

The other kids are going back to Matt’s house after this for a sleepover. Bruce told Dick that he could sleep over too if he wanted to, but he was really stressed about it, and really relieved when Dick said he didn’t want to. Dick is getting more and more comfortable around other people, but he doesn’t like not knowing where any of his people are. Bruce was worried about him feeling left out, though, so he arranged for Dick to sleep over at Kate’s house tonight instead.

Cass is sleeping over with Stephanie. She’s even more excited about that than she is about the existence of trampoline parks.

- Tim is still a little uncertain about Talia, but his new sister is definitely cute. The nurse said when they walked in that they could hold her, but Talia said no. She’s worried about germs. She lets Bruce hold her, and Tim is pretty sure Dami’s held her before, but Tim and Jason don’t get to.

That’s okay; she’s got a few more weeks in the hospital, but once she comes home everyone should be able to hold her. Although Tim isn’t quite sure where she’s coming home to—the penthouse? Back to the Manor? She can’t be going back to Nanda Parbat, but that’s about all he knows for sure.

“What do you think, Jay?” he asks.
“Cute.”

“Isn’t she great?” Damian asks.

“Yeah, Dami,” Tim says. “Things still going okay with your mom?”

“Yes, but she’s a really bad cook. I’m glad Alfred sent food.”

They leave Talia and Athanasia at the hospital and go to the bookstore, because promising books was the only way Bruce got Jason out of bed this morning. That’s okay; Jason seems pretty out of it so far today, and something he’s interested in can help sometimes. Plus the bookstore and the library are the only places Bruce doesn’t feel like he needs to constantly have his eyes on Jay when he’s not doing great.

At the bookstore, Tim heads straight for the self-help section. Bruce’s cameras aren’t good enough to make out the author of Croc’s book, and he wants to know what kind of person writes a guide to not being a cannibal.

“Does eating humans still count as cannibalism if he’s part crocodile?” Damian asks.

“He’s part human too, so it counts. Hey, do you want a book on reconnecting with abusive relatives?”

Tim is perfectly fine with Ra’s al Ghul staying far, far away from Gotham and his family. But he kind of doubts that’s actually going to happen, so they might as well start preparing themselves now.

“Dad? Do I have this book? It looks familiar, but I’m not sure.”

Bruce takes the book in question and reads the back cover; he’s not sure either. “Amanda? Can you check our purchase records?”

Jason’s been calling him Dad more often lately, he’s noticed, on days when he’s present enough to know he’s not. Which means he’s doing it on purpose.

It’s nice.

“You know, we have plenty of duplicate books at home. It doesn’t matter if we bought this one already.”

“Uh huh,” Jason says, not looking up from the bookshelf.

“Are you feeling better?” Bruce checks. Last night was rough.

“I’m fine, Dad.”

Kate is really hoping Dick is easier to babysit on his own than with his brothers. So far things are going well, but she’s only just got him back to the apartment. He’s quiet, but seems to be in a good mood—he’s on her couch, doing that thing where he sort of bounces even though he’s sitting down.

“Are you sure you don’t mind not spending the night with your friends?” she asks, because Dick is legally fifteen, and at some point Bruce is going to have to start letting him do things without constant supervision.
“I like Matt. I don’t like Matt’s house.”

“Why not?” She’s pretty sure he’s never been to the house in question.

Dick looks away. He turned off his masking device when she picked him up, and looks inhuman in the low light of her living room. “There’s Owls across the street.”

She has to call Alfred, then, to confirm the address. There were Owls across the street, before she and Bruce got them thrown in prison last winter.

“Okay,” Dick says. “But can I still stay with you?”

“Sure, kid.” She puts on some movie the other kids thought he would like, relieved that he isn’t interested in talking any more about the Court of Owls. She doesn’t want to be the adult in charge when it occurs to him to wonder what she and Bruce did with all the Talons in this world. (Nothing, because before the last Owl was arrested he killed all of them, presumably so no one else would ever be able to use his weapons. The Gotham police had been baffled by the bodies.)

“Hey, Dickie, what do you want to eat?”

“Snickerdoodles,” he answers promptly.

“I meant real food.”

“Snickerdoodles are real.”

Kate gives up. She’s not the kid’s dad; she’s his cool grown-up cousin. If he wants cookies for dinner, he can have cookies for dinner. As long as he doesn’t tell Bruce.

They go to the Indian restaurant for dinner, because it’s Damian’s turn to pick. He didn’t think it was supposed to be his turn, but that’s what Father said. Damian thinks he might have gotten an extra turn because Father is still insecure about Mother being here. He should just talk to Cass about it—she would tell him everything is fine.

After dinner they go to the art museum, so he can see the paintings and Tim can see the new photography exhibit. Damian’s never been to the art museum before, not in Gotham. They all went to the one in Star City.

He thinks his mother would like the museum too. But she likes there to always be someone with the baby during visiting hours, and also her being here would probably ruin it for Tim. Tim doesn’t like his mother.

He hopes she’ll come back to the house when Athanasia gets out of the hospital, even if Tim doesn’t like her. He’s sick of all the going back and forth.

Cass thinks it would be weird to have his mother living at the house all the time because of Selina. But the obvious solution to this problem is for Selina to move in too. And all her cats. Damian would like that. Father should hurry up and marry Selina so Damian can have step-kittens. And if Selina was living with them, he’s sure he could convince her than he needs more pets.

Right now he’s pretty sure he could convince Father he needs more pets, too, but only because he’s so stressed about Mother, so that would be cheating. Selina is fair game.
Tim still doesn’t have a pet of his own, but he’s up to six cameras. He won’t let the rest of them see most of his pictures, though, which is weird. Cass says it’s because he’s up to something, but she hasn’t tried to figure out what yet—she’s been too busy making friends and helping everyone else to make friends. Jason says she’s sleeping over with her friend Steph tonight. Damian hopes she’ll be back early enough that he can spend some time with her before he goes back to the penthouse tomorrow.

He’s really sick of all the going back and forth.

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Stephanie has to pick up Cassandra from the trampoline park, because she doesn’t have a drivers’ license. Officially this is because she hasn’t gotten around to it since moving here from China a year ago, but Tim says it’s actually because she’s a former assassin from another universe who can’t read and write well enough to pass the permit test.

They haven’t really talked about that. The whole alternate universe assassin thing. To be fair Cass doesn’t talk a lot about anything, and anyway Steph isn’t really sure how to start that conversation—so, you used to kill people professionally?

But it does seem like it’s maybe something they should talk about, if they’re going to be hanging out so much.

She also really, really wants to talk about how Bruce Wayne is apparently Batman, which Tim knew but never bothered to tell her because he’s a jerk, but maybe it’s rude to ask a girl about her dad’s secret vigilante career?

Probably not as rude as asking a girl about her personal career in murder.

“It’s okay,” Cass says suddenly. Steph looks up from her pizza. It’s the first time Cass has actually spoken since she picked her up half an hour ago—when Steph asked what she wanted on her pizza she just shrugged.

“What’s okay?”

Cass shrugs again. “What you’re nervous about. I don’t know.”

She doesn’t know how Cass does that. She hardly ever talks, and then half the things she says are reading Steph’s mind. “Did you really used to kill people?”

She nods. “Was bad. Didn’t want to. Glad I’m here now.”

“I’m glad you’re here too.”

They sit in silence for several minutes, eating their pizza, and then Cass says, suddenly, “It was my dad.”

“What?”

“He made me,” she says. “Kill people. When I was little. It’s why he wanted a daughter. For killing.”

Dads suck. Steph is really glad hers is in prison for life. “Is he still in your old universe?”

Cass nods.
“Good. I hope his life there is awful.”
Chapter 54

Chapter Summary

"I think you think that if you can go back to being Robin, you can pretend all the bad shit didn’t happen. Because you’re so used to adults wanting something from you that being just a kid feels like a punishment. But Bruce doesn’t give a shit about Robin, Tim. Bruce cares about us, and all he knows about Robin is that it hurt us."

Tim sits in bed, waiting, until Dick shouts in his sleep. He doesn’t like that his brothers have nightmares, but he’s not above using them to his advantage. He slips on his shoes and coat and grabs his camera, listening for Alfred’s footsteps. When Dick’s door opens then closes again, he makes his escape.

He can only get out on nights when Alfred is sufficiently distracted and everyone else is in bed, which doesn’t happen nearly often enough. He can’t usually leave until Batman’s been out for an hour or two, and he has to get home before he’s done, which isn’t nearly enough time. And he can’t interfere, or he’ll get caught. But at least he gets to take pictures, like he did before Robin.

It’s a mob night—most of the activity is going to be in a warehouse by the docks. Tim climbs into the rafters, takes his camera out of its case, and settles in to wait. When he left the cave Bruce was on the other side of town, but this is where the stolen weapons are, so this is where he’ll end up.

Bruce is beginning to think this is a two person job. Well, not beginning. He should have called Kate an hour ago, and he knows it. But she’s on a date with Renee tonight, and he didn’t want to interrupt.

There are just a lot of people here. With a lot of guns.

“B!” someone shouts, and he spins around, more concerned about the familiar voice than about the bullet that just went into his arm instead of his chest.

“Stay where you are!” he shouts at Tim. There’s definitely not time to call for backup now—he needs to deal with this before his son gets hurt.

It takes another fifteen minutes to wrap things up and call the police, who should have been here already, but apparently the jewelry store robbery was more important.

Tim drops from the ceiling and runs over, camera swinging around his neck. He’s not even dressed appropriately for the weather.


“If you hadn’t shouted it would have been worse,” Bruce says, trying to be grateful, even though he’s very, very angry. Tim looks worse than Bruce feels, and Bruce is losing a not-inconsiderable amount of blood.

“You got shot,” Tim says again. He’s shaking.
The last time Tim saw Bruce get shot, he was the one doing the shooting. And then Bruce died. “I’m going to be fine, Tim. Okay? I’m fine. We just need to go back to the cave.”

“They shot you.”

Bruce steers Tim out of the warehouse and toward the car. He’s in a lot of pain, and he’s both worried and furious that Tim followed him. He is going to yell so much later. But that won’t help right now.

“Tim, can you call Alfred for me?”

He nods, pulling out his phone. Tim likes to be useful. Especially to Batman.

He likes to be Robin.

How long has he been doing this?

Alfred pulls out the bullet and puts in stitches, then bandages a long, nasty cut on Tim’s lower leg that Bruce hadn’t even seen—he has no idea where it came from, and Tim hasn’t spoken since calmly informing Alfred that Bruce had been shot and they were on their way home.

“Go up to bed, Tim,” he says. “We’ll talk about this in the morning.”

“You got shot,” Tim says again.

Bruce sighs. “Do you want to stay down here with me?”

He nods.

“Okay,” Bruce says, sliding over to make room for him on the cot. Tim might as well enjoy time in the cave while he can, because he’s seriously considering locking him out for the foreseeable future.

- 

Tim hears the window creak open, and turns to watch Jason climb out onto the roof.

“You know Bruce doesn’t like it when we’re up here,” Jay says.

Tim turns back around, staring at the Drake house. “Bruce doesn’t like anything I do.”

“Tim. You’ve been following him on patrol for over a month. You have to understand why he’s upset.”

“You were Robin too, Jay. How can you not care?”

A few minutes pass before he answers. “I lost my dad. I think you lost your Batman.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Remember when we were talking about how Dickie separates his Talon history from his, like, humanity, so he doesn’t have to cope with what he did?”

“Yeah.”

“How are you at coping, Tim? Because Cass says you suck at it. I think you think that if you can go back to being Robin, you can pretend all the bad shit didn’t happen. Because you’re so used to adults
wanting something from you that being just a kid feels like a punishment. But Bruce doesn’t give a
shit about Robin, Tim. Bruce cares about us, and all he knows about Robin is that it hurt us.”

“I like Robin.”

“You can’t fight crime if you can’t handle seeing Harley or watching Bruce get hurt. What’s going to
happen if you run into the Joker?”

“You’re not really selling me on this not being a punishment.”

Jason shrugs. “Your parents live over there, right? Do you miss them?”

“No.”

“Do you miss Bruce?”

“He’s downstairs.”

“He’s not, Tim. He’s dead. You shot him.”

Tim flinches away from him.

“Sorry. But going out at night isn’t going to undo the past. You can’t be Robin anymore. But you get
to be Tim again. Bruce gave you that. The least can do for him is stay safe, and the least you can do
for yourself is actually mourn the version of him you lost, instead of trying to absolve yourself of the
Joker’s sins by fighting crime.”

Tim scoots closer to the edge of the roof, away from Jason. He doesn’t want to talk about this. He
doesn’t want to do this.

“I didn’t even do anything. I was only watching. And that bullet would have pierced a lung if I
wasn’t there.”

“You’re changing the subject, Tim.” He sighs. “Look, I know I’m not great at this, but Cass is
having this conversation with Bruce, and maybe getting you ungrounded in the process, so you’re
stuck with me.”

“I don’t want to talk about my Bruce.”

“Your Bruce put you in a position to be worse than killed.”

“And your Bruce actually got you killed,” Tim says, because if Jay is going to be an asshole he can
return the favor.

“Yeah. I died. But I was his son first. You were only in his life because of Robin. And sure, he
probably loved you, and you probably loved him. But you were his Robin. You were your parents’
heir. You’re just Bruce’s son here. Just Tim. You can’t get back your relationship with your Bruce.
But you have to stop blaming yourself for how it ended.”

“I killed him.” Tim thinks he might be starting to cry. He really, really doesn’t want to talk about this.

“Shit. Don’t cry. I suck at this. Do you want me to get Cass?”

Tim shakes his head.

“Bruce loves you, Tim. He wants you to be safe. That’s not a bad thing.”
“I don’t want to be safe.”

“Why not, Tim?”

“I don’t deserve to be safe.”

Jason smiles. He doesn’t look happy. “Exactly. Cass said you’d say that. Now can we get off the fucking roof? Every time you move farther from me you move closer to the edge, and Bruce is gonna kill me if you fall off.”

Tim lets himself be pulled back into the house. He feels limp and wrung out, and he wants badly to be done with this conversation.

Dick is in the hallway when they come through the window. “Tim? What’s wrong?”

“Come hug your brother, Dickie,” Jay says. “He’s having a breakdown about how Bruce died and loves him and shit.”

Dick looks confused, but he wraps himself obediently around Tim, and Tim starts crying again. This sucks. He hates this.

“Tim?” Damian says, emerging from his bedroom. “What happened?”

He hates this so much. It’s half an hour before he can shake off the concerned attention of Dick and Dami, and even then, Jason refuses to leave him alone.

It’s another hour later when Bruce comes to find them, and Jason finally, finally leaves.

“You cannot follow me like that,” Bruce says when Jay is gone. “You weren’t even wearing body armor. You could have been killed.”

“So could you. You have been.”

“And it wasn’t your fault.”

“Everyone keeps saying that. I literally shot you.”

Bruce sighs. “Leslie is right. I really need to find you a therapist.” He pauses. “I trust you. Is that part of the problem? That not wanting you out there means—I have complete faith in you, Tim. But I’m not about to risk your life to prove it.”

Tim shrugs. He hasn’t looked at Bruce’s face once since he came into the room. “Did Cass convince you not to ground me?”

“She said cave access is vital to your peace of mind, and locking you out would make you even more likely to follow me on patrol. But you are not seeing Kon this week, and I’m taking your phone.”

“Can I at least text Kon to tell him I’m grounded so he doesn’t worry?”

“Make it quick.”

Tim does, then hands over the phone. Bruce pockets it and stands up, then hovers over him, awkward, for several seconds.

“I love you, Tim.”
“Love you too,” Tim mutters, because he does, even though he’s confused and angry, mostly at himself. Then he realizes it’s the first time he’s said that, to any Bruce, possibly to any parent ever.

Bruce sits back down and wraps an arm around Tim’s shoulders. “I want to see the pictures you’ve been taking on patrol, though. I bet they’re awesome.”
Chapter 55

Chapter Summary

“Do I really get to hold the baby?” Dick asks.

“Yes,” Damian says. They’re on their way to the hospital with Alfred. Mother is very concerned about Athanasia getting sick, since she is tiny and her immune system isn’t good yet. But Damian convinced her that since Dick isn’t technically alive, he can’t have germs.

“How’s Tim?” Jason asks when Bruce finds him in the library.

“All right, I think. A little mad at me.” He sits on the couch, and Jason leans into him. “I thought he was doing better.”

“Tim’s great as long as he gives himself jobs. Get you to join the League. Make sure the rest of us are taken care of the way he thinks we should be. Make his boyfriend’s super-family be nice to him. Basically he’s at his best when the rest of us aren’t. And we’re pretty much good right now, so he went back to what he does best.”

“Hm.” He’s still working on the therapy thing, though Athanasia has been a major distraction. He knows Jason has been talking to Dinah a lot—she frequently acted as a mentor and counselor for the younger heroes in his world, a role she didn’t fill in Tim’s. Apparently there’s a Green Lantern with a degree in psychology, but he’s been off-world since before Bruce met the Justice League.

“Do you miss it, Jay?”

“Sometimes. I know it wouldn’t be safe right now. I mean, even less safe than it was always was. But I—I think Tim thought he was part of the family—his old family—because he was Robin. I always knew I was there because I was Jason. Anyway, dying kind of kills the appeal a little. Maybe in my—maybe in a world without the Joker in it. But the world without him doesn’t have you, either. And dads are better than vigilantes.”

“Do I really get to hold the baby?” Dick asks.

“Yes,” Damian says. They’re on their way to the hospital with Alfred. Mother is very concerned about Athanasia getting sick, since she is tiny and her immune system isn’t good yet. But Damian convinced her that since Dick isn’t technically alive, he can’t have germs.

He was careful not to make this argument where Dick could hear him. It’s not much of an argument, so he hopes Athanasia doesn’t get sick. Dick’s pants have been just slightly too short for about a week now. Alfred is much too good to shrink the laundry, and Damian is pretty sure undead people don’t grow.

“Is she coming home soon?” Dick asks.

“I don’t think we’ve decided where home is yet.”
“Home is home. But we haven’t picked a room or got a crib or anything.”

“She might not live in the same house as us, Dickie.”

“But she’s our sister. She has to live with us.”

Damian agrees. But he doesn’t think the adults have actually talked about it yet. And he’s too nervous to ask any of them about it.

Dick doesn’t have that problem.

Mother makes him sit down before handing him the baby. Dick holds her very carefully, supporting her head just like Damian told him to. Then he looks up at Mother and asks, “When are you coming home?”

“Coming home?” Mother repeats.

“Yeah, so Bruce and Dami don’t have to keep coming here every day. We have to paint the baby’s room before you come back. I think it should be yellow.”

Mother looks at Damian. He shrugs. “I’ll have to speak with your father.”

“Okay.” Dick touches Athanasia’s forehead, very gently. “Do you think she’ll be scared of me? Real me? I don’t like to wear the masking all the time. It kinda buzzes, around my head? Annoying. But I don’t want to scare her. I asked Tim, yesterday before he was upset, and he said if she starts seeing my real face soon, maybe she’ll be used to it before she’s big enough to know it’s scary.”

“Is Tim all right?” Mother asks.

“He snuck out last night and watched Father get shot,” Damian explains. He’s fairly sure there’s more to it than that, but Tim hadn’t really been talking when they saw him this morning. Also, Mother makes Tim uncomfortable sometimes, so probably Damian shouldn’t discuss him with her.

Dick makes Mother uncomfortable sometimes, too, but today is going very well so far.

“She is very soft,” Dick says, poking her cheek.

“Be careful,” Mother says, even though he already is.

“Okay,” Dick says. Then he asks, again, “Do you think she’ll be scared of me?”

“I’m sure she won’t be.”

“Good. Can you take her back now? I don’t want to hold still anymore.”

Damian takes Athanasia—she is so small and he loves holding her—and Dick jumps up and does a cartwheel, because he really isn’t good at holding still for very long. Probably cartwheels aren’t allowing in hospitals, but Mother is making the face that means she’s trying not to laugh, so everything is good.

Bruce is in the kitchen, trying his best to put dinner together—Alfred is going to feed Dick, Damian, and Talia before bringing the boys home. (Talia seems to really like Alfred, which is good, and Dick is clearly growing on her. The biggest lingering issue is Tim’s discomfort with Talia, but there are other things to worry about with Tim.) Cooking is definitely not one of Bruce’s strengths, but there
are still three children in the house to feed.

Cassandra joins him quietly, climbing onto the countertop to reach the highest cupboards.

“Any ideas?”

“Ask Jason. He can cook.”

“I thought he was working on homework.” Online school is going well for Tim and Damian, but is by necessity somewhat sporadic for Jason. Bruce doesn’t want to interrupt him on a good day.

“Order something,” Cass suggests next. That’s probably for the best. She sits down on the counter, swinging her legs. “Tim might be worse. Now that you’re hurt.” She frowns. “Your arm will be okay?”

“It’ll be fine. I’m not going out for a few nights anyway. We’ll find a solution.” He orders in something that Tim and Jason will both like, then turns back to Cass. “You’re dressed up. Are you going somewhere?”

She nods. “College party. Tim is picking me up, and we will meet Duke and Steph there.”

“And were you planning on telling me about this?”

“Telling you now,” she says, jumping off the counter.

“All right, have fun. Remember you can’t drink until your birthday.”

“I know, Bruce.” She hugs him, then heads for the door. “Might stay with Steph tonight. I’ll text you.”

Bruce waits until after dinner to bring up his new plan for the Tim situation. “Alfred benched me until my arm is better, but I’ll be in the cave keeping track of Kate. Tim, I thought maybe you could join me for the next few nights, and if that goes well you can continue running comms when I’m working again.”

Tim brightens visibly. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. But if Harley or the Joker show up I want you upstairs immediately.”

“Deal,” Tim says.

If he’s doing comms he’ll feel involved—Bruce would prefer if he didn’t feel like he needed to be helping Batman, but he’ll work with what he has for now—and Bruce will be able to hear him all night and know he’s exactly where he’s supposed to be, in the cave, watching the cameras.

“You’re staying in tonight?” Jason checks.

“Yes. And when my arm is healed and I go out again, I’m going to make sure I have Kate with me on big cases like that.”

“Good.”

Jason follows Bruce and Tim down to the cave, but he isn’t as focused on the cameras as Tim, even though he’s having a fairly good night. He has a book along, and wanders over to the computers only occasionally. Both boys seem relieved to have Bruce where they can see him, and Bruce enjoys spending a night with his kids instead of with criminals.
Selina knocks on the penthouse window, which opens slowly a moment later.

“You must be Catwoman,” Talia al Ghul says.

“I thought it was past time we met.” She climbs up onto the roof, and Talia joins her. They sit in silence for a few minutes, not quite uncomfortable, but not exactly comfortable either.

“I heard Bruce was injured last night,” Talia says, finally.

Selina nods. Jason had called her earlier. “Minor, but it spooked the kids. I think seeing the baby was a good distraction.”

“I’m glad he’ll be all right,” Talia says, and there’s another awkward pause.

“I heard the kids want you to move into the manor full time,” Selina says. Cass had texted her about that, after getting a report of the hospital visit from Damian. Her writing is improving significantly.

“Yes, Dick brought it up today. I don’t think they’ve spoken to Bruce about it.”

“They definitely haven’t.” She turns to look out at the city. “It’s not a bad idea. I don’t think Bruce would do well with having his child in a different house long term. And Cass says that going between you is stressful for Damian.”

“I am not opposed to returning to the manor,” Talia says, “but I think you should move in first.”

Selina turns back to face her. “And who says I want to live with Bruce?”

“Don’t you?”

“It would be convenient. And my cats would have more space to roam.” She stands. “We’ll have to discuss it with Bruce. May I meet your daughter? Tomorrow, during visiting hours.”

“That will be fine,” Talia says. “I will see you tomorrow.”

Selina swings off of the roof and toward the history museum. She thinks the meeting went well.
Two days after Bruce is declared officially healed, he and Kate join the Justice League in fighting off an alien invasion.

Alfred doesn’t know where he went wrong. How did he manage to raise a man so completely devoid of common sense?

“Be careful,” Cassandra tells Bruce before he leaves. “We have all lost too much. We need you.”

Bruce is apparently too excited about the prospect of his first fight with aliens to treat this as seriously as it deserves.

All five of the children are gathered in the cave, waiting anxiously for news. Alfred disables the zeta tube before anyone gets any bright ideas; when Bruce wants to come home he can call first, and Alfred will turn it back on.

It’s the first time he’s ever been grateful that Jason is having a bad day—that’s one child, at least, that he doesn’t have to worry about doing something reckless. Dick and Jason would both be easily distracted if they weren’t in the cave, surrounded by the tension of their siblings, but they aren’t going to leave unless he finds something better for them to do, and he can’t leave the cave himself unless he can also keep all five children out. Left to their own devices, they will definitely work out how to turn the zeta tube back on. Or possibly just steal a car or jet and drive to the fight.

After lunch he gives up and calls Selina, who does an admirable job. She gets Dick and Damian both to walk their dogs, then keeps Dick and Jason upstairs for the rest of the afternoon. The other three, though—by the time Bruce and Kate return in the late evening, Alfred feels he’s earned a very long vacation.

- 

Something bad is happening. Jason is having a really hard time focusing today, and he isn’t quite sure what. But something bad. Dad left, and everyone is quiet and unhappy. He kind of wants to ask Alfie, but talking sounds hard right now, so he doesn’t.

“Everything is fine,” Tim says, even though Jason didn’t ask. “Bruce is just hanging out with the Justice League today.”

Jason doesn’t believe him.
Tim hates this. He knows how good Batman is—that thing a couple weeks ago was just a fluke. And he promised he’d bring Kate next time he had to go up against that many people. But this is different. This isn’t the mob and petty crime and the same old rogues he’s been fighting for years. This Bruce has only met the Justice League a few times. He doesn’t know how they do things. He’s never fought an alien before.

He promised he’d be careful. This is not being careful. And Tim isn’t even allowed to help him.

Jay looks like he’s more freaked out about how freaked out everyone else is than about what’s actually happening, so Tim tries to tell him everything’s okay, but he doesn’t think he’s very convincing. Damian has the news playing on three different channels—it looks like the League is winning, but they’re so far away it’s hard to know for sure. Dick is sitting next to Damian, asking for clarification every few minutes, until Cass starts to see how annoyed Dami is getting and pulls Dick away.

The cave is way too quiet. Alfred tries to get them upstairs, but down here is better. If anything goes wrong they’ll hear about it faster.

Bruce has never even seen an alien that wasn’t Clark or J’onn. What was he thinking? He’s not ready for this.

- 

Selina isn’t sure what’s more annoying. Finding out from the tabloids that her boyfriend’s ex is staying with him, or finding out from the radio that her boyfriend is fighting aliens in Metropolis. Aliens. Really. The things she puts up with.

Alfred is right—Cassandra, Tim, and Damian all look ready to make a break for it at the first sign that Bruce is in trouble. He has the entire Justice League at his back; Selina’s not too concerned. She leaves Alfred to handle that mess, and takes Jay and Dick upstairs.

It’s been over a week since she met Talia and Athanasia. She’s not surprised when Dick, balanced on the back of the couch, asks, “When are you going to stay, Selina?”

She does wonder how much of this is actually from Dick, and how much is scripted by the others, knowing he’s adorable and almost impossible to say no to.

She’s fairly certain Bruce would be delighted to have her move in. But he hasn’t asked. His kids have. And that’s a lot of independence to give up.

“I don’t know, Dickie.”

- 

Dick doesn’t understand why all the grown-ups have to be so difficult about this. He tries to explain it to Selina.

“Cass and Tim say Athanasia can’t come until you do. I want to live with my baby sister.”

At least, that’s what he thinks they meant. He asked them both last week. Cass said “The news is stupid and mean, and they will be extra gross about Talia if Selina is not here, because they do not understand being parents together without having sex.”
Tim said “If I have to live with Talia al Ghul full time, I’d better at least get Cat-mom, too.” (Tim doesn’t spend a lot of time with Selina, but Dick thinks he really likes her. It’s probably one of his weird multiverse things. Like how sometimes he’s really mean to Kate for no reason, then feels really bad but won’t admit it. Or how he really hated meeting the older Dick. Or how sometimes he has nightmares about something called Arkham, then calls Kon and says he knows it’s not fair but he doesn’t want to see him for a few days.)

“I haven’t talked to Bruce yet,” Selina says.

“Why not? It’s been forever.” More than a week.

“Bruce and I usually talk at night. In costume. But he’s been staying home with you lately.”

That’s right, Alfred grounded Bruce. Tim wasn’t allowed to see Kon while he was grounded, so it makes sense that Bruce wasn’t allowed to see Selina either.

“What if Athanasia could move in without me moving in?” Selina asks.

Dick sighs. The grown-ups are making this very hard. He looks over at Jason, but Jason is playing with his cat, and not even paying attention. He won’t help.

“No, you have to move in too. So you can be our fake mom.”

“Your fake mom?”

He nods. “Like Bruce is our fake dad.”

“Can’t Talia be your fake mom?”

“No.” He thinks about it for a minute. “Well, maybe she could be our fake mom too. But you’ll be better at it. Talia’s afraid of me. And Tim’s afraid of Talia. And Bruce and Talia aren’t in love. My real mom and dad were in love.”

“I’ll talk to Bruce about it,” Selina says, just like Talia did. Dick is starting to think they are liars. He gives up and goes to play with Jason.

“That was amazing,” Kate says as they step through Bruce’s handy new basement teleporter.

“Bruce, we need to fight aliens always. Why are we fighting clowns when there are aliens?”

“Because the clowns are in Gotham and the aliens aren’t?”

“Who says we have to stay in Gotham? Do you think the Green Lanterns are hiring? I think I’d make an awesome Green Lantern.”

“The main reason you are not always fighting aliens,” says Alfred from across the cave, “is that it terrifies the children.”

Oh. He sounds mad. She looks around the room; all of the kids are gathered, and they all look stressed and tired.

“Not hurt?” Cass asks.

“Just scrapes and bruises,” Bruce says, stepping away from Kate. “Do you want to see?”
She nods, and Bruce makes his way to the med bay, the kids following in a huddle. Only Dick
remains; he comes up to hug Kate, Kate being currently more accessible than her cousin, then
wanders over to the med bay too.

“Fun day?” asks Selina. Because Bruce’s girlfriend is here too, of course. She doesn’t seem as
worried as the kids—Kate wonders how worried Renee would have been today if she knew she was
dating Batwoman.

Kate really is going to tell her soon. Just as soon as she figures out how.

“Definitely,” she tells Selina. “How was it here?”

“Not bad. The kids were tense, but none of them actually ran off to join you, so we’re calling it a
win. Get changed and come upstairs; I tried to make dinner while Alfred wrangled the kids, but I
need a second opinion. Dick and Jay are not good taste testers. I swear those boys will eat anything.”

Tim knows Bruce doesn’t really like it when he hangs out alone in the cave during the day. But he’s
not tracking the mob or watching the dedicated Arkham camera feed or anything. He has an essay to
write for his online history class, and sometimes it’s just easier to focus down here.

He’s three pages in, and just about to give up on digital sources and ask Alfred to take him to the
library, when a strange sound comes from the corner of the cave where Bruce keeps the multiverse
equipment. Tim turns around; there’s a man in a red helmet standing in the cave.

“Hey, Replacement.”

Chapter End Notes

I’m not 100% certain there’s going to be exactly 58 chapters, but the end is close enough
that I thought I should put an official amount of chapters so the ending isn’t, like, a
shock.
Chapter 57

Chapter Summary

Bruce knows enough about Red Hood that he doesn’t want him alone with Tim, but ultimately this is just Jason. An angry, hurting Jason who wants desperately for his father to do exactly what he did, in the world Bruce’s version of him came from. He has no idea how badly it has the potential to end.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The man takes a few steps forward, pulling off his helmet. “Holy shit, you’re tiny. Do you even know who I am?”

“Jason?”

Okay. It’s okay. The cave has been breached, but it’s just Jason. About five years older than the one upstairs, Tim thinks.

He sort of remembers Bruce saying something about some Jasons really hating him.

“Yeah. Sorry to, like, crash your universe, but I got separated from Donna and Kyle, and you’ve got the tech I needed to land. Where’s Bruce?”

Okay. This is fine. Tim can handle this.

“I think he’s walking the dogs.”

Jason starts to move toward the stairs, and Tim darts out in front of him. “Wait! You can’t go up there.”

“Why not?”

Jason’s eyes narrow. He has about a hundred pounds on Tim, and he might really hate him. But he needs to stay in the cave right now.

“I don’t know what kind of day Jay is having. And meeting your alternate self is kind of a lot.”

“I live here?”

“Yeah? You’re only eighteen.”

Jason looks really, really thrown off by this information, but he pulls himself back together and goes back to looking sort of terrifying.

“Fine. Fifteen minutes. Get me Bruce, or I’ll find him myself.”

Tim isn’t totally sure if he should trust scary adult Jason in the cave, but he knows he doesn’t want to spend any more time alone with him, so. Leaving him in the cave it is.
It probably should have occurred to Bruce before now that someone might be able to use his equipment to get into this world. Tim seems a little panicky when he tells him, which makes sense—Tim obsesses over his old universe, and likes to know everything about everyone in his new one, but he’s never seemed particularly interested in the multiverse as a whole. He knows nothing about Red Hood.

Bruce knows enough about Red Hood that he doesn’t want him alone with Tim, but ultimately this is just Jason. An angry, hurting Jason who wants desperately for his father to do exactly what he did, in the world Bruce’s version of him came from. He has no idea how badly it has the potential to end.

Bruce makes sure Dick and Damian are putting away the leashes and bags of dog poop like they’re supposed to, tells Tim to keep everyone upstairs, and goes down to meet Jason.

He’s about the same height as Bruce’s son, but built like a man who fights crime daily, rather than a lanky teenager. Early to mid twenties. He looks surprised to see Bruce, despite just demanding that Tim send him down.

“You’re wearing jeans.”

“Yes? I usually don’t walk the dogs in the Batsuit. The neighbors tend to stare.”

Jason just stands there, apparently baffled. Bruce realizes he was expecting not Bruce but Batman, prepared for a fight. Just how bad are things with his family at home?

There are already two Jasons in this universe. Bruce can’t keep him. But he can let him stay for a few days, maybe even a week. Do what he can to help.

“There are some clothes that should fit you by the showers. Get changed; I’m going to go prepare my Jay before you come upstairs.”

He leaves Jason there; hopefully he’ll listen and actually change into something more comfortable. But Bruce really needs to talk to his son.

“No,” Jay says.

He’s not having a great day; Bruce is actually surprised he’s talking at all. It’s taken several minutes to explain so he’s sure Jason understands what’s happening, and now that he does, he apparently does not want to meet himself.

“Jason.”

“No,” he says again.

Bruce sighs. “Then I need you to go up to your room for a while, Jay. I’m not going to make him stay in the cave all night just because you don’t want to see him. It’s almost time for dinner.”

Jason just sits there, staring at him. Bruce is spending a lot of time today being stared at by Jasons.

“I got it,” says Tim. “I don’t think other Jay really likes me, anyway. Come on, Jason. Let’s go upstairs.” Tim has had to interact with himself at least half a dozen times now; he’s probably the best one to talk to Jason about it. Bruce lets Alfred know they’ll be having one more for dinner, then goes
“None of the kids were actually born here,” Bruce explains as they walk up the stairs. “They all came from universes where things weren’t going well. I’m not sure how many siblings you have at home, but—”

“They’re not my siblings,” Jason says.

He’s in a bad mood, visibly tense. That’s fine. Tim spent his first several weeks here threatening to kill Bruce. He can handle an unhappy Jason.

“Well, you’ll be meeting Damian, Dick, and Cassandra in a minute here. Tim and Jason are upstairs.”

“Didn’t want your kid to see what happens when things go wrong?”

“Jason isn’t feeling well, and he didn’t feel comfortable seeing who he could have been. Plenty of things have gone wrong for him, and I won’t have you trivializing his experiences because you don’t get along with your father.”

He tenses even further. “Fine, I’ll be nice to teen Jason. Why are we even doing this? I just need to use your gear to call Kyle.”

“How long have you been travelling in the multiverse?”

“Three or four months.”

“And how long ago did you get separated from your friends?”

“Six days.”

“That’s why. You need a break, Jay.”

“I’m not your son.”

“I know.”

“I’m dangerous,” he says. “You don’t know anything about me. I’m not like your Jay—not if he’s still living in your house.”

“You’re not,” Bruce agrees. “You’ve killed a lot more people—I suppose that’s what you mean. Three of my kids are former assassins. Jay is the only one who hasn’t killed anyone. Except for the baby, but she hasn’t even left the hospital yet.”

“The baby?” Jason repeats.

“Bruce!” Dick shouts before he can answer, running into the room. “Cass says I have to ask you first if I—” He skids to a stop. “You look like my brother.”

Jason stares for a moment. “Dick?” He sounds understandably alarmed as Dick narrows his yellow eyes—he must have turned the masking off and taken out his contacts as soon as they brought the dogs in.

“You’re gonna be in so much trouble, Bruce. Alfred said no more kids.”
“He’s not staying for long,” Bruce says. “Dickie, this is Jason. He’s visiting from another universe. Jason, this is Dick.”


“What’s wrong with him?” Jason asks when Dick is out of sight.

“He’s a Talon.”

“Those Court of Owl zombie things? Shit, Bruce. No wonder you’re not worried about me.”

“He’s a great kid. He just looks a little unusual.”

“Uh-huh. So where’d you pick up the rest of us?”

Jason is much more relaxed after running into Dick. Bruce takes him to meet Damian and Cassandra, and tries not to think about all the opportunities this visit creates.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, I added a chapter. Might add another? Doubt it'll be more than 60, but idk. I had several chapters where the writing was going really slowly, and now suddenly the words are just flying out, so we'll see what happens.
Chapter 58

Chapter Summary

“Avenge you? You want to be avenged? My dad avenged me, and then he got thrown in Arkham and died in a riot. I would give anything to have the Joker alive still. If I hadn’t been fucking avenged I wouldn’t have lost my dad.”

Jason is pretty out of it, so Tim sits on the floor in front of his bed, scrolling through his phone. He synced it up to the computers in the cave months ago—he thinks Bruce probably doesn’t know about that. He’s not sure which universe the other Jason came from, but he’s cross-referenced the outfit, and now he’s reading everything he can find about several different Red Hoods.

This guy probably tried to kill his Tim at least twice. He looks over at his brother, who is completely ruining the settings on his camera right now—Tim’s own fault for giving him the camera to play with when he seemed bored. He got really lucky in Jasons.

“Tim?”

“Yeah, Jay?”

“Are you—” He stops, clearly frustrated, then starts again. “You’re…upset?”

If he’s putting in the effort to ask if Tim’s okay on a bad day, he must be really worried, which means Tim is completely failing to hide how totally freaked out he is by Red Hood Jason. Who was scary, yeah, but didn’t seem like someone who wanted to murder him.

Tim used to want to murder Bruce. Tim did murder Bruce, kind of. Maybe this Jason got over it, too.

“I’m fine, Jason. Other you just freaked me out a little.”

“Bad?”

“He’s all right,” Tim says, hoping he’s not lying.

Jason Todd is twenty four. He has all the same siblings except for Athanasia, and finds her arrival in this universe deeply amusing. He hasn’t seen his Alfred since his last major fight with Bruce eleven months ago. He tells all of this to Alfred over dinner, largely ignoring the rest of the family. He’s still on edge with the rest of them, but seems quite happy rambling to Alfred about anything and everything.

Cassandra is quiet and thoughtful as she watches them, and Damian is a little on edge. Dick seems to be taking a second Jason in stride, and Bruce is watching fondly as he talks to Alfred. Jason seems at ease until Alfred gets up; he doesn’t attempt to follow him, but looks as if he might want to.

Alfred takes food up to Tim and Jason; if Bruce intends to keep this new Jason here for more than a few hours they’ll need to come downstairs, but for now they can stay hidden if they want to. He finds them both in Jason’s room, Jason sitting on the bed and Tim lying on the floor. Tim sits up
quickly and flips his phone over to hide the screen—that generally means he’s been doing something he thinks he shouldn’t. Researching the new Jason, probably.

He’s a bit concerned about what Tim may have been telling their Jason; Tim always has his siblings’ best interests at heart, but what he thinks their best interests are can be unpredictable. He might have told Jason good things about Red Hood so he won’t be as uncomfortable meeting him. Or he might have told him all the awful things to reassure him that he’s the superior Jason.

He’ll find out what Tim’s done soon enough. For now he sets down the food and turns to study Jason, trying to decide if he’s present enough that talking him into coming downstairs is a good idea.

“Is he okay?” Jason asks, after picking at his food for a few minutes.

“I prefer you, but he seems to be a very nice young man.”

“Is he staying?”

“Your father would like him to spend a few days here. I’m not sure yet if he’ll agree.”

Jason sighs, then stands slowly. “Let’s get this over with, then.”

Cassandra watches her family carefully. The older Jason has agreed to spend the night, and Bruce has decided to leave Bat-things to Kate, so everyone is not-watching a movie together. The movie is playing, but really they are watching each other.

Jason and Tim came downstairs in time for dessert, but the two Jasons haven’t talked to each other at all. Older Jason started out being very jealous, but their Jason is having a slightly bad day, and as the night goes on he stops being jealous, and gets worried and confused instead. Their Jason is nervous and uncomfortable, sitting very close to Bruce on the couch.

The older Jason kills people. Cass can tell, of course, but Dick and Damian can tell because they also used to kill people, too. Damian is suspicious and trying not to be. Dick wasn’t bothered by it until he started noticing how bothered everyone else was, but now he is tense and fidgety, looking constantly around the room. He’s climbed on top of a shelf—usually he stays closer to the ground when they are watching a movie together.

Tim and Bruce are both trying to pretend that everything is normal, but Tim can’t stop staring at the older Jason.

Cass’ phone buzzes, and she looks down. The cat emoji means she has a text from Selina. She looks at it for a minute, then holds the phone out to Jason. “Don’t know that word.”

“Wrong Jay, Cass,” says Tim.

She looks up. “Can this Jay not read?”

Older Jason takes the phone. He’s smiling, a tiny bit, for the first time since he started talking to Alfred earlier. “She wants to reschedule.”

“Oh.” Cass takes the phone back. “Again?”

Selina is avoiding her. It’s not fair—she can’t tell why unless she actually sees her. And she hasn’t. Her twenty first birthday was three days ago, and Selina didn’t even come. She said something
important came up, and she was going to make up for it by taking Cass to lunch tomorrow. But now she’s not coming to lunch, either. Cass doesn’t understand.

“Cass?” says Jay. Her Jay—her little brother.

“I am okay.”

“Lie,” says Dick from his shelf, and now everyone is looking at her.

“I’m tired,” she says. “Going to bed now.”

Tim catches up with her on the stairs. Tim is a good brother, and he understands that she does not want to talk about things in front of a Jason who isn't her brother. “What’s wrong, Cass?”

“Selina doesn’t want to see me.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Tim says.

“Tim.”

“I’ll make Bruce take care of it?”

Cass nods. That is better. “Night, Timmy. Love you.”

“Love you too, Cass.”

In the morning Bruce takes Red Hood Jason down to the cave to try contacting his friends. Bruce still thinks Jason needs a break, but he has a one track mind and is visibly uncomfortable in the presence of everyone but Alfred.

“So what’s wrong with little me?” Jason asks, unconvincingly casual, as he fiddles with a machine he pulled out of his pocket.

Bruce hesitates, not quite sure how to answer, or how much information his Jason would want him to share. “He never went into the Lazarus Pit,” he settles on, finally.

“Huh. Doing pretty good, then. So you’ve got zombie assassin Dick. Damian and Cassandra have it pretty shitty in most universes, so that makes sense. And Tim—something with the Joker? He has that look around the eyes and the mouth. Prolonged exposure. Plus, some of the universes I’ve seen…”

“Yes,” Bruce says quickly, not particularly wanting to hear what the Joker has done to other Tims, Tims he can’t save.

“But me. How’d he wind up with you?”

“I’m dead in his universe.”

Bruce still isn’t sure how much information to share, so it’s a relief when Dick and Damian both shout for him from upstairs. “I’ll be right back,” he tells Jason.

Jason waits until Bruce goes upstairs to come into the main part of the cave, where his other self is
messing with the multiverse equipment. They haven’t really interacted yet. He wasn’t feeling great yesterday, anyway, but after dinner he might have pretended to feel a little worse than he did, so he could collect his thoughts and put off actually talking to himself for a while.

“So why do you hate everyone so much?” he asks, and the other Jason jumps—he must not have seen him.

“Who says I hate everyone?”

“Like twenty pages of research when I stole Tim’s phone last night. Plus, you know, you hate everyone. Visibly. You don’t have to be Cass to, like, feel from across the room how angry you are. I mean, I was pissed at Bruce when I woke up and found out I was in a new world and he wasn’t my dad, but all he did to you was set up a guest room.”

The older Jason sighs. “It’s not personal, kid. He just looks exactly like my Bruce.”

“So why do you hate your Bruce?” It hasn’t escaped Jason’s notice that his older self hasn’t referred to Bruce as his dad at all.

“The Joker killed me.”

“Yeah? So? Me too. They say it’s part of the standard Jason experience.”

“So he didn’t do anything about it!”

Jason sits down in Bruce’s chair. This is starting to look like it’s going to be a long conversation. He tries to picture hating Bruce, and fails immediately. He loved his dad, and he loves this Bruce too.

“What did you want him to do?”

Older Jason shoves his hair back, highlighting the white streak they share. (He doesn’t have the J brand in his cheek, though, or if he does he’s better than Jay at covering it up.) “I wanted—I thought—I wanted him to kill the Joker.”

“Oh.” He feels kind of sick, suddenly. Maybe this had better not be such a long conversation, after all. “That’s—that’s it? He didn’t kill the Joker, so you hate him?

“I mean, I—are you okay, kid? You look kinda—”

“You’re so stupid. How can you be so stupid?”

“Stupid? I died. I was supposed to be his son, and he couldn’t even bother to avenge me.”

“Avenge you? You want to be avenged? My dad avenged me, and then he got thrown in Arkham and died in a riot. I would give anything to have the Joker alive still. If I hadn’t been fucking avenged I wouldn’t have lost my dad.”

He doesn’t want to talk to stupid, grown up Jason anymore. He storms up the stairs, running into Bruce halfway up. Bruce catches him by the shoulders, holding him out to study his face. “Jay? What happened?”

“I hate him.”

“What did he say? Did he hurt you?”

Jason shakes his head. “I just—I want—Come back upstairs with me? Dad?”
“Sure, Jay. I’ll send Alfred down to keep an eye on him.”
“You’re my dad,” Jason says immediately. “I’m not leaving you.”

“I got in contact with Kyle,” Jason says when Bruce returns to the cave. “They’re kind of tied up at the moment, but they’ll be picking me up the day after tomorrow. If you don’t mind me staying that long.”

“That’s fine, Jason.”

“Sorry I upset your kid. I do try not to fight with the Bats in other worlds. And I’ve never gotten this warm a welcome before, so, yeah. Sorry.”

“He’ll be all right.” Bruce sits down across from Jason; he seems a little more comfortable now that he has a clear plan. Which makes now a good time to bring up that thing he really, really doesn’t want to bring up. “My multiverse tech was set up in three days with the help of a Bruce who had a lot more experience with interdimensional travel. It’s…limited, and I don’t have the knowledge to develop it further. So I was wondering if you could do me a favor.”

“Come in,” Jason says when there’s a knock on his door, even though Bruce and Alfred don’t knock like that, his siblings don’t knock at all, and he knows it has to be other Jason on the other side.

“Hey,” his older self says. He leans down to pet the cat, curled up on the bed. “So. My Bruce is an asshole, and there are a lot of reasons we don’t get along. He’s a good Batman. And I think he loves me. But he’s not a very good dad. It sounds like both of your Bruces are really great dads, and I’m sorry you lost one.”

Jason shrugs. He doesn’t like to think about Dad. “I’m sorry your dad sucks.”

“Yeah. For one thing, he never let me have a pet.”

“Technically all the pets are from Selina. She’s really bad at saying no.”

“You know,” the older Jason says slowly, “he said I could come visit any time.”

“Yeah,” Jay says. If his dad is really that bad, he deserves to spend some time with a Bruce that doesn’t suck. He doesn’t think he will, though. Jason’s been mad at Bruce before, really mad, but he doesn’t think he’s been as uncomfortable with him as this Jason is since that first night, sitting in the back seat of the Batmobile after trying to steal the tires. “You could visit,” he says anyway. “If you wanted.”
Cassandra waits outside the gymnastics building for Selina to pick her up. Dick went over to his friend Jake’s house after class today—it’s his first time out completely unsupervised, and Cass is only a little worried about it. Bruce will pick him up from there in a few hours.

As soon as Selina walks toward her she sees it. “Selina! You have a baby!”

“I’m going to have a baby,” Selina says. “In about eight months. I’m sorry I missed your birthday.”

“You were hiding. You didn’t want me to know?”

Selina starts walking back toward her car, and Cassandra follows.

“I haven’t told Bruce yet.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow night. After your multiverse visitor leaves.”

“Good.” Cass gets into the car. “Boy or girl?”

“It’s too soon to tell.”

“Bruce will be a good dad. We broke him in for you.”

Selina laughs. “I’m sure he will. Where do you want to go for lunch?”


Damian looks down at Athanasia. She’s just fallen asleep, and soon he’ll have to give her back to Mother—Selina and Cassandra are picking him up and taking him home.

“One more week in the hospital?” he checks. Mother told him all of this earlier, but he was paying more attention to the baby than to her.

“If everything goes as planned,” Mother says.

“When are you coming home?” If Dick and Selina have both asked her about it, Damian probably can too.

“A few more weeks. Your father and I talked about it, and we want to keep Athanasia closer to the hospital until she’s a little older.”

“But you are coming home?”

“Absolutely.” Mother puts her hands on his shoulders; he thinks maybe she’d like to hug him, but Athanasia is sort of in the way. “I think it might be a little awkward living with your Father, but I cannot wait to sleep under the same roof as you every night.”

“Okay,” Damian says quietly. He’s really looking forward to that, too.


Bruce looks around at his family, gathered in the cave. Dick is somewhere in the rafters, probably watching them from a comfortable distance; he’s been a little tense this morning. He had fun with his friend after gymnastics yesterday, and Bruce is optimistic that he might be able to send him to school within a year or so. He and Damian were up late last night painting Athanasia’s nursery—they’d
refused to let him and Alfred help.

Bruce is considering school for Damian, too; they need to talk about it with Talia. He’ll be turning sixteen soon, and getting his driver’s license. It’s only a slightly terrifying thought.

“It’s okay, Bruce,” Cassandra says, leaning over his shoulder. She doesn’t really know, though—he hasn’t discussed this with Cassandra or with Alfred. Only with the older Jason.

Bruce kneels down on the training mats next to Tim and his Jason—his counterpart is in conversation with Alfred, studiously ignoring them all.

“Jason,” Bruce says, “do you remember when I told you that I couldn’t go into the same universe twice?”

“Yeah?”

“The other Jason doesn’t have that problem.”

“Um, okay?” Jason looks over at Tim; Bruce can see the moment understanding dawns on them both. “Bruce. You’re not…”

“If you want to go home—if either of you wants to go back to your Dick, to your Alfred—he’s willing to take you.”

“You’re my dad,” Jason says immediately. “I’m not leaving you.”

“Okay,” Bruce says. “Okay.” He leans forward to hug Jason—honestly he’s not nearly as worried about the possibility of losing Tim. Tim’s never called him an imposter.

“You’re not trying to get rid of me,” Tim says when Jason lets go, “Right? You’re just trying to give me options.”

“Right. I’ll never want to get rid of you, Tim. You’re my son.”

“Okay. Hey, grown-up Jason!”

Jason jogs over from across the cave. He looks a little worried. “So?”

“Could you—could you visit my Dick, maybe? I don’t know why he didn’t come for me. I’m not sure I want to know. It’s better here. But could you—if you ever meet him, can you let him know that I’m alive? That I’m okay?”

“I can do that.”

“Thanks.” Tim gets up and wanders away, toward the corner where Cass and Damian are. They’ll need to talk more later, but Bruce thinks he’s going to be okay.

“Jay? Do you want to do something like that, too?”

Jason looks up at Bruce, then over at his older self. “They think I’m dead. They’ve thought I’m dead for, what, three years now?”

“Something like that,” Bruce says.

“Then wouldn’t it just hurt them more, hearing that I’m alive but in another world, unreachable?”
“I didn’t think about that,” Bruce admits.

“Maybe—maybe someday. But not right now.”

“I adjusted Bruce’s tech so he can send me messages,” his older self says. “Let me know if you change your mind.”

“Sure,” Jason says. He stands, walking slowly in the direction of his siblings, looking up. “Hey, Dickie! Get out of the ceiling! I wanna show you something.”

An hour later two more people appear in the cave. Bruce waits to be sure they are who they say they are, watches Jason go up to them and disappear in a flash of light. Then he goes to join his family.

Chapter End Notes

Idk. Endings are the worst. I was stuck on that last scene forever, and I finished super late last night, and I was too tired for another round of edits.

I talked a little about what's coming next here:
http://iowriteswords.tumblr.com/post/183483166826/writing-updatescoming-up

This story is going to have a sequel. The sequel is not going to be posted any time soon, because of all the projects discussed in the link above. However, the preview will go up on Tumblr in the next couple days. It'll be tagged "Robins and Other Flightless Birds."

End Notes

Updates every Tuesday, probably sometimes more often because I have some short chapters and they make me feel guilty.

Works inspired by this one

Snapshots by Bubbly_Kandy, la folie de la vie by jedormis
(dottie_wan_kenobi)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!