Roasted

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Roasted

by Kathendale, widdlewed

Summary
After finally escaping the Court, Talon knew he couldn't be a Hero. Not with his past. Not with all the death and blood and lives he'd stolen.

So he decided to do the next best thing.

He opened up a café.

Notes

Breathes in. Listen. Just. Listen. This story is going to be crack. There may be some plot, but it's mostly crack. Please try not to take any of this seriously. I'm not that familiar with the current comics or most comics (I just in randomly during the Batman & Robin run with Bat!Dick and Damian) so just. Enjoy. Enjoy and suffer with me because you bet your butts I'll be channeling my daily frustrations as a barista into this fic

ENJOY!

See the end of the work for more notes.
It was a well known fact that Gotham housed some crazy, messed up villain. It was common knowledge that Batman kept other Heroes out for their own protection as it was to protect those he fought in the late hours of the night.

The Villains were the lowest of the low, ranging from child-traffickers to assassins to homicidal maniacs. The Villains were terrifying alone just because of the fact that they were human. They weren’t all meta-humans. They were human through and through and the amount of destruction and death they caused gave reason for concern.

Because of Gotham’s unsavory reputation, new businesses were rare to come by. If it hadn’t been in business for at least three generations, then there was a chance it wasn’t owned and ran by a local Gotham citizen.

On the rare occasion that someone stupidly moved to Gotham and tried to start a business, it’d usually only last a few months before failing. Between the daily robberies and the property damage that insurance couldn’t cover, it was a losing battle.

Until, during the early winter season, a cafe opened. It was a small thing, located in Crime Alley. It was inconspicuous at first glance - looking like a run down building instead of a establishment. People barely batted an eyelash at it - it’d be gone before the weather warmed up.

Except it lasted one year.

Two years.

Three years.

Rumors spread throughout the streets of Gotham and mingled in the cocktail glasses of the underground. The Cafe was off-limits. The Cafe was neutral. Apparently the owner didn’t mind who came in, as long as they paid for their drinks or food and were calm and courteous.
The Joker and Harley Quinn paid the Cafe a visit. Those who had the fortune to witness the event would swear on their lives that it ended with the Joker leaving a generous tip in the tip-jar and Harley promising to return.

It was unheard of. The Joker, known murderer, leaving the Cafe and the workers unharmed and not mentally scarred?

The rumor mill worked harder. Deathstroke was spotted there, despite him not being a Gotham rogue. The Penguin apparently only drank the espresso from that cafe. Poison Ivy had given a few potted plants, nothing poisonous or dangerous, as gifts to sit in the windowsills. Catwoman helped decorate the place during the holiday seasons, offering framed pictures of her black kittens for Halloween or helping to make black cat cookies. Two-Face was almost a permanent resident at the cafe, more so rarely seen away from his corner table than at it.

It was crazy. Unbelievable.

Then Gotham nearly exploded the day Batman trudged in, plopped down at a booth table, and waved for the bruised and beaten Joker and Harley Quinn to join him. One of the brave workers of the cafe (a college student with dead eyes and an even deader will to live) had taken their orders.

It was a tense affair.

After that, more of the vigilantes who roamed the streets started showing up. Red Hood was a common sight, begging the only guy barista in the joint for just one more fucking espresso shot, please! Nightingale was also someone who wasn't surprising to see. He'd drag himself in, slam down three cans of Red Bull or Monster, and stare the barista straight in the eye as he’d whisper, “Fucking murder me.”

No one could say for sure how this cafe came to be, or the secret to its neutrality and success. All anyone could say for sure was that the barista who seemed to live there was more or less the main attraction for the women customers, and the coffee and the food the other reason for anyone else.

As long as Villains and Heroes alike could have a safe haven from the insanity of their lives, then they didn’t care, to be honest.

The coffee was dirt-cheap and delicious and the barista was always friendly and happy to see anyone who walked in the door.
It was amazing.

The cafe was small but well furnished. The espresso bar, imported from Italy and top of the line, was daunting and intimidating in its size and with how many buttons it had. The chairs and tables, a dark mahogany, were brand new from the pristine state. The wall decorations were modern canvases of black-and-white sketches of Gotham in various states, tastefully spread out across the bricks.

The cafe itself had a industrial aesthetic to it, the support beams and instillation uncovered to give it more appeal. Christmas lights and Edison bulbs hung loosely across the beams, strung across to give decent lighting.

Behind the metal, retro-looking counter was a man, his tanned skin almost glowing under the orange and yellow lights of the establishment. His black, thick curls were tucked up under his tan baseball cap. A tan apron was tied tight around his waist, showing off his defined muscles of his arms and chest.

His name tag read ‘Dick’, a smiley-face sticker plastered beside the printed letters. Dick wiped down at the metal counter, humming under his breath. A bell jingled as the door opened, two men in fine-pressed suits slipping past the tables and chairs.

“Heya Dickie,” one of the men greeted, his words stilted by his thick accent, “just you today?” Dick waved, shoving his rag by the cash register as he tapped at the computer screen.

“Yeah,” Dick laughed as he smiled wide to the two, “just me. What can I get started for you?” The two men peered up at the LED light-up menu board hanging overhead, the neon letters written out neatly.

“Uuuuh yeah, gimme a Baby Bat,” one of the men ordered. Dick’s finger hovered over his computer screen, eyebrow raised in amusement.

“Which type would you like? Zombie, Millennial, Once in a Dream, Spoiler Free, or Tantrum?” Dick listed off without thought and the man’s eyes went a bit wide.
“Um.”

His buddy nudged him. “Get the Zombie. You’ve got a long shift ahead of ya’.” He gave an approving nod to Dick, who put the drink order in. “And get me a double shot of espresso.” Dick hummed and put it in. He set to work, dispensing the espresso grounds into the portafilters.

The two men made idle chatter as Dick worked on their drinks. He filled one small to-go cup with two shots, sealing it with a lid. Another cup, he filled with 10 shots of espresso. He lidded that one as well before handing the two drinks over.

“Have a good night!” Dick smiled brightly. “Don’t murder anyone, please!” One of the men saluted as they left, leaving Dick alone again.

The bell rung again as a woman sauntered in, her blonde hair pulled into two bouncing pig-tails. Her makeup, eyeliner, mascara, and black lipstick, looked perfect on her.

“Hiya toots!” The woman greeted, batting her long eyelashes at Dick. “Can you give me The Batman today?” Dick laughed as the woman all but sprawled out along the counter, entering in her drink.

“One dark chocolate peppermint mocha latte coming right up,” he spoke as he went to make it. The woman watched him as he steamed the milk, grabbing two plastic bottles of white chocolate and caramel sauces to drizzle on top of the whipped cream she was eagerly looking forward to. “So how are you today, Harley?”

“Gonna be lots betta’ after I get this drink,” Harley spoke as she tapped a painted nail along the counter. “How’s about you? All by your lonesome?” She eyed the deserted cafe. “Kinda slow for a Thursday night.”

“I think Ivy was doing something tonight. Barely had any of the regulars,” Dick spoke with a shoulder shrug, drizzling the sauces on top of the mountain of whipped cream. Harley made a appreciative noise as he passed the drink over, a wrapped cookie following.

“Oh yeah! Ivy mentioned somethin’ about her newest project. I completely forgot!” Harley faked knocked her head with a laugh. “I’ll keep ya company then until you close!” She bounced over, sprawling out over one of the plush chairs. “Come sit with me, Dickie!”
Dick rolled his eyes, easily sliding over the counter. It was a slow night so he could take the time to rest - it was his place after all. He sat across from her and the villain wasted no time in breaking the cookie into bits, offering Dick a piece of the bat-signal shaped sugar cookie.

“No thanks, Harley. I’m on a strict diet,” Dick spoke with an apologetic smile. “But thanks.” Harley eyed him sourly before popping the cookie into her mouth.

“So, was it slow all day?” The woman broke more pieces of the cookie off, taking small bites while Dick stretched in the chair, his back making a crack.

“Not really. It was pretty steady earlier. I let Jessica go home early - it’s a school night after all.” Dick rested his chin in his hand, humming softly. Harley sipped on her beverage for a moment, eyes dark as she studied the man across from her. “Hm?”

“Nothin’,” Harley argued but her staring said different. “Just. I never asked. What made ya decide to open up a cafe?” She looked around at the decorations, squinting. “Did your kid draw that?”

Dick’s eyes moved to where she was glaring, seeing a black and white sketch of Gotham from a high building. It had been stretched onto a canvas and hung. He beamed proudly.

“Yep! Dami’s so talented.” He looked at the picture fondly. “Why I started this place?” He shrugged. “I grew a passion for coffee. Everyone always tells you, ‘do something you love for a career’. I love coffee, so I opened a coffee shop.” Harley smiled against the lip of her lid.

“I bet your parents love it.”

Dick’s smile widened, just a tiny bit. The two fell into silence, Harley sipping on her drink and Dick watching the occasional person walk past the glass window panes.

It was nice.

"Are you ever going to change the name though?" Harley asked finally.
"I think it's fine," Dick argued. Harley raised an eyebrow and tapped on the cardboard sleeve hugging her cup.

BIG DICK'S CAFE was printed in a wonky font across the sleeve. Dick crossed his arms over his chest defensively.

"It's fine."

"Kids make fun of you."

"When don't they?"

*Ivy makes fun of you."

"..." Dick squinted at the table top. "Maybe." Harley snorted into her mocha drink.

Chapter End Notes

The Baby Bat - various forms of drinks with espresso shots.
Zombie - ten shots.
Millennial - two shots of espresso, four ounces of red bull, and ten ounces of cafe’s strongest coffee - cold brew.
Once in a Dream - french vanilla syrup mixed with three shots of espresso.
Spoiler Free - Lavender powder based milk tea with coffee flavored jellies. Espresso shots are optional
Tantrum - Soy (or almond) latte. No flavor. No sugar. Five shots of espresso.

The Batman is a dark chocolate mocha latte with white chocolate drizzle, peppermint syrup, and four shots of espresso.
Espresso Shot 2

Chapter Notes

Thank you for the interest in this fic! :) It means a lot to me!

Sorry if this chapter is boring. LOL

Dick lived in a small one room apartment above the cafe. This was completely fine. The less he had the better. His small kitchenette was filled with various bags and brands of coffee beans, his most expensive items in the area were the grounder and the keurig and french press pushed back against the wall.

His mini fridge, nicknamed the FRATBOI MACHINE by Jason, contained a carton of soy milk, three soy yogurts, and a rolled up half-empty bag of cereal oats.

His couch was worn and sunken in from years of runaways sleeping on the cushions or nights when his brothers crashed after a particularly heated argument with their dad. A futon was pushed up in the corner of the room, near the window. A stuffed Bat rested against the uneven surface of the padding. A sketch pad and pack of colored pencils were nestled under the futon.

A TV, old and bulky compared to the slimmer models out on the market, faced the window, giving off a glare from the sunlight streaming in through the ruined, broken blinds. DVDs, mostly cartoons, lined the stand the TV rested on.

A small closet was located by the futon, holding all of his clothing and shoes in it.

Every morning at 3 a.m., an alarm would go off. Dick, who’d set it to bring him out of his meditation, would change into a pair of yoga pants and a work-out tank-top. He’d push his hair back into a bandana, make sure his earring was secured against his earlobe, and place non-slip shoes on. He’d make a quick trip down the stairs leading to the outside of the street before entering his cafe.

After slipping into the eatery, he’d greet his employee working the night shift. If things had gone smoothly the night before (as they always did), the ingredients he needed to make crescent rolls would be measured out for him and individually separated into measuring bowls for him to just dump all together and mix with the requested liquid.
While he could easily cheap out and get frozen pastries from vendors for the convenience of it all, there was just something accomplishing about baking his own. With a lot of his items vegan-friendly and gluten-friendly (mostly so he could keep bribing Damian to the cafe), it also made him feel better about knowing exactly what was going into the items he sold.

After mixing, shaping, and setting the oven to the necessary temperature, Dick started on the other breakfast and lunch items. He turned on the coffee brewers, letting them wake up as he moved about to grab the coffee he was going to brew for the day.

He plopped the coffee bags down onto the large surface of his kitchen counter, placing them into the grinder. The quiet of the late-night silence was disrupted by the grinding and crushing of beans against blade. He bent down, grabbing the large coffee filters that’d slip into the filter basket.

The oven dinged and he danced his way over to the trays of crescent rolls. He spun and glided throughout the kitchen, prepping for the day. He grabbed the tofu out of the refrigerator, along with the needed vegetables to make the Southern Tofu Scramble he had on his menu.

By the time he had completed his daily prep, the time on his cell phone showed 5 a.m. The cafe itself was open 24/7 and while he himself could man the night hours, he’d hired two employees to work overnight. They’d all but practically begged him, saying that the late hours fit into their schedules with school. He’d caved and found more free time to look up new recipes or lovingly observe his Bats.

“Hey Boss?” Ketti, one of the college students who lived on energy drinks and the misery of others, popped her head into the kitchen. “Two Capes is here.” Her curly blonde hair was tied back into a tight bun.

“Okie dokie~!” Dick called, doing eccentric lunges towards the door. Ketti giggled and held the door open. Dick came out of the kitchen in a pirouette, stopping the spinning after three rotations. The cafe was filled with clapping. He bowed and looked to the two Capes in his cafe.

Red Hood and...Batgirl?

“What an unusual combo,” Dick greeted as he grabbed his hat from under the counter, tucking it on over his bandana. “What can I do for you two Vigis?”
“It’s too early for this,” Batgirl - Stephanie - groaned as she slapped a 20 on the counter. “Gimme something strong and with enough sugar that I’ll crash by 7 a.m.”

“Gimme the usual,” Red Hood - Jason - called as he leaned against the pastry case. “Got any breakfast ready?”

“You want a sausage burrito?” Dick asked, typing their orders in. While his employees could handle themselves, they knew how much everyone much rather preferred the owner himself.

“Fuck yeah!” Jason’s voice was a rough growl at that and Dick glanced at the two masked customers.

“Did you two just get off patrolling? Together?” He nodded to Ketti, who saluted and disappeared into the back to make the burrito.

“There was some Bird Sightings,” Jason spoke flippantly and only the two Bats noticed the minuscule twitch in the barista’s hand. “So we went to go check it out. Nothing fancy besides a Penguin.”

“Oh.” Dick’s lips twitched. “Well. I’ll go get started on your drinks.” The two moved to a table, nodding stiffly to Two-Face, who nodded over his newspaper.

Ketti came out with a burrito and a muffin. She stopped at Jason, placing the burrito down, before dropping the muffin off to Two-Face. The villain smirked at her and she scampered back to the safety of Dick’s side.

She moved around him fluidly, grabbing the cups and filling Stephanie’s with enough sugary syrup pumps to make it almost half-full, and grabbed a carton of milk to be steamed. Dick smiled, proud, as he worked along with her.

With only Ketti, Jessica, and Morgan in his staff, it’d been easy to get into a groove of how to work with and around them. With his additional acrobatic skills, it was like learning to dance to a new routine. Learn it once and it was cemented in his steps and movements.

“I get off in a few minutes,” Ketti spoke as the door opened, Morgan stumbling in as if she was being half-dragged by an invisible goblin. “I have a sociology quiz today.”
“Good luck!” Dick spoke and reached out, ruffling her hat. She smiled and ducked away from him, rushing to throw herself at Morgan. “If you ever need help, I doubt Harley can’t help a bit!”

“She has a doctorate in psychology, not sociology. Two completely different things,” Morgan grumbled as she clocked in.

“I never went to school so this is news to me.” His two employees laughed at his easy admission of his failed education and he just shrugged.

Not like he needed to learn about the Great Emu War while learning how to slit someone’s throat.

[They were falling. Falling - falling - falling - falling-

SPLAT.

Instead of a sudden rush of noise, it was more of a vacuum, sucking up the echoing screams or sobs. Silence. Silence and a faint buzzing in his ears as he stared, unblinking, at -

What was he staring at?

It reminded him of those wooden art dolls Mr. Haly had in his private tent. Like how Dick would play with them, position them in impossibly funny poses, the bodies of his family - Red red red red were sprawled out in impossibly horrendous angles.

The blood was warm and sticky, more thick that he’d expected. It’d spread and stretched until it soaked his hands and knees. It stretched still and distantly, he wondered if his parents blood was going to devour the entire Big Tent. Erase their murder place from existence. Drown it in their lingering suffering.

A hand touched his shoulder, cold and calloused, and his face was angled up, to the side. His eyes
stared glued to his parents bodies, brightened by the spot-light that was mockingly trained on them.

“Look at me.”

The words, foreign to anyone listening, were like a warm hug around his trembling body. His eyes were torn away from the scene and he met acid-yellow eyes. Like a owl’s predatory glare in the darkness of the night, the eyes narrowed in eager hunger.

“Hello son of Gray,” the man spoke, the Romani rolling off his tongue fluently. Dick couldn’t bring himself to be overjoyed or alarmed - it was rare to find someone who spoke his first language - even rarer for someone to know it so fluently unless they were his father or mother. “You are going to come with me now.”

The man was covered, his hair and face mostly concealed in a large brimmed hat. The coat and scarf he sported looked heavy - thick. His hands were pale and as cold as ice. Dick’s eyes moved back to his parents and he shook his head.

Let him lay with them. Let him sprawl out between his mother and father and close his eyes for a final time.

“No.” The hand jerked his gaze back to the man. “You come now.”

In the chaos of a rushing audience and screaming wails, a tiny pair of blue eyes stared horrified as the man and child disappeared right from the center of the ring.

Another pair of blue eyes, haunted and glossy, shuddered as they too realized the child they were forcing their way towards was gone.

Like thin air, the child was spirited away.

Richard Grayson, for all sense and purposes, died that night with his family.

What was left was a doll, ready to be broken and remodeled to the liking of whoever fancied his
The morning rush always consisted of two regulars - Penguin for his espresso fix, and the publicly famous son of Bruce Wayne - Damian Wayne.

The boy would exit the car he was carted around in, walk in with his head held high, and stare resolutely at Dick until the man leapt over the counter to wrap him up into a hug.

The customers, used to the interactions, who just snicker as the child flushed and smacked at his arms.

“Hello hello Little Wayne!” Dick let go of the child with a beam. “Homework?” Damian pursed his lips before shuffling through his backpack, producing the requested sheets. Morgan got started on the child’s order - a vanilla hot chocolate and a Tofu Scramble - while the man checked the assignments.

“Grayson, I do not know why you desire to-”

“Because for all the money your father has,” Dick cut off with a tap to the child’s button nose, making it scrunch up, “he can’t seem to hire a decent tutor who isn’t biased in their teaching method. Now I may not be a genius-” Damian snorted “-but I do know that this problem and this problem are wrong.”

It was his English homework. Damian scowled. English wasn’t his first language and so, despite his best self-studying or tutoring with Cass, sometimes stumbled.

“Here ya go, Lil Guy,” Morgan spoke as she leaned across the counter, setting the kid’s order down. “If anyone gives you shit again, tell me.” After the child had come in one day during school hours with a black eye, all the girls of the cafe were more than ready to throw down with a bunch of snobby Gotham Academy kids in a alley or behind a convenience store.

Damian sneered, only saying thank you when Dick poked him in the forehead.
“Alright, change that word to ‘braise’ and this word to ‘isle’ and you should be good!” Dick beamed as he handed the papers back. “I’m experimenting with a black bean burger if you’re interested in being my guinea pig? The girls won’t eat it unless it’s red and bloody.”

Damian sniffed, taking a tentative sip of his hot chocolate. “I supposed if you don’t have anyone else who can taste test for you.”

Dick ruffled Damian’s black locks, eyes squinting up. “Here.” He grabbed an offered muffin from Morgan. “Give this to Mr. Pennyworth out there and go. You’ll be late.” Damian wavered for a moment before nodding, rushing out the door. He was gone and Dick huffed.

“You know,” Morgan started innocently, “if you want a kid, I’m more than ready-”

“No Morgan.” Sitting in a table near the bar, a goon with a bloody lip burst out laughing.

Just another morning.

Chapter End Notes

Dick: *pretends he doesn't know any of the BatFam for sake of secrecy*
Batfam: *Hello Darkness My Old Friend*

When is the next update? Who knows.
Will I ever make a longer chapter? Who knows.

Since the ages of the Batfam are a complete mystery to me (Look me in the eyes and tell me with certainty you know all their ages) I'm just going off what I've seen off a ComicVine forum and what other fics have decided. LMAO because, I'm sorry, but Post-52 Dick was 21. Now he's lot in the Rebirth?? HOW OLD ARE YOU ALL?!

Bruce: 45
Barbara: 29
Dick: 26
Jason: 20
Cassandra: 19
Tim: 17
Stephanie: 17
Damian: 10
Alfred: Immortal - fucking fight me he will never die
But if anyone actually does know their ages, I'll totes update this. LMAO Not like I've stated their ages anywhere in the fic yet so we gucci
oof idk man but I'm on a roll. I feel like it's gonna stop soon tho lmao

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[He didn’t feel like Richard. He didn’t feel like Dick. Or Grayson. Or Robin. Or Little Angel. He didn’t feel like much of anything, anymore.

Richard ‘Dick; Grayson died along with his family.

What did that make him?

They called him the Gray Son of Gotham. Talon. Special. Precious.

He didn’t understand what they meant.

They told him he was destined to be Talon. Their Talon. He didn’t know who they were. All he knew was the man who’d come for him - William Cobb. His great-grandfather.

Or so he said. He didn’t have family - not anymore.

Not anymore.

He was numb. In shock, Cobb had said with a hand in his hair. It was heavy and cold - comforting in an odd way. The man had no idea how to give comfort - but touch was all the once Grayson needed when hurt.

He was taken into a Labyrinth.
“What brings you to Gotham this time, Deathstroke?” Dick looked up as a chair was dragged out and a body heavily collapsed against a table.

“I don’t kill and tell, Yoga-Pants.” Deathstroke exhaled loudly and banged his head against the table. “I somehow adopted a teenager. She’s worse than my own daughter.”

Dick leapt over the counter, placing down a porcelain mug of french roast coffee. Deathstroke lifted himself up and sipped tentatively at it.

“And she seems to have a crush on me.”

“Aaaaaw,” Harley and Ivy cooed three tables away. “What’s she look like? Got any pictures?” The two women were quick to hop tables, nudging Dick back.

“No.” Deathstroke took another sip, the girls politely looking away from his uncovered mouth. “She’s a handful. She smokes and has an attitude and if I even look at a woman - she explodes.”

“Sounds adorable!” Harley chirped while Ivy rolled her eyes. “Right sugar?” Ivy leaned against her girlfriend’s shoulder, nodding slowly.

“I see when I’m not needed,” Dick teased, patting the two women on the shoulders before moving back around the counter. He flicked on the TV hanging in the corner, turning it to the news channel.

“And in other news, more graffiti tags have been spotted throughout Gotham. Is this the work of a new group on the rise?”
Dick checked on the pastry case, squinting at a cinnamon roll. Huh. It looked kinda sad. The frosting was lopsided.

“Here with me in Commissioner Gordon of the GCPD. Commissioner Gordon, what do you think of these new tags? Do you think they’re the work of a new drug gang or signs of something...more?”

He was careful in removing the pastries he deemed sad, deciding to just give them away for free rather than pitch them. He whistled to the occupants in the cafe, raising the tray of treats. Harley all but scrambled out of her chair, snatching up the baked goods.

Two-Face slowly lowered back to his chair, dejected. Ivy threw him a cinnamon roll.

“Something more?”

“Maybe it’s a warning to the famous Capes who guard our city? A threat?”

Dick’s eyes snapped up to the TV immediately, hand tensing against the rag in his hold.

It showed images of the various graffitied walls around Gotham. Whoever had taken the pictures were laying them out into order, creating a nursery rhyme.

“Uh Boss?” Jessica poked his arm. “You’ve been wiping that spot for the last two minutes. You good?” Dick jolted, nodding jerkily as he dropped the rag as if burned.

“Oh, yeah, sorry. I - I feel kinda dizzy. I’m going to go sit in the back for a few.” He patted Jessica’s shoulder and slipped into the kitchen, ignoring the curious stares of the patrons. He moved to a corner, sitting down on the tiled floor without care.

He curled up, blue eyes staring blankly into space as he repeated the rhyme in his head.

Who killed the Robin?
‘I’ said the Talon,
Draining his blood by the gallon,
I killed the Robin’.

Against the shadows of the illuminated kitchen, his blue eyes flashed acid-yellow.

He came back out fifteen minutes later. The TV had been switched to Netflix, some random cartoon playing in the background. He patted Jessica again and took her spot at the register, winking when she asked if he was okay.

“I just get weak when I see your face,” he teased and Jessica gave a snort-giggle.

“That’s sexual harassment, Boss.” The girls liked to call him Boss - they thought his name was stupid.

“Correct!” Dick beamed. “Good for you to know that. Make sure you let people know when you’re uncomfortable.” Jessica nodded at him and rolled her eyes to Ivy and Harley, who snickered into their half-devoured muffins.

A random goon stumbled in, looking dazed. Jessica was subtly moved towards the kitchen as Dick beamed at the man, greeting him.

Another normal shift for them, then.

When Dick had decided to open up a cafe, Cass was surprisingly the one to name it.

“You want to call it what?” Jason was sprawled out upside down on the sofa in the family room, Tim and Stephanie engaged in a battle royale type video game on the plasma screen TV. Cass was curled up on the couch beside Jason, painting his toenails a neon pink. Barbara was settled beside her, her chair folded up and leaned against the wall. She was painting Cass’s toenails a lavender
“Bat Beans,” Dick spoke slowly, as if concerned that his brother hadn’t heard him properly.

“No,” Tim called without even looking away from the screen. Beside him, Stephanie hissed and elbowed him to jerk the controller out of his hold. “FUCK! You little shit!”

“Language!” Dick reprimanded with a huff. He placed his hands on his hips, frowning down at them. “What do you think Cass?”

“Big Dick.”

Jason crashed to the floor with a squawk while Stephanie shrieked, Tim’s neck giving an audible crack from how fast he whipped his head around.

“No, no, no, no, no!” Tim crawled his way over with each ‘no’, shoving at Cass. The girl frowned and raised a hand to retaliate. Dick caught her hand and held it gently. “You cannot name it that!”

“Why not?” Dick was the one to ask, genuinely confused. “I like it.”

Bruce walked in-

“You can’t name a food establishment Big Dick!”

-turned on his heel and walked out.

Jason stayed on the floor, laughing so violently his stomach was pushing him off he ground as if trying to perform push-ups.

“Big Dick,” Cass argued, lips pulling into a part. “It’s good.”
“Yeah.” Dick nodded. “I like it.”

“No,” Tim whined out loudly, dropping his face onto the couch cushion. “It’s not okay!” Barbara and Stephanie kept their mouths shut, deciding to focus on picking out other polish colors for each other.


Both Cass and Dick shook their heads.

“Big Dick.” They seemed so adamant about it. Jason was no help at all. Tim didn’t think he was breathing anymore from how hard he was laughing.

A knock at the door drew their attention. Bruce stood there, awkward. “Dick, I want to check your earpiece.” Dick was over in a flash, steps soundless and body so graceful he almost glided over to the man.

“We’ll figure out a better name for you,” Barbara promised with a smile and the two were off down the hall. Bruce led him down into the Cave, where Alfred was standing by a steel table.

“Master Richard,” Alfred spoke with a twitch of his lips, “after the check-up is over, I would like to invite you to join me for a cup of coffee. I’ve recently acquired some Kona coffee beans from Hawaii.” Dick perked up, smiling widely.

“Sure!” He sat down on the steel table, reaching his hands up. Using his fingers, he unfastened the simple black V stud in his ear. The moment the earring was out, his appearance changed drastically.

Gone was the youthful, tan skin and blue eyes. Gone was the defined jawline and toned muscles. Gone was the 6’0 height and the appealing appearance of a 23 year old young adult.

In his place sat a child. Looking no older than 14, he was small. Paper-white skin stretched almost translucent over a wiry frame. His limbs were long and, while defined with muscles, nothing like his brothers. Black and pale blue veins raced up his neck and spider-webbed across his face, making the acid yellow eyes stand out. Their pupils were slit, like a feline, but sharp and narrowed
like a bird of prey’s.

His chest did not move. Talon had no need to breathe. Did not need to eat, or sleep. Did not need to live to be alive. Did not age. Did not feel.

Was not human.

Bruce’s gaze flickered away, Alfred’s lips tilting downwards. Talon just sat still, shoulders hunched, as his father figure conducted the necessary checks on the magic-embedded cloaking device of his. Talon was broken beyond repair and to give him a semi-normal life, they’d had to create a device (with Zatanna’s help) that’d used magic to transform his body into what he’d have looked like if not ruined.

“You never take this off,” Bruce spoke softly as he looked to the computer. “Not even when it’s just the family.” Talon shook his head, expression empty of any emotions.

“Scared.” Talon’s eyes slid to the side. “They’re scared. Of me. Of how I really look. With that—” he nodded to the earring “—they can pretend I am normal. Without it, they are reminded of how I am. I scare them.”

Alfred’s eyes softened in sadness and Bruce opened and closed his mouth before sighing.

“I am not alive,” Talon stated. He’d done so many times since the night he encountered Batman. “I am not alive and they tend to forget that. I cannot feel. I cannot express pain. I’m just repeating emotions I’ve seen at me.”

It’d taken a long time, too, to get himself to stop referring himself in third person. It’d taken a long time for a lot of things to be rewired.

“I died when I was 14.” The Cave was positively still with his soft whisper. “I died when I was 6. The night my parents died.”

Almost childishly, he kicked his legs back and forth. “I am no longer their Talon.” He was still Talon. Always would be for as long as he continued to stay undead. “But I still scare them because I am Talon.”
“Yeeeah, no.” Talon looked over his shoulder. Jason and Cass stood there, Jason’s arms crossed over his chest. “You look like a fucking creep but you don’t scare me like that.”

“Language,” Alfred chided but it fell to deaf ears. Cass slid over, moving to sit down next to her brother. He looked even tinier compared to her solid form and she leaned against him.

“Compromise.” She smiled and lifted a hand, running her hand through Talon’s long, tangled hair. While he kept his hair at a decent length for Dick, Talon kept his hair long and always either out in tangles or in messy buns or braids.

He’d never been allowed to cut his hair - alter himself in any way without the Court’s permission. So, he’d forgotten to care for his appearance.

“Cass was about to draw blood if we didn’t agree to Big Dick-”

Alfred wheezed out a breath.

“-so we decided on Big Dick’s Cafe. You good with that?” Still sitting at the computer, Bruce put his hands to his face and groaned. Loudly. Talon perked up, just slightly, and nodded rapidly.

“Big Dick’s Cafe.” It was an awkward mockery of a smile but neither of his siblings flinched or looked away. “I like it. I like it a lot.”

Three months later the streets were filled with grumbles and whispers over how big a set of balls the new owner of the cafe had to have, naming their place so brazenly.

Bruce just thanks whatever deity that he remained an anonymous owner.

[It was raining. Talon liked the rain. It reminded them of the showers - of water washing away the red warmth that coated them by the end of a Mission. Talon basked under the drizzle, head tilted]
Footsteps sounded heavily against the asphalt of the rooftop and Talon let his eyes open from behind his goggles.

A shadow of a Bat faced them. Ah, it was the infamous Batman that the Court always made disgruntled noises over. He was right on schedule. Talon found something warm in his chest at the thought - not having to chase the man-bat down in the darkness of the chilling night. They stayed perched on the edge of the roof, letting one leg dangle as they faced the night lights of Gotham.

“Who are you?” Batman’s voice was a growl. Beside him, another figure dropped down. Smaller than Batman but no doubt a good few inches taller than Talon. Cloaked in dark grey, indigo, and black, the infamous Bluejay stood tall and curious beside his Bat.

“Batman.” Talon’s voice was hoarse and heavy with an accent - easy to immediately note English wasn’t his first language. “The Court of Owls has sentenced you to die.”

Talon shot up into the air, using the roof ledge as if it were a balancing beam to push himself off of. They flipped over the two masked crusaders, landing in a crouch behind them. Two knives were snug in his clawed palms, glinting against the lights of the Christmas lights strung across the roof.

Bluejay slid in front of Batman like a shield and Talon paused momentarily.

“Not target. Move.” Talon wasn’t told to go for Bluejay. They’d let them live. There was no Order against it. “Now.”

“Fuck no!” Bluejay’s voice was high-pitched and cracked. In the soft drizzle, Talon’s head cocked to the side. What a odd voice.

“Not target. Move.” They repeated the words again. Movement behind Bluejay brought Talon’s attention to the Bat, who shoved Bluejay behind him and lunged for Talon.

Stupid Bat.
Owls were known for being predators. Bats were prey.

Talon met him mid-lunge.

Chapter End Notes

So I'm just gonna go ahead and say - I'm not going off of any comics. This fic is gonna be a hodgepodge of everything. So sorry if anything in this fic contradicts comic events.

Remember, it's crack! :) with a bit of angst and plot. Just some.
During the cafe’s first month, Dick was by himself. He was fine with that - he didn’t need any additional staff just yet. The place was still new and barely had any business. There was a rule to Gotham - fresh blood was usually drained quick enough so no one cared for new businesses.

Two guys tried to rob Dick. He’d almost felt sorry when he’d had to tell them, “Guys my register is literally empty.” They didn’t take well to that.

They’d shot him point-blank in the forehead and made a mad dash with his cash register. Dick had waited exactly one minute before sighing and standing, the opened flesh of his head stitching itself back together. He looked desolately at his blood-splattered equipment and groaned, thinking of the conversation he was going to have to have with Bruce.

Not fun.

He found the men easily enough. They were staring at his empty drawer. He hadn’t been lying - he wouldn’t put any cash in the register yet until he had his first customer.

“I told you.” The two men jumped and whirled to face him, guns trained on him. The man who’d shot him gaped, paling like he’d seen a ghost. “No money.” He used the walls of the alley (it was always alleys these things happened in) to propel himself over the two men. He dropped behind them and was quick in slicing their throats and sliding his blades between their ribs.

They were dead in seconds.

Dick hefted his register up into his arms with a huff. Using one arm to hold it, he pulled his phone out and dialed Bruce.

“Heeey Bruce.” Dick peered at the robbers. “So, there was a tiny issue at my cafe.”
Dick had never seen Jason throw up before - but apparently seeing his blood splattered across the wall and kitchen door of his cafe was enough to send him over the edge. Tim and Cass had just shaken their heads while Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose to hide his concern.

The cafe had finally entered its third year when the infamous Joker and Harley Quinn popped in. Joker was a flurry of loud noises and heavy footsteps while Harley was more silent in her approach to the counter.

Fear tactics. They were trying to scare Dick. Behind him, his newest employee (Jessica, her name tag read), gave a faint whimper. Dick waved a hand and he found a grip latched onto his shirt, clenching tightly.

Oh, she was just adorable.

“Hiya sport,” Joker cooed as he leaned heavily against the counter, arm up and around Harley’s shoulder in support. “Heard this place was nice. Whatcha got that’s good?” His eyes slid to Jessica, lightening up at the sliver of fear he saw her direct at him.

“Jessica, go into the kitchen and get started on that cheesecake recipe.” Dick didn’t look away from Harley or Joker.

“But...”

“Jessica.”

Jessica wavered before nodding and scampering into the back. Joker pouted while Harley just tilted her head to the side, studying him.

“What can I get you?” He kept his tone friendly and open, body relaxed. Harley peered closer at him, smile stretching across her painted face.
“Oh Mista J, he’s got the loveliest eyes~!” She giggled and batted her eyelashes at Dick. “I think they’re gorgeous!”

Joker hummed, reaching a hand out. Dick stayed still as the man’s hand touched his cheek, his fingers curling up around his eye.

“Want me to pluck it out for you, Harley dear?” Joker smiled, all crooked teeth and a nasty gleam in his eye. Harley squealed in delight. Joker added pressure to his fingers.

“What can I get started for you?” Dick repeated, not even the slightest bit concerned with the fingers slowly digging into his eye socket. The clowns paused.

“You’re no fun,” Joker mumbled and withdrew his hand. He rubbed at the back of his neck. “I don’t - gimme a coffee? With five sugars and three creams?” He suddenly looked extremely uncomfortable and misplaced. Dick put the order in and stared expectantly at Harley.

“Caaaan I get that Caramel Macchiato thingy?” Harley twirled a pigtail in her hold.

“Our macchiatos are traditional - only the shots of espresso and a dollop of foam,” Dick recited with a smile. “Is that alright?”

Harley blinked. “No, the caramel macchiato. Caramel. Macchiato.” She spoke it slowly, as if he hadn’t heard her. “Y’know, like what Starbucks has.”

“Our Macchiatos are traditional - only the shots of espresso and a dollop of foam.” Dick stared her dead in the eye. “If you are looking for the Starbucks styled drink, that’ll be a caramel vanilla latte with an extra shot of espresso.”

Harley frowned. “No, I want the-”

The exchange went on for five more minutes before Joker grew bored and raised a hand to silence Harley.

Only to howl when his hand slammed into the counter, knife impaling the back of his hand into the
Harley reeled back in alarm, eyes wide as Joker gripped at the knife’s handle. Dick huffed, seemingly put-upon with Harley.

“I’ll make you the caramel vanilla latte and you’ll like it.” He reached over, batted Joker’s hand away, and pulled the knife out without any effort. Harley gawked at him, something bright in her gaze, while Joker cradled his hand to his chest.

“Take a seat wherever and I’ll have your drinks out in a moment.” He tossed a rag at Joker and turned to make the drinks.

Both Harley and the Joker were a little bit in love by the time they left. How could they not be when they’d met a normal (maybe) human who didn’t take any bullshit?

That day Dick gained two more regulars.

“Have you thought about renting out the building next door?” Killer Croc had been the one to ask, surprisingly. It was a slow day. Besides him and Two-Face (who all but lived there), Catwoman was sharing a table with Ivy and Harley. Nightingale was laying face down on the table, an empty energy drink can by his head.

Dick kept sending the vigilante concerned looks. After making sure he was breathing, he turned to the reptile-like man.

“Um. No?” Dick crossed his arms, tapping his chin in consideration. “What would I use it for?”

“You could expand,” Harley suggested, curling Ivy’s hair through her fingers.

“Maybe?” Dick tilted his head to the side. “I don’t really get that busy though.”
“A cat cafe!” Catwoman suddenly shrieked, slamming her fists on the table. “You could make a cat cafe!”

“Wha-” Dick’s eyes went wide.

“I’ll go get the cats!” Catwoman hopped up from the table, the customers looking at her in alarm. “It’ll be purrfect!” She rushed out of the cafe.

“She’s joking right?” Dick’s expression twisted into one of horror. “Oh my god, she’s joking, right?”

Silence met his hysterical question.

“SHE’S NOT JOKING!”

Nightingale jolted up with a snort.

Somewhere, Bruce felt a migraine coming on.

[Bruce took one look at his newest ward and fought to pinch the bridge of his nose. He was hauling Jason around like the teen was a doll, keeping him tight to his chest.]

“...Dick,” Bruce started cautiously. For all the man-handling and bad blood between the two, Jason seemed oddly content in Dick’s hold. “Whatcha doing buddy?”

Dick blinked owlishly at the man, moving to position himself between Bruce and Jason.

“Bonding with my new owlet.” His voice was blank. Bruce gave in and rubbed at the bridge of his nose.
“...Is Jason okay with this?” He watched as Dick nuzzled his face against Jason’s neck. Jason stared blankly at the ceiling, lips pulled into a thin line.

“This is my life now,” the crime-fighting teen spoke blandly. “I am oddly okay with this.” Dick just nuzzled closer to him, eyes all but daring Bruce to tear them apart.

“Alfred!” Bruce cried out finally. “Dick won’t let go of Jason!”

“Oh for heaven’s sake.”

The bell chimed as the door closed softly. The air was filled with a buzz from the illuminated light bulbs, making a soft lull sound off like a mother humming.

“You shouldn’t be here.”

The child leaned back against the handrail of the door, looking out of place.

“It’s two in the morning, Owlet.” Dick looked up from his book. Damian could make out Emotional Intelligence for Dummies before the man closed his book.

“...can...” Damian shifted his footing. The cafe was empty, surprising him. Even Two-Face’s table was empty. It was just Dick.

It was kind of lonely.

“What’s up, Damian?”

Damian. Not that title of endearment he was adamant about using. Damian stepped further into the
cafe and Dick was quick, launching himself over the counter before the child even knew what was happening. He picked Damian up, depositing him down on the counter top. Eye level with the child, he cocked his head to the side in a owl-like display of flexibility. “Talk.”

Damian looked down at his hands, picking at his cuticles. His cheeks heated slightly as he all but childishly swung his dangling legs. He - he made a mistake. He shouldn’t have come here. Cold hands cupped his cheeks and Damian’s gaze met shocking yellow.

“What’s wrong, Owlet?” Damian’s shoulders slumped at the familiar name and he leaned into the hold.

“What’s wrong, Owlet?” Damian’s shoulders slumped at the familiar name and he leaned into the hold.

“Can you teach me to make coffee?”

His father loved drinking it. Alfred would often lose himself in a conversation about the beans and the temperature of the water and the various types to brew it. Drake wouldn’t - couldn’t - function unless he all but had the caffeine injected into his veins via IV. Todd and Fatgirl always held a civil conversation if it involved the liquid. Cain, on any given day, could easily be found with a mug of it.

It was a link chain in their family and Damian felt...lost, not being able to drink it.

He could, if he wanted to. He just...disliked the bitterness of it and the man before him was the only one who’d ever made him a drink he didn’t immediately dislike or force himself to find a appeal to.

“...You want me to...teach you to make coffee?” Dick’s face blanked. He didn’t know how to express himself with the sudden request. Damian allowed the man to reconstruct a proper mask of confusion and curiosity.

“Yes.” Damian let his eyes drift away from the man. “Please.” A cold hand moved to press against his forehead and he scowled. “I’m not sick, Grayson.”

“Just making sure. You snuck out at two in the morning to ask me to teach you the tricks of a coffee maker?” Dick bumped their foreheads together for a moment before slipping away from the child. “Come on.”
“Where?” Damian hopped down off the counter, watching as Dick flipped off the ‘OPEN’ LED sign. He locked the front door, turning the lights off.

“To my place. You’re going to bed.” His tone was solid. There was no arguing out of it. Damian stayed where he was, despite knowing he was facing a battle he could never win.

“Grayson-”

Dick was in his space again in a second, scooping him up. Damian tensed before flailing, snarls escaping him. Dick just tightened his hold and walked the wiggling child towards the kitchen exit. He scaled the fire escape, all but tossing Damian into his open window.

Damian tumbled onto the futon, blinking dazed up at the ceiling. Blankets fell on top of him and Dick sat near the edge of the couch-bed, staring at him.


The child’s mouth snapped shut and he studied the man for a moment before turning on his side. He reached out, wrapping his hand around three of Dick’s fingers.

His skin was so cold. Damian squeezed the digits tightly, silently hoping to let his high body heat soak into the icy appendages.

As Damian drifted off, Dick smiled gently. His eyes glowed yellow as he moved to stare into the shadows of his apartment.
Extra Shot

Chapter Notes

Happy Holidays and a Happy New Year! I was away visiting family so I didn't have time to upload anything LMAO

But I really wanted to have a kinda flashback chapter. Oof hope y'all like it! :)

Chapter warnings: Not really graphic depiction of self-harm but it's kinda disturbing, description of vomiting.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He awoke to light.

Black spots were an immediate assault against his vision as he clamped his eyelids back shut. Shuffling sounded above him, a few knots to the left.

“Hey Batman! I think it’s awake!”

More shuffling. Heavy footsteps. The feet dragged against the flooring - their heels scrapping with each pick up of the leg.

Another set of footsteps - lighter. They made a gentle patter, steps more fast in their descend and ascend.

A shadow fell over him. The burning red hue against the endless black lessened up. Maintained breathing, not too heavy or shallow, echoed in the buzzing room.

“Are you sure?”

He knew this voice. Batman. Why-
It came back to him like a stab to his skull.

Oh. He'd been sent on a Mission by the Court for Batman’s head. But that hadn’t happened.

Bluejay got involved and - Talon remembered screaming, Batman’s gruff voice downright terrifying, and then black from the injury sustained to his head.

“The...guy’s eyes snapped opened. I saw it!” Bluejay’s voice. He sounded congested - his tone nasally.

“Hn.” The shadow faded, leaving just the intense illuminating bulbs. Then the lights dimmed and Talon’s eyes opened wide.

No burn or sting from too bright lights. Perfect. The shadow came back and Batman towered over him.

Talon tried to move. A crack resounded as his arm popped out of its socket, wrist and clawed hands contained in metal contraptions bolted to the metal table. Yellow eyes flickered downwards. Legs were in the same position.

No problem.

Talon moved, feeling that distant tug of muscles and ligaments tearing as he began to try and sever his arm from his body.

“OH MY GOD!” Bluejay’s voice was a shriek of something - Talon couldn’t tell what. Batman clamped a hand down, hard, on Talon’s chest and stilled him.

“Stop.”

It was a growl, forceful and low in timbre. An Order if Talon had ever heard one. He froze, slumping back against the table. An Order was an Order and Talon would obey no matter who spoke it.
“Did he just try to…?” Bluejay’s voice trailed off. “I think I’m gonna be sick.”

“Who are you?” Batman demanded, ignoring Bluejay’s commentary in the background. Talon couldn’t spot the child - he must be somewhere out of sight.

He remained silent. Predatory eyes rolled lazily about his surroundings, cataloging it all. White walls, glass pane stretching from one corner to the next, medical supplies. An infirmary of some sort?

“Answer me.” That commanding growl was back, demanding attention and answers.

Too bad he was asking the wrong questions.

“...what are you?” It was Bluejay who’d asked it.

“Bluejay.” Batman didn’t sound pleased at his sidekick interfering. “Leave.”

“What?!” He sounded so offended - voice raising into a yell. “No! You were the one-”

“Talon is Talon.”

Something in him was weird - itching to answer that child’s voice. There was a quality of innocence in the words spoken, layered under heavy curiosity and skepticism. Something about the child made his chest ache and tighten and collapse and inflate all at once.

He did not understand why.

“What’s a Talon?” More shuffling and the child was leaning over the table, a decent sized bruise forming along their left temple. Inside the restraints, Talon’s fingers twitched.

Why?
“Talon is Talon. The Court of Owls’ Talon.” Talon kept his eyes trained on Bluejay, tracing their domino mask and bruised cheek. “You have been hurt. Did your Grandmaster punish you?”

A small part of Talon rose like a coil of heat at the thought. It was strange.

“Wha-?” Bluejay recoiled. “Um.” Batman huffed and guided Bluejay by his shoulder, leading him away. “Whoa whoa! Hold up! Batman!”

“We’ll finish this later.” The room was bathed in darkness and Talon stared blankly up at the annoyingly white ceiling.

Talon had engaged Bluejay during the Mission. He'd made sure to dodge all attacks by the child. So how had they been hurt?

In the darkness, a growl emitted from his throat.

“So how old are you?”

Bluejay sat on the edge of the cot beside the table, swinging his legs childishly.

“Talon does not understand.” Talon watched him, noting the bruise was fading to a blotchy yellow color. Something warm and heavy settled in his stomach at that. A gentle purr resounded and the child stopped short.

“Did you just-?” Bluejay stared at them, face scrunching up. “You purr?”

The peace was ruined.
“Richard Grayson.”

Bluejay tensed slightly at the sudden entrance of Batman but relaxed immediately as the man walked between the two, gaze going between them. Talon’s narrowed eyes snapped to Batman, something swirling in his toxic gaze.

“Is that his name?” Bluejay asked curiously, his legs starting up their back and forth momentum once more. “That sounds familiar.”

“The Flying Graysons.” Talon’s face pinched up. “From Haly’s Circus.” Batman studied his reactions. “You were six years old.”

“Richard Grayson is dead.” Talon let his eyes slip closed, something cold and shocking banging against the inside of his temple.

“You’re Richard Grayson,” Batman argued, tone border lining on cautious. Talon’s fingers and toes curled.

“Richard Grayson is dead,” he repeated.

“No he isn’t.” Batman hovered over him, tone a growl of impatience. “You’re right here.”

Talon finally opened his eyes.

“No.” The word was whispered in a soft, broken breath. “Richard Grayson is dead.” His eyes burned into Batman’s masked ones. “All that is left is Talon.”

“Tony Zucco.”

Batman looked up from the computer. Talon had been bound to a rolling chair, pushed around by
Bluejay after three weeks of being kept captive.

“What about him?”

Tony Zucco. Tony Zucco. Why did that name sound so familiar? Turning back to the monitor, he typed the name in.

Tony Zucco, a no-good thug who'd been behind the murder of the Flying Graysons. Found dead with his throat slit open a year after the deaths.

Batman had been investigating the murders and the sudden disappearance of their child when the death had hit the news. After that, life and more pressing matters got in the way until the missing Grayson was forgotten.

“Talon disposed of him.” Talon was watching Bluejay again. Batman had been worried, at first, when he noticed how focused the assassin was on his child. But the caution had slowly eased when he noted that Talon was almost….monitoring the kid, like a mother would their wayward toddler at the neighborhood park.

It was fascinating and disturbing all at the same time.

“Owlet, stop.” Bluejay was messing with the BatBike (as Bluejay had cheekily named it), a screwdriver in hand.

Batman jolted up straighter while the screwdriver fell to the cave floor with an echoing clank. The two looked at Talon, their expressions varying.

Bluejay looked weird - his mouth open and eyes wide behind his mask. Not scared, Talon instantly noted. Something else.

“What did you just call him?” Batman snarled low. More questions, not that Talon minded. His entire captivity was just non-stop questions needing answers. It beat going back to his coffin, at least.
“Owlet. My Owlet.” Talon felt his shoulders twitch up. He'd been doing that recently - hunching into himself when Batman or Bluejay said something in tones that felt like acid on Talon’s bones.

Apparently it was defensive, if what Batman typed up on his computer was to be true.

“...why?” Bluejay had moved to perch by Batman’s chair, hand gripping the man’s cape. Talon cocked his head to the side.

“Mine,” was all a reason Talon could give.

“Content?” Talon blinked, nose scrunching up as he hugged Bluejay - Jason - to his side. Jason, holding onto one side of the book on basic emotions in his lap, nodded.

“Yeah. Like. Hm.” Jason tapped a hand to his chin, unmasked face turning to the book in concentration. “Uuhh. When you are laying in your blanket nest and it is really warm and you don’t wanna move? That’s content.”

“Oh.” Talon ran sharp nails through Jason’s locks, being gentle when the tips grazed along his scalp. “Then I am content with you, Owlet.”

Bruce, watching the two cuddle by the fireplace, quirked a tense smirk at them. “Just him?”

“Master Alfred too-” A pause- “And you, Grandmaster Bruce,” Talon added on as if an afterthought. Bruce didn’t know if he liked that or not.

The first time the Wayne family discovered that Talon couldn’t eat food, Alfred looked ready to single-handedly take down the Court.
It’d been the third day since his release to wander the manor with Jason, following him like a lost puppy.

Alfred, having been put on Talon’s ‘Do Not Engage’ list, had greeted the two in the kitchen. He set a plate of fruit down for the children, watching as Talon observed their Owlet eating a strawberry.

“You want one?” Jason asked, noticing the unwavering yellow eyes on him. Talon blinked, slowly, and looked between the hand holding a melon cube to the plate. A good couple of awkward silence followed the question before Talon nodded once.

Jason pushed the plate closer to the assassin and he picked up a watermelon ball, popping it into his mouth.

Not three seconds after he swallowed the fruit did it come back up, black liquid tinging the bile and strings of saliva. The melon ball was coated in the thick goop, Talon’s hands hovering over his mouth in a aborted attempt to stop the sudden spew.

Jason cried out in alarm and worry and the two adults in the house were quick to get to the assassin’s side and access the situation.

“Talon forgot,” Talon muttered out, shrinking back away from Bruce with something open and hurt in his eyes. “Talon apologizes and awaits punishment.”

“I certainly think not!” Alfred snapped out, standing between the two. “There will be no punishments here. Now, dear child, what did you forget?” Talon relaxed under Alfred’s gaze and was subtle in his movement to be closer to the elderly man. A clawed hand reached out and gripped at the black tailcoat of the man’s uniform cover and looked at the black puddle.

“Talons do not eat,” he recited emptily. “Talons are not alive so they do not need to eat.”

“My word…” Alfred’s face shut down into a careful mask of indifference. “I will clean this up and you two will relocate to the study.” He was gentle in unlatching Talon’s hand, feeling the cold appendage go limp under his hold. He patted the teen on the head and sent him off with Jason.
“I’ll study this,” Bruce mumbled to the quiet kitchen air, kneeling down to inspect the black liquid. “See what it is and if it can be reversed. It’s...horrible, what had been done to him.”

“Indeed.” Alfred’s tone was final and cold and he went to get the mop and rag.

Walking into the pitch black kitchen at 4am to see glowing yellow eyes was bad for one’s heart. Alfred nearly punched the child, seeing him perched on the island while all but swaddled in the flying elephant fleece blanket Bruce had gotten him. He was quick to flick the lights on, Talon’s eyes squinting at the sudden brightness.

“Master Richard, what are you...doing here?” Alfred looked at the kitchen - it looked untouched. Talon shifted, moving to cross his legs as he shimmied closer to the edge of the table. He’d rather the child not sit up on the table at all but - choose your battles.

“Talon does not sleep. Talon would like to watch you make breakfast.”

_Well, at least the lad’s forming interests and becoming curious on his own_ , Alfred thought as he nodded, moving to the pantry to retrieve his apron.

“I was thinking french toast this morning,” the butler spoke as he tied the strings around his waist. “Master Jason is a fan.” Talon slid off the table, neatly folding up his blanket as Alfred moved about to get the needed ingredients.

“French toast.” Talon blinked and tilted his head to the side. “Coffee?” Alfred paused in grabbing the container of coffee grounds, looking to him. “Grandmaster Bruce drinks coffee, yes?”

“Yes.” Alfred’s lips thinned at the title. “And just call him Bruce.” He internally winced at the informal name that slipped past his lips.

“Bruce.” Talon moved to Alfred’s side, watching him scoop out and measure the grounds. “Why measure them?” He leaned over, sniffing at the aroma. “Smells like...hazelnuts?”
“Correct,” Alfred praised with a smile, shifting slightly to let the assassin watch easier. “It’s a hazelnut blend that Master Bruce is quite taken with as of late. As for the measuring - you can’t just willy-nilly pour water into a clump of grounds. The perfect coffee comes down to a science, my boy.”

Talon just stared.

“Once it is done, you can taste-” He stopped himself. The child couldn’t eat. Damn the Court.

“Talon would like that.” Talon shifted his footing, looking suddenly hesitant. “Talon...feels they could hold it down.” Alfred raised an eyebrow and silently debated on the pros and cons.

He decided it was worth cleaning up that black goop again, if it meant the child could at least feel some semblance of normal.

Alfred showed the assassin the french press, explaining the art of making a perfect cup of coffee. Talon listened intently, nodding along and asking questions while the water boiled in the kettle.

Ten minutes later and Talon was staring down at a small cup of coffee, smelling the rich aroma as it coiled up in steamed wisps. He raised the cup, inhaling the smell. He took a painstakingly slow sip.

Alfred watched with bated breath as Talon’s eyes went wide, cup shuddering in his suddenly trembling grip. A soft gasp left his lips as thick black trails formed and slid down his scarred cheeks, pattering against the cup and into the dark liquid.

“Master...Richard?”

The cup fell and shattered against the clean tile as Talon scrambled backwards, slamming his back into the island. Trembling hands reached up, brushing against the black liquid leaking from his eyes. Gasping hiccups escaped his still chest, making the rapid-up and down heaves awkward to watch.

Loud echoing wails rang throughout the kitchen as Talon buried his face into his clawed hands, crouching down to curl into themselves. Bruce and Jason threw themselves into the kitchen, batarangs in hand. They froze at the sight of Talon hysterically crying.
“It tastes good,” Talon choked out, rubbing at the black liquid with his pajama sleeves, staining the clothes. “It tastes really good.”

“Oh Master Richard,” Alfred murmured and gathered the child into his arms, squeezing tightly.

That day, Talon found a new interest in coffee.

Chapter End Notes

Timmy's chapter will be the next extra shot chapter. Might do that in like, three chapters or something idk man

Have a wonderful rest of the year!!
Chapter Notes

Happy New Year!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[He leaned up against the rigid wall of the fountain, curling into himself as the silence around him buzzed. He’d taken gulps of the water, desperate for something to tide his cramping stomach over.

Now he just felt nauseous and wanting to rip his own stomach out.

“Who killed Little Robin?”

The voices were back, taunting him. Teasing him. Whispering secrets and soothing words of comfort in his ears when pain became a constant for hours on end.

“I, said the Talon.”

He curled tighter into a ball, letting a tiny whimper escape.

“Draining him by the gallon.”

A clawed hand clamped down on his arm, yanking, and he screamed.

“I killed Little Robin.”

The hands grabbed and groped and pinned him down and cut him open. The world was a blur as he screamed, begged, calling for his parents.

Then blissful darkness.
“There are lots of reasons coffee can taste bitter.” Damian looked up from his sketchbook, pencil posed over the curve of Dick’s nose. “It can be the water temperature, the coffee itself being burned…”

He was sipping on a giant mug (a gag gift that he took seriously), eyes half-lidded against the steam coiling against his face. Damian continued his sketch, a cup of chocolate milk and donuts beside him. Since he didn’t need to eat, Dick rarely kept food in the apartment. He’d surprised Damian with homemade donuts, knowing the child liked the sugary dough.

Of course, he’d made sure they were vegan for his tiny child.

Damian continued his sketch, letting the sound of Dick’s voice wash over him.

“My first coffee was a hazelnut bend,” Dick was saying as Damian shaded his jawline. “Alfred made it for me to taste. It was Bruce’s favorite at the time.”

“Hazelnut?” Damian looked up, blinking for a moment when he noticed that one of the man’s eyebrows were a few millimeters higher than the other. Damn. He gently erased the lines, trying not to smudge the pencil marks. “They make hazelnut coffee?”

“It was a blend, yeah.” Dick took another sip of his coffee, eyes closing as he let the hot liquid run down his throat. Damian made a quick sketch off to the side of his serene expression. “Whatcha drawing, Owlet?”

Damian hugged his sketch pad to his chest, hiding it from curious eyes. “Nothing, Grayson. Mind your own business.” Dick raised an eyebrow before nodding, leaning back away from the child.

“So, another thing to take into consideration is the type of grind you want. You have a fine ground and a course ground and-”
Damian leaned back against the wall and let his pencil go free, basking under Dick’s gentle tone.

“*My mother used to call me a nickname,*” Dick mused aloud as he threaded the needle through the fabric, stitching black and red together. “*I can’t remember what it was, though.*”

Damian settled on his stomach along the futon, sketching the man sewing. Batman had finally approved to allow Damian out for patrol - only for the entire family to realize the child didn’t have an alter ego ready to go.

Dick had been ecstatic, swooping in and all but screaming at the top of his lungs that he was making Damian’s costume. He nearly snarled like a dog at Bruce and Alfred when they tried to argue. Damian had allowed it, stating he had sketches already done.

Alfred hadn’t let Dick make Tim’s costume when he started out and he wasn’t about to let the chance slip away again.

Thus, they were holed up in his apartment, Dick struggling to straighten out his stitches while Damian lazily doodled and shaded random drawing.

“Do you remember her at all?” Damian asked. The subject of mothers was still a sore one - but he was curious about the former Talon’s past.

“Not really.” Dick paused, staring off into space. He visualized brief flashes of bright colors, of yellows and reds and greens. Of plush carpet under his bare feet in a tight trailer. Of hot-plate made mac-n-cheese.

Of gentle fingers in his hands. A soft voice whispering a name he couldn’t grasp. It slipped through his fingers like strips of papers fluttering in the wind.

“Do you miss them?” The child set his pencil down, eyes wide in that childishly innocent way that made Dick want to entrap him in his arms and never let him be hurt.
“No.” Dick closed his eyes. “Any feelings I had for them were rewired out of me. Talons do not have families. Talons do not have parents. Talons are not human and therefore do not have precious people.”

He vaguely recalled crying for his parents, back in the days of trapped white walls and endless light and voices cooing at him. He vaguely recalled screaming at the top of his lungs for his mother when the Talons swooped down on him, intent on training his reflexes and their knives and claws dug in too deep.

He vaguely recalled black hair spilling over a tan shoulder in thick waves, of stubble on a pale chin, of warmth and safety and love.

Damian just stared at him for a moment. Despite his rather horrible relationship with his mother and his grandfather, he couldn’t imagine not having any sort of feelings for them. He couldn’t even fathom seeing images of his mother and not feeling that weakening bubble of longing and want of her comfort.

“Is it strange?” Damian propped up, crawling closer to look at the vest coming together. “That you think of your parents as strangers?”

“No. So, Owlet, what will be your field name?” Dick was good at changing the subject, all light toned and soft smiles. Damian was secretly impressed.

“I was going to use Owlet.”

“No.”

It was growled out, feral yellow meeting wide green.

“No. They will find you. Use you for the name. No.” Dick shook his head, hunching into himself. “No. They can’t have you. My Owlet. Mine. My child. My Robin-”

The air tensed and Damian rocked back on his haunches, eyes wider. “Robin?” Dick looked lost, dropping the fabric in his hands as he turned his gaze to the wall.
“...Robin. I- I was her Little Robin.” Dick let out a exhale. “Oh. I remember.”

Damian shifted on the futon and paused as Dick opened his arms out. Damian hesitated for a moment before crawling forward, letting himself be slotted against the man’s side. It was cold and hard and like hugging a rock. Damian couldn’t be more comfortable.

“My Little Robin.” Dick whispered into his hair. “My mother used to tell me how Robins were birds of divinity. They represented spiritual rebirth - of divine sacrifice. Renewal and new birth.” His hands rubbed mindless circles along Damian’s back and arm. “If you’d like, I would like for you to use the name Robin.”

“Robin.” Damian stared into air. “Batman and Robin. Batman and Robin.” He tested the name out, feeling something in him warm up at the thought. “It’s like a protective charm.”

Renewal and rebirth. Wasn’t that fitting for Damian and Dick, trying to be everything they weren’t raised to be.

“Yes, it is.” Dick let his grip around Damian slacken and the child rolled out of the hold, nearly impaling himself on the needle strewn about the futon. Dick let out a wheeze of alarm.

“Fine. Robin it is.” Damian smiled, small and tentative. “I heard Father named the others. How sad is he going to be that you helped name me instead.”

Bruce was devastated.

Tim Drake, not Nightingale, wandered into the cafe. He looked like Death, prominent circles under his eyes and his complexion almost sickly pale. Dick looked up, did a double take, and rolled his eyes.

“Can I get a quad shot of espresso?” Tim asked Jessica, who eyed him with a look of pity that only fellow college students could muster.
“Yeah, gimme a sec.” Jessica squeezed around Dick, grumbling that his butt was too fat for him to just stand right in the middle of the tight space, and went to make the drink.

“Here,” Dick spoke, handing over a panini sandwich. He made sure Tim took the napkins offered, the teen raising an eyebrow at the heavy fill to them. Peeking into the bundle of napkins, he saw Dick’s apartment key. He raised his gaze to Dick’s expectant one.

“Ten minutes,” he bargained and Dick raised a unamused eyebrow.

“Two hours.” He swiped the to-go cup from Jessica. “I’ll make you a new drink after.”

“One hour and I’ll only take 2 shots then?” Tim took a bite of his sandwich. Dick studied him for a moment before nodding. Jessica watched, used to the weirdness of her Boss and the various customers and regulars that came through. Tim left, Jessica frowning at the abandoned drink.

“Sorry,” Dick spoke and took a sip of the bitter drink. “Kid looked ready to kneel over.” Jessica nodded in understanding.

Fifteen minutes later, Dick excused himself to his apartment for a moment. The cafe was empty, save for Two-Face in his corner, so Jessica just waved him away.

The climb up the steps was a breeze, his footfalls light. He’d memorized all the squeaky steps and floorboards by the second day he’d moved in, so he took care to walk lightly. He slipped into his apartment, finding the door ajar. Tim was sprawled on his stomach on the futon, snoring.

“Oh my Owlet,” Dick sighed fondly, moving to adjust Tim. Luckily, or maybe not, Tim was a heavy sleeper during his first four hours of sleep. Unless a bomb or gunshot was sounding, he could be manhandled.

(And yet the moment Jason stepped foot in the mansion he was up and alert, to the never ending bemusement of Dick).

He draped his elephant blanket over the teen, smoothing a thumb under a dark circle. He frowned. He really had to monitor his Owlets more often. He sat at the edge of the futon, running his fingers
through Tim’s locks.

He moved, sliding off the futon to settle down in front of the slumbering teen. Resting his arm on the futon, he nestled his cheek against it, smiling faintly at Tim’s snores.

He sounded like a kitten. It was so freaking adorable.

It was unbelievable to think that this crime-fighting genius slumped over on his futon was the tiny creepy child he’d met all those years ago. Dick continued to run his hand through Tim’s hair, humming softly as the skin between Tim’s eyebrows crinkled up. He smoothed a thumb over the wrinkled flesh, making shushing noises to ease the slumbering teen.

God, he loved his children. His brothers. His Owlets. He loved them so much. He moved up on his knees, pressing a kiss to the teen’s forehead. He was silent as he slipped back out of the room, not noticing the blue eyes that watched him leave.

Four hours later, Tim stumbled in and begged for an energy-infused coffee. Ketti laughed at his bed head.

At least his complexion looked a bit healthier.

It started with a text message.

**BaBaBabsSheep**

Hey D, we have a Happy Meal issue.

Dick blinked at the message, checking the cafe. Catwoman was sharing a table with Two-Face, trying to draw him into a game of scrabble. It wasn’t going so well. He looked over to Morgan, who raised an eyebrow as she looked up from her own phone.
“Mind if I make a call?” Dick asked and Morgan laughed.

“You’re the boss, Boss. Go ahead.” She flashed a thumbs up and Dick slipped through the kitchen to exit the building. Tapping the call icon on Barbara’s contact profile, he pressed the phone to his ear.

“Hey Babs,” Dick breathed out as he fiddled with his earring. “What kinda Happy Meal?”

Happy Meal. Code for the Joker.

“A Kid’s Meal and a Chicken Nugget combo.”

Robin and Nightingale. Dick’s grip on his phone tightened.

“What’s JayJay doing? He can’t go pick them up?” Sometimes Dick hated having to be subtle and invasive over the phone but paranoia was never easy or friendly to deal with.

“He’s busy dealing with Dad. Dad doesn’t want to make anyone upset.” Jason wants to kill Joker once and for all while Batman was still adamant about his One Rule. Meanwhile, his Owlets were at the hands of the Joker.

Dick hummed.

“I’ll go get them then.” He heard Barbara inhale sharply.

“Dick, I don’t-”

He ended the call and slipped his phone into his pocket. He went back inside and grabbed three 24 ounce paper cups. Morgan watched, hip pressed against the counter, as he brewed up two coffee and a hot chocolate.
“Late night coffee run?” Morgan joked and Dick smiled. It didn’t reach his eyes.

“Yeah. I regret giving people my number with the offer of delivery.” Morgan laughed loudly at that. That had probably been his worst decision for the company ever.

“You dug your own grave. Who ordered it?” Dick could see Catwoman and Two-Face trying to be innocent in their eavesdropping. He flashed them a knowing smirk.

“Joker.” Morgan winced and wished him good luck. Dick hummed and left, keeping his baseball cap on.

He might as well not pass up a chance to advertise as he prowled the streets.

“Three drinks it’s Red Hood,” Nightingale whispered to Robin, who grunted as he tested out the restraints again. The two were chained up to chairs, back to back. The lighting of the warehouse was dim.

Sitting in the shadows on a crate, the Joker sat and listened.

“Obviously not,” Robin snorted as he gritted his teeth. His shoulder was dislocated. Yep, it was dislocated and struggling wasn’t helping at all. Blood lethargically leaked from the gash along his forehead, where the Joker had smashed a metal baseball bat against him. His body ached and throbbed. Breathing hurt and pulled at his burning ribs. Probably broken. Hopefully not - he didn’t need a punctured lung.

Nightingale must look the same or worse. He’d been getting wailed on by the bat by the time Robin swooped in with a flying kick. No doubt he’d need intensive medical attention once they were rescued.

Joker, content with listening to the two, raised a single eyebrow in curiosity.

“Four hot chocolates,” was all Damian said as the metal double doors slammed open, one falling off the rusted hinges. It clattered against the ground with a echoing ping and three pairs of eyes met a beaming face.

“Delivery for Mr. Joker!” Dick called, stepping over the fallen door and making his way over to the three. “I have two coffees and a hot chocolate.”

“Wha- why?!” Nightingale squeaked out, his voice wavering as his face crumpled in pain. Dick’s smile sharpened.

“Dickie Boy!” Joker cooed as he tossed aside his bat. “What a pleasant surprise!” He jumped off the crate, making his way towards the man. “How’d you find me?”

“A little sheep told me,” Dick answered airily and handed a coffee to the Villain. His eyes flashed to his Owlets and for a split second, his face went blank. “So, how about you let them go? I dislike my customer count declining.”

The Joker looked at Dick for a moment, squinting as he sipped at his coffee. “I don’t want you going out of business. But first, let’s chat.” He reached out, throwing an arm around the barista’s shoulders.

Robin growled low in his throat. Nightingale shushed him.

“I never get to see you outside of the cafe! Let’s have a few beers, swap some stories!” Joker lead him over to where he’d piled the crates up, making a table and chairs of sorts for the two. “What’ya say?”

“How about no.” A shadow fell upon them and Batman stood over the unconscious Joker, looking between the three. “...what are you doing here?”

“Helping,” Dick answered easily, handing the cup holder to Batman. He took it, sniffing at the larger cup. Sipping at the black coffee, he watched Dick flawlessly tear apart the chain links as if they were wet paper.
Dick knelt down, peeling back Nightingale’s cowl just a bit to see his eyes. Pupils were uneven - concussion. He checked his face, cataloging the bruises and broken skin. His hands ghosted down the Hero’s front, stopping when he chanced upon a bruise sticking out or when he caused a whimper to sound.

Batman was checking Robin, announcing aloud what was wrong with his partner. Dick cupped Nightingale’s face and pressed a kiss to his cowled head, humming.

“Oh my little Owlet,” he breathed out, eyes flashing yellow as his gaze slid to the downed psychopath. “Want me to finish him?”

“No,” Batman snarled and Dick tensed. “No killing the Joker, remember?”

Gaze narrowing into slits, Dick nodded stiffly and gingerly picked Nightingale up, being gentle as he shifted him into a position that wouldn’t jostle his injuries too badly.

“No killing the Joker,” Dick intoned emptily. “Talon remembers and understands.”

[He stared at the coffin, mind peacefully blank. Around him, the people he had come to care for sobbed and mourned. He brushed a hand over the sleek, carved stone of the grave marker, eyes tracing the name engraved.

“Joker?” Dick breathed out softly to Bruce once they’d move a little ways away, watching everyone say their goodbyes. Bruce nodded stiffly, head bowed and lips almost white from how thin he’d pressed them.

Talon nodded and turned to leave, eyes glowing yellow. He had a clown to behead.

A hand latched onto his shoulder and he hissed animalistically at the grip, glaring into Bruce’s icy gaze. “Let. Go.”
“You are not killing the Joker,” Bruce snarled low, stepping closer to the assassin until they were almost nose-to-nose. Talon’s mouth opened to snap at the man. Not kill the man who brutally murdered his Owlet? His Owlet. “That is an Order.”

Just like that Talon’s face fell blank and his eyes shuttered in their sockets.

“An Order.” Talon’s voice was empty of emotion. “Understood. Talon will not kill the Joker.”

Bruce nodded, reluctant, and released Dick. Dick stepped away from the man, creating distance.

“I think I feel hatred for you,” Dick intoned thoughtfully, words almost stolen by the wind. Bruce bodily flinched. “You do not care for my Owlet as I do.”

“He was my son,” Bruce whispered, words cracking and splattering against the ground like Dick’s parents. “Don’t act as if you loved him more than me. You’re just a broken toy.”

Dick could tell, the moment the words let the man’s mouth, that he instantly regretted it. Dick inclined his head. He did not care what people said about him.

He didn’t not feel enough about himself to care.

“I may be a broken toy,” Dick was in Bruce’s face in a flash, hands twitching to sink his claws into the man’s chest, “but at least I didn’t treat Owlet like a soldier. You loved him? You shouldn’t have let him out in the first place then.”

He turned and left.

The next day, he found a dingy apartment on Crime Alley with a empty lot underneath it. For a few years, that lot would remain empty, almost teasing Dick.

It was perfect.]
this was supposed to just be crack...how did angst get in here?
As it turned out, Catwoman was not joking about a cat cafe and within the month, Dick’s anonymous backer had bought the empty building beside the cafe and had already made plans for the feline establishment to go in.

Everyone ignored the Penguin who muttered, “But I’m allergic” in favor of throwing out ideas for the interior.

Robin, surprising everyone, was the most vocal besides Catwoman.

“We should have a few cat towers,” the little bird prattled as he sat on the counter top, Catwoman beside him and nodding along. “And a few shelving spaces. Cats like high places - it gives them comfort and control. Also, we’ll need at least 40 litter boxes. It always recommended to have two boxes per cat-”

Dick just nodded along, goofy smile on his face. Robin kept saying ‘we’. He seemed too invested in this idea. It made Dick so happy.

It made him so happy.

Who cared if animals had a natural detest for him due to his undead nature? It was worth getting constantly scratched or bit if it continued to bring smiles to his Owlets faces.

[Tim burrowed deeper into his blankets. He still wasn’t used to sleeping in the manor yet, even more so in a warm bed that radiated home and wasn’t just a vague object of rest. Beside him, back against the headboard, Dick continued to read. His eyes glowed dimly and Tim watched, wondering if he could see in the dark.

“Tapetum lucidum,” Tim whispered softly. Dick blinked and looked down at him. In the darkness of his room, he reminded the child of a giant owl.]
“What?” Dick cocked his head to the side unnaturally, adding to his avian characteristics.

“Your eyes. Can you see in the dark?” Tim sat up on his knees, hugging the blankets around him tighter. Dick poked at the side of his temple, tracing the prominent veins.

“Yeah?” Dick frowned. “Why?”

“Tapetum lucidum. It’s how animals can see in the dark. Light reflects off a retroreflector directly behind the retina, increasing the light available to the photoreceptors.” He sounded like he was reciting a book, eyes closing as he recalled the information. “It contributes to the superior night vision of animals, like cats. Or owls.”

Dick quirked his lips up. “Owls, huh?” He ghosted his claws over his eyes.

“Owls are also color blind,” Tim blurted, cheeks heating in the darkness of his room. Wow, way to go, nerd.

“What do you know?” Dick gave a laugh, raspy and awkward and fake. “I am too.” Tim’s eyes went wide.

“You are?” He breathed it out in a gasp of shock. His eyes were just like an owl’s.

“Yep. I only see in black, white, and shades of grey.” Dick turned his head towards the window, thoughtful. “But I remember what certain objects are supposed to look like.”

Like blood. And sunflowers. And the sky on a clear day.

“Hey Dick?” Tim inched closer and the man turned to look at his hunched form. “How comes you always say you don’t feel things when you do?”

Dick went rigid and he blinked, once, slowly. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I mean, since I’ve met you, you always say how you can’t feel. How you don’t have
emotions.” Tim curled a bang around his finger and fidgeted in discomfort. “But that’s a lie. You
do have emotions. If you didn’t, you wouldn’t have brought me here.” He looked down. “You
wouldn’t be watching over me while I sleep because I’m scared of sleeping by myself.”

Timid eyes met glowing yellow. “You wouldn’t go to Jason’s grave and just sit against it for hours
on end.”

Dick was up and out of the bed in a moment, moving to the window.

“Talon does not feel.” Tim sighed, hearing that empty mantra. “Talon does not feel. Talon is not
human. Emotions are for humans.” He grabbed Dick’s pillow, hugging it to his chest.

“But you aren’t Talon,” the child whispered and the recited words cut off abruptly. “You’re Dick,
right?”

“I.” Dick floundered for words- “Yes. I’m Dick.” He exhaled. “I’m Dick, not Talon.” His
shoulders slumped. “But. I...Can I feel?”

“Why wouldn’t you be able to?” Dick moved back to the bed and Tim wiggled back, instantly
slotting against his side after he crawled back into the sheets.

“Am I allowed to feel?” Dick whispered softly. Tim nestled down against his chest and hummed in
thought.

“Don’t see why not. Hey, that song you sung the other day?” Dick hummed. “Can you sing it for
me?”

Tim shifted, getting comfortable, eyes closing as a Romani lullaby began to roll of the assassin’s
tongue.

Despite his responsibilities in Gotham (protecting his Nest and his Owlets) and to the Cafe, Dick
actually took a weekend off every month to visit other cities. He’d look up the most popular coffee shop/cafe in the area of the desired city and go visit it, hoping to see what they were doing to cause such success.

So, during the second weekend of December, Dick packed up a backpack and went to the manor.

6am hit and Alfred wasn’t surprised to see Dick in the kitchen, coffee brewed and scones in the process of rising in the oven.

“Good morning Master Richard,” Alfred greeted and Dick was quick to pull out a seat for the aging man. He hesitated only for a moment before sitting down, taking the offered cup of coffee. He inspected it, inhaling deeply the slightly sweet scent of chocolate. He raised an eyebrow.

“Dark chocolate blend, Master Richard?” He took a curious sip before humming. “Splendid choice.” Dick flashed a proud smile before sitting down across from the butler.

“Hey Alfie,” Dick began innocently, “may I kidnap Dami for the weekend?” Alfred took another sip and his lips quirked at the corners.

“You’re asking me? Why not Master Bruce?” He watched Dick tap his fingers against the island, looking thoughtful.

“Cause you rule this house with the grace of a God and no matter what Bruce wants or thinks, you’re the final say in anything.”

Alfred didn’t hide his smile. Indeed.

“Please still run it by Master Bruce beforehand. I have no problems with him going on a cafe adventure with you. Where are you going this time?” Alfred took another sip.

“San Francisco,” was the airy answer as Tim stumbled into the kitchen, looking like he’d only gotten ten minutes of sleep. “Owlet, go back to bed.”

“I slept three hours,” Tim argued as if that was a decent amount of time before he slumped down
against Dick’s back, hugging him around the shoulders. “I smell coffee. Gimme.”

“Manners, young Master Timothy,” Alfred warned as he moved to get a cup for the sleep-deprived teen.

“Sorry Alfred. Please?” Alfred sniffed and nodded, handing the cup over. Tim practically inhaled the coffee, groaning as he moved to slump against the table.

“I love you,” he breathed out to the cup. Dick rolled his eyes while Alfred checked on the scones. “So why are you here so early?” Tim looked to Dick, who took his own sip of his drink.

“Cafe Adventure weekend. Dami’s turn to come with me,” he explained as he downed the last of his cup. Tim hummed.

“Dallas was fun,” he reminisced lazily. “Remember that pie shop in the Bishop Arts District?” Dick gave a faint moan at the memory.

“Their cold brew was amazing,” he agreed with a faraway look on his face. “How was the pie again?”

“Amazing and I want to steal their recipes,” Tim breathed out, wiping a thin trail of drool from his chin. Dick laughed.

“Grayson, Drake,” Damian greeted, clinging to Bruce like a koala as the man shuffled his way into the kitchen. The child looked sleepy, a bruise almost swelling his left eye shut. His nose was scabbing and his arm was bandaged. His right leg was in a clunky cast. Dick’s eyes narrowed. “What are you talking about?”

“Cafe Adventures,” the two spoke at once and Dick was out of his chair in a flash, arms raised to take Damian. Bruce stopped and glared challengingly at his eldest. Dick stared back steadily. Damian rolled his good eye while Tim snorted into his mug.

“Dick, he is my son and if I wanna hold him, I will damn well do it without you swooping into snatch him up,” Bruce snapped as Jason dragged himself in, groaning loudly as he stretched his arms over his head.
“Just give him the damn kid,” Jason grumbled as he moved to give Dick a hug, ruffling Tim’s hair afterwards. Alfred just shook his head, pointing wordlessly to the coin jar on the top of the fridge. Jason tossed two quarters in. “Cafe Adventures? Is it the weekend already?” Dick nodded, still in a standoff with Bruce. “My turn then.”

“No, Dami’s,” Dick argued and then frowned, moving his eyes to the child’s injuries. “...Or not. Patrol go bad?”

“Two-Face,” Bruce grunted, setting Damian down on a stool. He shifted, wincing. Dick’s eyes flashed yellow.

“Jason, you come with me then,” Dick grunted and pouted, moving to sit beside Damian. “You’ll get next month, okay Owlet?” He ran a hand through Damian’s wild locks. “For now, get better.” He let his family around him reach for the scones he’d made, turning his attention to his cellphone.

“Go pack, Jay,” Dick called, seeing the time. “We’ve got a flight to catch.” Jason shoved two scones into his mouth and scrambled out of the kitchen. Dick watched, expression serene. “Oh, I wonder if we’ll see the Teen Titans. I’d like to meet Starfire in person.”

Tim groaned. “Uhg, no. Her and Babs are too sickeningly sweet together. You’d vomit.” He ducked under Alfred’s stern glare. “I mean-”

“Babs and Kori are dating?” Jason stumbled back into the kitchen. “When did this happen?” He hefted his backpack up higher. “Let’s go! I want some California grade sushi!” Dick rolled his eyes at him.

“Since August,” Tim replied flippantly. “By the way, these scones are awesome. Vegan?” Dick nodded. “Awesome.” Damian bit into his with a small smile.

“I guess we’ll go, before Jason blows up,” Dick laughed, standing from the kitchen table. He moved around, planting kisses on each member’s cheek (Alfred included) and turned to Jason. “Let’s go.”
Not dead.

He stared at the dug up earth.

Not dead.

Bruce was barking something at him. Beside him, clinging to his hand tightly, Tim looked up with teary eyes.

“Dick?”

Not dead.

Not dead.

Not dead.

Jason was alive. Those were claw marks made by hands - Jason dug himself out of the dirt. Not dead. Not dead. Not dead.

Talons do not die. Jason did not die. Jason is Talon? No.

No.

Jason is alive. Somewhere. Alive.

Owlet is alive. Alive.

Alive.

Not dead.
A blink.

*He was no longer at the manor. Where was his newest Owlet, Tim?*

*Owlet. Jason. Jason was alive.*

*Dick was going to find him. Talon was-*

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“Owlet.” It was whispered softly. *Something in his chest clenched and tightened and collapsed.* “Owlet.”

“Shut up!” His Owlet - Jason - screamed as he waved a gun at Dick. “Don’t call me that!” Batman was screaming something, telling Jason to drop the gun. He was shielding Tim, the smaller boy staring at the scene with wide, unblinking eyes.

“Owlet.” Dick took a step. Another.

**BANG!**

*A bullet sunk into his chest, directly where his heart was supposed to beat.*

*He took another step forward.*

**BANG! BANG! BANG!**
He ignored the bullets finding homes in his body as he wrapped his arms around Jason. His Owlet. He was shaking, breath nothing but wheezing rasps as he switched from a gun to a knife, digging it repeatedly into Talon as if it’d hurt him.

Talon let him, unaffected by the black liquid that slowly leaked from his fast-healing stab wounds. Jason’s hands dropped the weapons, clinging tightly to the older one’s hot pink long sleeve.

“You let me die,” he sobbed out, burying his face into Talon’s neck. “You let me die.” Talon - Dick, he was Dick he couldn’t forget himself right now, clung tightly to his Owlet.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered into Jason’s hair. “I’m sorry. I failed you.”

He’d gotten curious about their next door neighbor, spent more attention on the new Owlet. He’d spent less time with Jason and the Joker had killed him.

“I’m sorry.”

Jason pressed a gun to the side of Dick’s head and Bruce cried out just as he pulled the trigger.

“Boba?” Dick raised an eyebrow at the sign, squinting at the little black pearls pictured in the drink. “It’s...tapioca?”

“It’s good,” Jason stated and tugged Dick in by the hand, finding an empty table. Dick looked around, noting the interior design. He pulled out his handy-dandy pocket book and a pen, flipping it open to a new page. Jason looked over the menu that the waitress brought over, gaze flickering over to Dick’s notes every so often.

He snorted. “What’s that say?” He leaned closer to read the upside down words. “Coloring is bleak? Dickie, you’re colorblind.”

Dick gave him an unamused stare.
“Jeez, you dork.” He tapped the menu. “Look at the menu instead of judging them on their design flaws. You judge them by the drinks and food, not the color of their curtains.” Dick grumbled under his breath but did grab the menu.

“It’s a Asian fusion cafe,” Dick muttered aloud to himself, reading over the list of drinks. “Hm. Okay. I can only have the milk teas-” he huffed- “so you’ll have to taste everything else.”

“Good deal, good deal,” Jason smirked. He rested his cheek in his hand, waiting for the upcoming entertainment.

“Excuse me,” Dick called and the waitress came over, smile wide, “could we get one of everything on the drinks menu?”

Around them, people glanced back, curious and alarmed. The waitress faltered.

“One - one of each?” She repeated, eyes wide. “Are you sure?”

“Yes please!” He smiled wide. “Want anything to eat, Jay?” Jason hummed and pointed to a picture on the menu.

“This sauteed edamame,” The waitress scribbled down the order and took the menus, hurrying away to get the drinks started.

That was how the Adventures went. Dick would order every beverage off the menu, drink the ones his body could handle, and have his siblings finish the rest off and give their honest opinions on the taste, texture, and the like. Then he’d consider how he’d be able to add it to his own cafe and work up plans for new drink ideas.

It was also good bonding time. The last time had been with Bruce, which had been amusing and awkward all at the same time when people noticed him out and about in Metropolis with an unknown man.

The paparazzi had gone wild. Clark had laughed about it for three weeks straight until finally Batman shut him up.
“Joker kidnapped the Owlets the other night,” Dick spoke after a lull in their mood, eyeing the table. Jason grunted.

“Yeah. I was homebound because Bat thought I’d kill him,” Jason grumbled out darkly. Dick nodded. “...why is he still alive?”

Dick’s gaze flickered up.

“Yeah, yeah, I know, the Order. But - you aren’t...you know…” He gestured wildly. “So how comes Orders still stick?”

“Rewired,” Dick said with a rapt to his skull. “Unable to properly fix what was ruined.”

Jason grunted again. He hated it when Dick began to speak in that weird, choppy way he did when he mentally lapsed back into Talon for a split second. Cass did the same thing, her’s more of an excuse because of her learning the language. Dick’s because he was mentally broken, more than anyone cared to dig into or confront.

“So000.” Jason smirked, changing the subject. “I heard from Morgan and Jessica that some girl called Shawn asked you out?”

Dick blinked.

“Shawn Tsang?” Jason raised an eyebrow at the full name. “She commutes from Blüdhaven for work or something.” He shrugged. “She comes in at least two times a week. She’s a nice girl but...” He shrugged again.

“Not looking for a girlfriend?” Jason leered. Dick’s face fell blank. Uh oh. He didn’t know how to properly emote what he wanted to say.

“Not looking for someone to date. I...I don’t do relationships.” He looked at his hands. “I can’t do relationships. I...just don’t feel that way for people. The way they want me to feel for them. I can’t be in a relationship.” Dick shrugged. Jason gave a small nod of understanding.
“Oh, okay. Yeah, that’s fine.” Jason scratched at his cheek. “So, you gonna turn her down?”

“Of course.” Dick sounded as if it was the only option. “Would you like her number?”

Jason exploded into cackles.
Chapter Summary

You know those customers that made you want to just die on the spot because they can't care to listen to a single word you say? One of those shows up.

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much alrambles for the inspiration for a section in this story! Bless you! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Uuuuuum.”

Behind him, he could tell Ketti was double over with a barely concealed wheeze.

“What’s the difference between a cappuccino, that macchiato thingy, and a latte?”

Dick felt his smile strain, just a tiny bit, as the woman squinted at the menu.

“A cappuccino is just the shots of espresso and a cup full of foam. A macchiato is the shots and then a dollop of foam. A latte is the shots, steamed milk, and then some foam at the top.” Dick watched the customer moved her eyes to his smoothie menu.

“Oh no. I don’t like coffee,” the woman pointed out. “What about your espresso latte frap? It’s hot?”

Ketti crouched down, wheezing as she tried to pretend she was looking for something in the small milk fridge. Dick’s eyes went dead, smile still in place.

“It’s iced. It’s a blended ice drink.”
“I want a mocha latte,” the woman decided, looking slightly irritated. “That’s not coffee, right?”

Sitting at his table, Two-Face was unabashed in his gawking, Killer Croc’s own cold brew hovering over his open mouth. The Joker, man-spread for days in the booth, was laughing loudly at the woman’s questions while Harley snickered into Ivy’s neck.

Ivy just sent Dick pitying looks.

“A mocha latte, depending on the size, will have two to three shots of espresso-”

“Oh, no, I don’t like coffee.” The woman’s tone took a nosedive downwards. “What’s that thing?” She pointed to the newly hung BOBA menu, Damian’s artistic abilities used to design the stylish drink board.

“Those are our boba drinks. Boba-” Dick was quick when he saw her mouth open “-are tapioca pearls. They go at the bottom of the drinks listed on that menu. It’s optional.”

“I don’t want those.” Her expression twisted into one of disgust.

“It’s optional.”

Ketti had all but fallen against his leg, tears falling down her cheeks from her silent cackles. The bell rang out, signaling a new customer. She shot up, nearly toppling into her boss from the sudden movement.

Cassandra Cain, Stephanie Brown, and Barbara Gordon stared back at her, Barbara’s expression pinching at the tear-tracks.

“T-take a seat,” Ketti breathed out and went to help them move a chair out of the way for Barbara. The three girls made sure to sit as far away from the Joker as possible. Ivy and Harley sent them sympathetic looks before turning their attention back to the entertainment.
“Can I just get a chai tea?” The woman rested all her weight on one leg as she twirled a red curl along her manicured nails. Her tone turned weird, borderline sultry, “and your number?” She batted her eyelashes at him.

“I don’t disclose my personal telephone number to customers,” Dick spoke as if rehearsing a line in a play. For some reason, he was always getting asked that. “But here is our business card if you’d like to keep it.” He handed the card stock to the woman. She kissed it, pressing a kiss to the rectangle. Her lipstick stained it. She plucked one of the pens up by the register and scrawled out her number.

“Here you go, handsome. Your tip.” She winked at Dick.

“That’s going to be five-fifty-five,” Dick stated without blinking, ignoring the offered card back. The woman’s expression fell and she scrambled for her money. After she’d paid Dick slipped into the back, deciding to let Ketti deal with her drink.

He leaned back against the kitchen wall, sliding down to sit on the floor. Exhaling, he tilted his head back and breathed.

His careful in-and-out breathes soon turned into tiny puffs of air. He curled into himself, snickering silently as he recounted the entire situation in his mind.

Ketti peeked into the kitchen, saw him on the floor trying to be quiet in his hysterics, and burst out into shrieking laughter. She joined him on the ground, on her hands and knees, and Dick’s head tossed back as his laughter ripped through his chest violently. Ketti fell silent and just listened to her boss laugh, looking back to see some of the customers trying to peek in through the opened door.

The cafe was filled with the owner’s echoing, bellowing guffaws. Barbara hid her smile in her hand as she rested her chin in her palm, Cass and Stephanie not even hiding their wide smiles.

Stephanie’s phone was out on the table and unlocked, showing the recording app she had currently up and running. No doubt by the end of the hour their entire crazy family would have the file of their Talon laughing saved onto their phones.
“One Americano, medium size. With three sugars, two counts of almond milk, slightly stirred, a single ice cube to cool it down, and a drizzle of chocolate.”

Morgan just stared, hand hovering over the touchpad. Lex Luthor raised an eyebrow, expectant for his total. “Well? How much is it?”

“That’s going to be four-eighty-nine!” Dick spoke as he gently nudged Morgan out of the way, putting the order in. “Want to add a cinnamon roll or a cookie to your order?” Lex raised the other eyebrow, lips tugging into a sneer.

“No.” He paid and turned to look for an available seat. Dick patted Morgan on the shoulder and sent her to clean up some tables. He got quickly to work, thoughts wandering.

Lex Luthor was in Gotham? Why? It was rare for the man to ever venture into the city without a business deal being involved. Because Lex Luthor and Bruce Wayne owned both small shares of stocks in each others companies, it wasn’t that rare for them to go to each others cities.

Except currently sitting in a booth was Batman and Superman, both looking mildly uncomfortable with the man’s entrance.

Dick placed the drink down in front of Lex, who looked at in curiously.

“You got it right,” he spoke, tone almost amused. “No one gets it right the first time.” Dick raised an eyebrow at the man before nodding and moving back to the counter. He ducked down, grabbing his feather duster.

Time to clean the bathrooms.

He took two steps towards the bathrooms when Superman lurched out of his chair and stormed towards Lex Luthor, who looked like a child about to be rammed by a ice cream truck - absolutely sadistically delighted.

Superman stood towering over the man, fists clenched tightly at his side. He opened his mouth-
SMACK!

-and promptly closed it as he turned slowly to stare down at Dick. Dick, a hand on his hip and another waving his duster, scowled at the Man of Steel.

“Did you just-?” Superman blinked slowly. The cafe was silent.

“No fighting in my cafe,” Dick snapped out, eyes flashing over to Lex Luthor, who’d raised his cup to his lips. It hovered there, brim pressed between his mouth as he just stared right back at Dick.

“But-”

SMACK!

Dick swatted at Superman’s arm with his feather duster. Batman made a weird coughing noise from his table.

“No fighting.” He punctuated the rule with another swat and Superman’s eyebrows rose up high.

“I- it’s Lex Luthor,” Superman tried to justify. Dick raised an eyebrow, looking ready to throw down.

“No.” Another swat. “Fighting.” He huffed, lips tugging into a frown. “This is a eatery, not some fight club. As long as both or either of you are in my cafe, there is no fighting. Got it?” He raised the duster up in a threat. Superman was quick to find his table again, ducking his head down in embarrassment as the cafe exploded into laughter.

Lex Luthor just continued to stare.

“I heard you’re opening up a cat cafe. Leave the expenses to me,” the man finally spoke.

Batman choked on his latte.
Lex Luthor took a sip of his drink, humming in satisfaction. “Perfect.” He smirked at Dick, who side-eyed him hard.

It was one of the extremely rare slow nights. No one was in, not even Two-Face. Dick manned the counter by himself, calling off Jessica off due to the slow traffic.

He leaned against the counter, scrolling through his phone. Everything had been deep cleaned *twice* and he’d already gone through and made fresh pastries and food items. It was *that* slow.

3:54am hit and finally customers showed.

The bell above the door echoed as the glass door was pushed inwards, revealing Batman. Beside him, Robin gave a small wave. Nightingale stumbled in afterwards, Spoiler almost slumped against him as he dragged her to a booth. Red Hood and Black Bat followed, both looking ready to sleep for years. The Signal trickled in last, looking uncomfortable and awkward between the gang.

“Who’s patrolling?” Dick asked as they all clambered into two booths, Batman and Red Hood having a glaring match over the remaining corner spot.

“Batwoman and Oracle’s running surveillance. Will ring us up if anything happens,” Nightingale grunted. “Please tell me I can have my usual.” Batman had won the corner spot, making Signal and Robin sit close by him.

“No, but I’ll make you something delicious and warm,” Dick spoke as he turned to the espresso bar, preparing their drinks. “Robin, come here please!”

Robin shot up, scurrying over quickly. He slipped behind the counter and stood at Dick’s side, waiting. Back at the table, Batman grumbled something under his breath. Signal patted his back and Batman looked a bit better. At least one of his children favored him.

“Go get some plates from the kitchen and get you guys some food,” Dick instructed and Robin
slipped into the kitchen. He came out minutes later, carrying two plates of muffins and a stack of burritos. Dick smiled at him and he went back to the table, laying down his bounty.

Red Hood and Spoiler were like hawks on unsuspecting prey, pouncing on the presented food without prompting. Black Bat snatched up a muffin and nibbled on, forcing a piece in Nightingale’s mouth while he tried not to fall asleep at the table.

Batman snagged a burrito for himself and Signal, watching Robin flurry back over to hover by Dick’s elbow.

Batman watched how Dick would pause, turning to talk softly to the child. Robin would nod, listening and pointing at thing and ask questions. Dick would trail a hand through the child’s hair, that gentle smile, and wonder just what exactly he did right to heal the broken man like he did?

Was it him, or…?

His eyes flashed to his children.

It wasn’t him. He did nothing but bring them together. They all healed each other.

Dick sent Damian back to the table, catching Batman’s stare. While he couldn’t see his eyes, he’d been trained to read body language. Batman was...sad? Why?

He hummed softly to himself as he set the drinks on one of his trays, carrying it over with ease. He distributed the drinks, hiding a smile as his Owlets sipped their mystery beverages.

Batman’s shoulders slumped at his first sip.

“You’re sitting with us?” Nightingale’s head perked up at the sight and Dick smiled, using his hip to shimmy Spoiler and Nightingale closer to Batman. He perched at the end of the booth, sipping his black coffee.
“I like drinking with my customers sometimes,” Dick spoke, letting his eyes close as he inhaled the coffee. “After that drink is gone, you’re going upstairs to bed, Nightingale. Same for you, Robin. Sig, are you wanting to sleep?”

“Uh.” Signal looked at the man. “I...guess? Can your futon hold us all?”

“It’s a big futon,” Red Hood spoke for the man, stretching. “Let’s go Timmers. Time to tell your insomnia to fuck off.” Red Hood all but hauled Nightingale out of the booth, hefting him over his shoulder. The younger teen just hung there, already on the edge of unconsciousness.

“I’d like to stay up with Grayson,” Robin tried to argue, only to shrink away as Red Hood snagged him as well, grabbing him around the waist and resting the wiggling child against his hip.

“Slumber party!” Spoiler gasped with glee, scrambling to grab Black Bat’s and Signal’s hands. “Let’s go before Jay steals the wall spot!” She was quick, abandoning the drinks and food to rush past Red Hood.

“FATGIRL YOU CHEATER!” Robin hollered and in a matter of seconds, it was just Dick and Batman.

“You wanted us alone?” Even under his cowl, Dick could see the eyebrow lifting.

“Of course.” Dick moved to sit beside Batman, feeling him tense for a moment. “I also want some personal time with my father.” He felt, more than heard, the catch of breath as he rested his head down against Batman’s shoulder.

“Dick-”

And Dick was up and across the table with a flip of his body.

“Sorry, I know, public images and all that.” Dick ran a hand through his hair. “I just - I do owe you a lot, B. For, well, everything.” Dick set his coffee down and closed his eyes. “I don’t really remember my parents anymore because of what the Court did but...you helped raise me. Try to fix me. You - god, you are my reason for even having this place.”
Batman swallowed a large lump forming in his throat.

"If I had to describe a parent, it'd be you."

Batman felt like someone had just decked him in the throat. He hid his expression in his cup brim, pretending the steam was making his eyes watery. Dick continued on, expression tender, unaware of the combo hits he was subjecting to his parental figure.

“I know sometimes you and I don’t see eye-to-eye when it comes to my Owlets—”

“My children.”

“-but that doesn’t change the fact that I do love you. Like I love them. You’re my family.” Dick’s smile was wide and genuine. “So stop being all sad, okay?”

Batman snorted and a loud thumping echoed from above them. Dick sighed.

“I’ll close early,” he decided and moved to lock up the place. Batman sat at their table, fiddling with Red Hood’s abandoned chocolate milk. “Let’s go see if they’ve broken the futon.”

“I keep telling you I’ll just buy a bed,” Batman grunted as he helped Dick clean the table. Dick snorted at him.

“Not like I need it. Owlets wanted a futon, I asked for a futon. If they want a bed, I’ll ask for a bed.” Dick nudged Batman. Batman moved a hand, running his gloved fingers through the man’s locks. Dick waved him away and pointed to the exit door.

Soon, he mused silently, as he slipped through the kitchen exit and entered the alleyway. Soon I can tell him. He scaled the fire escape that led to Dick’s apartment window and slipped in, seeing his children in a giant clump of a dog-pile, the broken futon laying under them. They waved at him. He sighed.
For now, he’d keep his secrets close to his heart, in the shadows.

Chapter End Notes

does anyone know how to get rid of that first note from showing up at the end of every chapter?? the drink explanation one.
Extra Shot 2

Chapter Notes

Surprisingly enough, or not, Tim is the hardest character for me to write. Cass is a close second.

Not edited/beta'd.

Edit: has been edited by Kathendale, your friendly neighborhood grammar nazi. Nothing was changed :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Talon was bored. Sorry, Dick was bored. Bruce was at his company most days when he couldn’t work from home and Jason had school, leaving Dick by himself. He shadowed Alfred when he could, but after realizing he made the man slightly uncomfortable with his constant staring, had taken to exploring the compound.

He visited the graveyard, meeting Martha and Thomas Wayne. He met Bruce’s other relatives, finding comfort in the silence. There was something calming in the eerie air that hung over the gravestones. It seemed like another world to an outsider - how the temperature seemed to decline the moment you touched down on the upturned soil or knelt before a marker and talked to the dead.

Until a child was falling out of the tree near the top of the hill. Dick didn’t even think twice about catching the child, arms securing him against Dick’s chest. The child gave an aborted whine, eyes widening as he realized he wasn’t in pain or a splatter on the ground.

“Are you alright?” Dick blinked down at the child. He was tiny. So tiny and light. He squinted. “You are Timothy Drake, from next door. Did you get lost?” He was trespassing.

Timothy just stared at him, eyes wide as his blue eyes slid across Dick’s face. “Your eyes are yellow.”

“Yes,” Dick spoke and gently set Timothy down. “Are you lost?” The child was on the Wayne property now. He could take him to the edge of the compound and show him how to get back to the Drake house but… Dick hadn’t yet left the safety of the manor’s border. Not since he’d been captured and kept with the Bats. Not since he’d been abducted from the Court and told that their treatment to him was bad.
Bad and he couldn't go back. He was Ordered to stay with Batman. In the manor. Until further notice.

Timothy just continued to stare. “What’s your name? You aren’t Batman or Bluejay.”

Dick wavered, eyebrows raising. The tiny child knew who his Owlet and Grandmaster were? Dick crouched down, thankful that even in his murdered state, he was still taller than the child. “Who?”

“Batman.” Timothy shied away, suddenly looking nervous. “And Bluejay. I’ve seen Jason fight some bullies at the ice cream shop before. Bluejay has the same heavy right hook. Batman had gotten hurt one night and Bruce Wayne had a limp the next morning, the same spot that one of Two-Face’s goon’s had gotten Batman with a crowbar.”

Dick blinked owlishly, making Timothy shy further away from him. He was. This child was-

everything the Court would desire in an Owl

-brilliant.

“Where are your parents?” He looked around, hoping to spot the Drake couple. Or any adult, for that matter. Who just let a child wander around? The world was dangerous and Gotham was a nightmare.

“Overseas. I slipped my nanny,” Timothy whispered softly, shoulders hunching up as if expecting to get in trouble. “Who are you?” He reminded Dick of Jason when they'd first met after his capture. It tugged on something in Dick's chest and he didn't hesitate to let his shoulders drop into a relaxed posture.

“I’m Talon,” Dick spoke without thought. “Come here, Owlet.” He held his arms open for the child. Timothy stood frozen, eyebrows pinching. “Let’s have Alfred call your nanny and tell her where you are.” The books Dick had been reading mentioned how children should always be in the presence of an adult. Neither of them could care for themselves so Dick decided Alfred needed to be with them. He was a responsible, sane adult. He’d make good judgement calls.
“...Who’s Owlet?” Timothy asked cautiously. “Me?” He pointed to himself cluelessly. Dick nodded and kept his arms open. Timothy took a hesitant step forward before he straightened his shoulders and narrowed his eyes in courage. He marched up to Dick and allowed the teen to pick him up gingerly, the child’s weight held with one arm.

Timothy’s arms wrapped around Dick’s neck and he peered curiously up at him. “Hey Talon, how old are you?”

“Talon does not understand,” Talon spoke and then tilted his head to the side. He shook his head. Dick. He was Dick. “Bruce says I am eighteen. How old are you, Timothy Drake?”

“You can call me Timmy or Tim,” Tim spoke with a scrunched nose. “Timothy is what my nanny uses when I’m in trouble. I’m 9!” He looked like he was 6 at most. Dick blinked. “And I know that Bruce is Batman!”

“Yes,” Dick agreed. “So smart, Owlet. So smart, little Owlet.” A soft purr escaped Dick’s throat. “Bruce will be pleased that you figured it out so easily.”

Bruce was, in fact, not pleased.

Timothy Drake, 9 years old, became a regular guest at the manor. The day him and Dick met, Bruce and Jason had come home to Tim giggling loudly as Dick paraded him around on his shoulders. Alfred looked at ease, sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee to warm his hands.

“Did you kidnap a child?” Jason blurted out while Bruce mentally noted the Drake heir. "Dude, you can't just snatch kids up! Daaaad!” Bruce opened and closed his mouth, looking completely at a loss.

“Owlet is Timothy Drake.” Jason made a guttural noise in this throat. "Owlet, meet my other Owlet, Jason. Timmy knows who Batman and Bluejay are.”

Bruce and Jason went rigid. Even Alfred stiffened.
“Nuh-uh,” Jason eloquently blurted out. Tim laughed and his giggles turned to shrieks of pure excitement when Dick grabbed him by the ankles and tossed him in the air, tumbling him into his arms.

“It’s true!” Tim giggled breathlessly as Dick held him with one arm. “I have the pictures to prove it!” Dick’s eyebrows raised up.

“Owlet didn’t mention pictures.”

“Pictures?” Bruce looked longingly towards his locked liquor cabinet. Ever since Jason had come to the manor, the hard liquor and alcohol had been locked up and stowed away.

“When you guys patrol.” Tim looked at the two seriously. “You have to be more careful - I followed you three blocks without you two noticing me.”

Dick’s yellow eyes narrowed dangerously, his free hand flexing to sink his claws into something warm and screaming.

“You cannot go out into the city at night, Owlet,” Dick spoke softly, turning Tim’s face to his. “Bad people roam the streets. Especially at night.”

“What the fuck,” Jason just blurted. Alfred pointed to the coin jar. Jason tossed a dollar coin into it without even looking. It clanked loudly in the tense silence of the kitchen.

Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Dick, you can’t just-”

“Owlet is mine now,” Dick cut off the man and Bruce took a moment to be internally delighted that he was growing a personality enough to be able to do that. He wouldn’t have dreamed of speaking against the man even three weeks ago. “His living conditions are not suitable for him.”
“Can I call my nanny and ask if I can stay for a bit longer? Please Mr. Batman-Wayne?” Tim looked at Bruce, blue eyes wide and watery, and Bruce felt his knees go weak. Damn the cute puppy dog eyes.

“Please, call me Bruce. Do not ever let anyone know I’m Batman.” Bruce knelt down and Dick took it as cue to set the child down. “How about we go over to talk to your nanny about you sleeping over? I think Dick and Jason could use a friend.”

“He’s a baby,” Jason pointed out. Dick’s eyes narrowed.

“He’s 9.”

Bruce, Alfred, and Jason took the moment to fully look at Tim.

“He can’t be,” Alfred spoke softly. “He’s…”

“Malnourished,” Bruce finished with tight lips, the word barely making a sound. “Maybe he isn’t being fed properly?”

"My nanny doesn't make me food I like," Tim spoke up, overhearing the two. "So I don't really eat a lot when she cooks. She also always forgets I'm allergic to certain foods...” He rubbed at his arm.

“Oh my, well we won't do that,” Alfred comforted, noting how Jason was now eyeing the guest with something in his gaze. “We'll let you pick out dinner tonight. You are our guest, after all.” Tim looked delighted at the suggestion. Tim turned to Dick and Jason, the three children (or teen in Dick's case) migrating over to the pantry to look through it.

"Master Jason has taken to the child fast," the faithful butler commented quietly. Bruce just hummed.

Dick had too, he didn’t say. It was obvious the moment he’s called the child Owlet.
“When are your parents supposed to be home?” Jason asked, leaning comfortably against Dick’s side. The child questioned looked up from the lined notebook paper, taking in Dick’s chicken-scratched written words.

“Dunno. Ms. Bethany said they should be home by the end of the month.” The child shrugged. “You spelled this wrong. It should be thorough. T-h-o-r-o-u-g-h. Got it?” Tim leaned over Dick’s shoulder.

“Yes. Thank you,” Dick spoke with a smile, nuzzling his nose against Tim’s head. “So smart, Owlet.”

Jason snorted, snuggling closer to the Talon, feeling slightly jealous. Just a little. “You wrote your R backwards.”

“Oh! Thank you, Owlet.” Dick pressed a peck to Jason’s temple. The second oldest of the three preened, sending a glare towards the youngest, and Tim’s eyes narrowed. Sitting in his arm chair behind the three boys, Bruce sighed. Alfred snuck up behind him, snapping a picture of the scene.

Alfred pulled the camera away from his face, smiling softly at the serene expression of peace on Bruce’s face, Tim and Jason both all but squishing into Dick, who was staring at the camera with a sort of protectiveness that could only look endearing on his features.

Ah yes, this was going in the scrapbook.

“Sleepover again tonight,” Dick spoke, patting Tim on the head. “You can sleep with Jason.”

“Why can’t we all share a bed?” Tim asked, pouting. It was his second week since being friends with the Wayne children, and he hadn’t seen Dick during their sleepovers after it was bedtime.

“I don’t sleep,” Dick spoke without pause, blinking down at the child. “So it is pointless for me to be with you two.” When Tim stayed over, Jason wasn’t allowed to go on patrol. Dick preferred that. Less chances of his Owlet being out in the darkness of Gotham, where they were, the better.

“You have to sleep,” Tim whined out, pointing a pencil at the Talon. “It’s impossible for a person
Bruce, Jason, and Alfred saw the immediate change. Tim did not.

“Talon is not a person,” Talon spoke out, tone emotionless. “Talon is not human, therefore does not
sleep. Does not eat. Does not feel.” Piercing yellow eyes bore into Tim’s wide blue and Jason was
in front of their guest protectively in a flash, hands raised placatingly.

“Hey, hey, it’s fine Talon. He was just asking,” Jason soothed and the tension lining Talon’s body
melted away, leaving Dick to frown at the two. “He doesn’t understand the whole zombie thing.”

“What?” Tim squeaked out, looking pale. “Zombie?” Instead of saying anything, Dick gently
grabbed Tim’s hand and guided it to his chest.

Nothing. No heartbeat, no rhythmic movement of breathing, no warm. Just ice cold hardness of a
muscular chest, motionless. Lifeless.

Tim tipped backwards, out cold.

“Oops.” Dick blinked down at the unconscious child while the three other residents sputtered into
action.

Something burning and hot coiled around Dick’s throat at the sight of his sobbing Tim. Tim was
crouched down, Jason fluttering around him in worry. Heavy, loud wails racked the child’s thin
frame.

“What-” Dick swallowed “-what happened?” Bruce planted a hand on Dick’s shoulder, stilling him.
He looked solemn and serious.

“The Drakes were murdered while in Haiti,” Bruce explained softly. Dick’s face fell blank. Oh, it
was just death. Bruce looked sad at the sudden drop in emotions. “Timothy was informed late last
night. For the time being, until relatives can be contacted, he will be staying with us.”

“Understood,” Talon spoke. Tilting his head, he looked back to Tim. “Is it such a bad thing? Death, I mean?”

Bruce jolted. His eyes widened at the curious question.

“Dick...it is. Don’t you remember your parents’ death?” Bruce tightened his hold on the Talon’s shoulder. Dick shifted away, withdrawing from the man’s touch. “Don’t you remember how you felt?”

“No. Talons do not have parents. Talons are not human.” Dick stepped closer to Tim. “Death is a constant for humans. Not Talons. Shouldn’t you be used to it?” He moved to kneel down next to the 11 year old, gathering him into his arms.

Bruce felt his heart shatter. Why were all four of them broken, orphaned in the worst possible way?

It wasn’t fair.

Talon carted Tim around on his back, looking completely at ease despite the child’s growing height. Even after spending a year with the Wayne family, he’d shot up like a weed. Bruce silently wondered if the child would grow any further, seeing as he was already a few inches taller than Dick. Judging by how the Drakes’ looked, he probably wasn’t blessed with height genes but he still looked fairly lanky as it was.

Tim let himself be manhandled, a constant for the two Owlets in the Manor. Some days Talon, and it was Talon during these episodes, regressed, slipping back into their emotionless puppet like state. They spoke in their choppy, broken English, more often than not trailing off into their first language, Romani, Bruce had explained during the first time it’d happen with Jason and Tim.

He’s only let Jason and Tim touch him, hover at Bruce’s heel and not relent to calling him Grandmaster. He’d regress back to how he was that first few months after being captured by Batman.
Tim had grown accustomed to the episodes. Like now. Talon wouldn't let Tim leave his side. Jason was nestled under blankets, having been captured the moment he’d awaken. Tim soon joined the second oldest in the nest of blankets and pillows, nodding in solidarity to the teen.

“This is our life,” Jason had explained the first time it’d happened. “Just go with it.”

Talon joined them in the nest, trying to pull both of them into his lap. It was awkward, Jason and Tim both too tall and wide and long for Talon’s smaller body now. Maybe a year ago it’d have been better, but not anymore. Tim was breaching 12, Jason 15. They couldn’t deal with it smoothly anymore.

Bruce looked over at the nest formed in the corner of his study. He’d stayed home from work the moment he’d awoken to Talon curled against his side, unblinking eyes boring into his sleep-riddled form.

That was the first clue to Talon’s episodes. He never openly entered Bruce’s domain. Not unless he regressed.

Bruce had a lot of theories about the Court. About this Grandmaster. About Talon’s episodes. About the Owls and how they treated their Talons.

None of them made him feel great.

“Grandmaster,” Talon spoke up, resting his chin uncomfortably into Jason’s shoulder, “join us.” It was a rare invitation, literal open arms held out to him.

Bruce sighed, looking at his three children. Jason and Tim both looked pretty content with themselves. Talon just looked haunted, their deathly complexion even more pale if possible. He looked to his paperwork, mentally judging the pros and cons of indulging in childish cuddling.

They did look pretty cozy…And Talon had asked him.

Bruce found himself wrapped around in the blanket and pillow nest, his three kids pressed up against him. Talon’s purrs were soft and endearing, Tim’s head bobbing up and down as he tried to
fight sleep. Jason was already out, drooling against Bruce’s jacket sleeve.

This was fine. This was more than fine.

Another photo was added to the scrapbook.

“Whoa!” Tim and Jason cried out as Zatanna stepped back, smile in place. In front of them, Dick’s small, lithe frame was replaced by a tall, muscular but still slim figure. Instead of barely reaching Batman’s chest, he stood eye-to-eye with the vigilante. His long tangled locks were replaced with short, neat curls styled in a over sweep.

Pale, veined flesh was replaced by a healthy tan hue, predatory yellow eyes instead a clear blue color.

“You look…” Jason’s jaw hung low. “Whoa.” Tim nodded, eyes wide and mouth just as unhinged. Zatanna gave an appreciative hum at the sight of the man. “I knew you were older but….wow.”

“Is it bad?” Dick asked, running a hand self-consciously through his hair. Zatanna gave a tight wheeze at the fluid motion and Batman glared at her as she subtly smacked herself on the cheek.

“No,” Batman cut in. “You look normal, Dick. A mixture of your mother and father.” His tone fell into a soft murmur. “This is how you should look.”

Dick’s smile was more hesitant and Jason made a weird noise in the back of his throat. Because despite knowing that the man in front of him was Dick, Talon, the normally stilted expression looking almost stupidly charming on him. Jason blamed puberty.

“You look amazing,” Tim beamed brightly, moving to touch his arm. “Oh wow, you’re still cold.” Zatanna gave a hum.

“It’s mostly an illusion for appearances. His body temperature and heartbeat are still...normal for
him. So, no warmth. The movement in his chest is part of the illusion - since he can’t breathe.” Zatanna walked around him in a circle, eyes sliding to his backside for a moment. They stayed there until Batman gave a warning clear of his throat. She turned her gaze away sheepish. “It’ll hold. Just do a monthly checkup to adjust it to the normal growth of a person. I’ve worked it with your technology so it should be easy for you to tweak it.”

“Thank you,” Dick spoke sincerely and Zatanna paused for a moment, eyes wide at the genuine emotions in his tone.

“Of course sweetie,” she smiled back.

Jason continued to gawk. Alfred kindly closed his mouth for him.

“...Dick?”

Burrowed under blankets and pillow in the small apartment, two glowing eyes stared out from the shadows. Tim edged closer, kneeling down on the wooden floor. He held back a wince at the cold seeping in through the floor. No furniture and no heat - a literal skeleton to compliment the zombie that resided there.

“Owlet?” Dick let the blankets fall around his shoulder. He squinted at the 14 year old. “What are you doing here?”

“Checking up on you. Jason and I are worried. He's sorry about what happened.” Tim swallowed back the lump in his throat at the memory of Jason shooting Dick point-blank in the head. “Are you okay?”

Dick didn't answer. He just opened up his blankets and Tim moved on reflex. He allowed himself to be cocooned up against Dick, despite the older's body smaller than his own. He was almost six inches taller than Dick now and knew he probably had a few more to go.

It was kinda sad.
Dick hid his face against Tim's shoulder.

“Jason's alive,” Dick whispered. It sounded wet. Tim felt cold patches forming along his shoulder blade. “He's alive.”

“Yeah,” Tim whispered and twisted until he was facing Dick. Black stains leaked along his cheeks. “He is. And he's sorry he hurt you.” Tim smiled sadly. “I brought my laptop. Wanna watch Peter Pan again?”

Dick nodded slowly and Tim escaped the warm nest, moving to his discarded backpack.

“You won't leave me, will you?”

Tim froze at the question. His hands hovered over his bag, gaze sullen as he stared at the zipper. He mentally debated the right answer, knowing he could possibly send Dick into a Talon episode.

“I'll try not to,” he finally decided with saying, smile brittle as he took out the laptop. “But you gotta promise me the same thing.”

“I'll never abandon you. You are my Owlet. Jason too.” Swarmed by his blankets, you'd never believe he was a 22 year old zombie assassin. He looked so fragile, like the smallest touch would shatter him beyond repair.

“Good. Now, can we talk about getting you a bed or something? This place is so sad.”

Dick smiled faintly and Tim burrowed back into the nest.

Chapter End Notes

Ages for this flashback because even I confused myself lmao:

Dick - Physically looking 14, Biologically 18-21 to present age
Jason - Bluejay (12 to 15) Died. Red Hood - 16 to present
Tim - 9 to 13 (Just Timothy Drake) 13 - to present (Nightingale)

Timeline because I REALLY REALLY REALLY confused myself lmao:

Dick met Batman and Jason when he was 15. Jason was 9. Bruce is 34.

Dick was with the Batfam for 3 years before meeting Tim. Tim was just a regular guest to the manor for a year. His parents died when he was 10 (11?). Jason died when he was 15. Tim was 13, Dick was 21.

Jason came back to life when he was supposed to be 16. Tim was 14, Dick 22.

Dick has been with Bruce for 11 years.

Unless my math is wrong, that should be it for right now? Oof I should have drawn out a timeline for myself instead of doing this lmao sorry
Dick was *lonely*. Tim and Damian were off in San Francisco, the older of the two wanting to introduce Robin to the Titans. Due to their absence, Jason was pulling overtime to relieve the slack. So, when he wasn’t out paroling, he was out cold to catch up on sleep. Cass and Stephanie were all but ghosts on any good day and Barbara spent her free time with Starfire.

It’d been the third day without Tim or Damian in the city and Mr. Freeze had stupidly decided to try and enter the cafe.

Everyone knew Mr. Freeze wasn’t allowed in the cafe. *They knew.* He was one of the only people openly banned from entering the establishment.

Well, he’d decided to chance his luck and had tried to enter. Only to nearly get bodily tossed across the street by the infuriated owner, expression down right feral.

“You do not get to come in here,” Dick hissed lowly to the Villain, careful to avoid touching him more than he had to. “You are not welcomed.”

After that, the Villains and low-lives of Gotham made a mental note to stay on Dick’s good side until he got out of his funk.

Now breaching the fifth day, Dick was just wallowing in his loneliness and bitter mood.
It was two in the afternoon. His phone buzzed once. Twice. Three times from his back pocket. Dick washed his hands quickly and checked his phone.

He ignored Ketti and her worried glances as he slipped into the kitchen, expression falling flat as he stared at the screen. And stared. And stared.

His eyes were nearly dripping acid from the sudden change in color. He closed his eyes and slpped the device into his pocket, leaning against the meta table in the kitchen. He stayed there, keeping his head bowed.

“Um, Boss?” Ketti peeked in. “Everything okay?”

His eyes opened back up to let the blue show. He nodded silently and turned to her. Her eyebrows were pinched up in concern.

“I have to leave. Family emergency,” Dick spoke. His voice came out rawer than he was expecting and something in his face must have shown because Ketti gave a soft gasp and scrambled out of the way.

“What?! Go, go! I’ll call Jessica in!” Ketti grabbed at Dick’s arm, tugging him towards the exit. “Get out of here! I’ve got this!” Dick let himself be tugged, using his free hand to untie his apron. He handed it to his employee, dropping his hat and bandana on top of it. He patted Ketti on the shoulder.

“Thanks, Ketti. You’re getting overtime pay.” He slipped out of the kitchen, leaping over the counter. He pushed open the cafe door and left, tugging on his loose hoodie as he pivoted on his heel and walked down the street.

“Yikes,” Clayface whispered, squished into his booth across from Black Bat. She just nodded and checked her phone. Eyebrows raising, she glanced back at where Dick had left.

Yikes indeed.
It’d been a simple text message.

**BaBaBabsSheep**

* Lil Ones had an accident.  
* Dealing with some Blood.  
* Emergency.

There was a list of coordinates attached. Dick skimmed the text message again, his grip on his phone tightening.

Lil Ones were Tim and Damian. Blood was short for Brother Blood.

Emergency meant life or death situation.

“You want me to come with?” Jason asked, helmet resting against his hip. Behind him, Bruce was typing away at his computer keyboard. Dick shook his head, frowning.

“Stay. Watch Gotham. I will collect my Owlets.” His tone was blank, empty, and Bruce looked up sharply. Jason tensed, sinking back away from the two.

“Dick, this is an-”

“Do not Order me,” Dick snapped back before Bruce could finish speaking. “Brother Blood has gone after what’s mine.” Yellow flashed against the blue. “You will not stand in my way this time, Grandmaster.”

Jason winced at the term. Bruce deflated in his chair. A relapse. Of course.

Dick input the coordinates into his phone. He rose his hand, unclasping his earring from his ear.
His image shimmered and glitched like a faulty program, leaving his true form in place.

Talon turned to stare at the two, gaze soulless. Jason averted his eyes, staring at Talon’s shoulder while Bruce just turned back to face the computer.

“I will be back.”

Neither stopped him.

It was easy to kill a cult member and steal the red and white robe they adorned.

Talon pulled it over his figure, hiding his short stature and yellow eyes away into the shadows the cover provided. It was easy to slip into the crowd, pushing forward towards the center platform.

His eyes landed on his Owlets, propped up like dolls on display. Robin was limp, held up only by the restraints on his arms, legs, and torso. Bruises and blood caked along his skin and mask. He’d just recently fully healed from his confrontation with Two-Face, too.

Nightingale looked no better. His arm was bent awkwardly and hung at his side, the restraint forgone due to the broken limb. His legs were bent, buckled, and so all of his weight was being placed by his one restrained arm. Blood dried along his uniform and face, his hair stuck to his skin from sweat and the red liquid.

The rest of the Titans looked unharmed, for the most part. Maybe a bit bruised and ruffled, but fair compared to their Owlets.

Anger flared and coiled in his throat at the sight of Deathstroke up on the platform, conversing with Brother Blood. How dare he act familiar with the cultist, having no care he was putting the Owlets in danger. He made a mental note to put salt in his drink the next time he stopped by the cafe. If he didn’t end up killing him first.
His muscles tensed, ready to lunge as Brother Blood began his preach. The echoing chants of the cultists around Talon were deafening as the man moved to the contraption holding the team hostage.

The machine hadn’t even fully turned on before Robin was screaming in agony.

Something cold in Talon snapped and he was up on the platform in a second, claws digging into one of the guard’s throats. His claws wrapped around the man’s larynx and pulled, ripping it out effortlessly.

The guard dropped in a second.

Talon leapt and flipped over another guard, knife sinking into the man’s neck, severing his spine. The guard crumpled and he threw a knife over at Mother Mayhem, rushing at her when she moved away from the control system.

Talon landed a jack-hammer kick to the machine, breaking it. Flipping off the broken machinery, he threw an exploding batarang (smuggled into his weaponry by Jason), letting it find home in the flowing contraption.

The machine exploded, sending Brother Blood flying away from his Owlets. Talon grabbed a guard two time his size and threw them, hearing a faint crunch as the guard’s body met a wall.

Deathstroke stood still, watching as the cloaked figure almost glided over to the trapped Titans. He leapt up, grabbing Robin gently before the child could crumple out of his restraints. He rested him gently on the ground before doing the same to Nightingale, who groaned into the short figure’s shoulder.

“T-Talon?” Nightingale squinted against his blurry vision, seeing two burning yellow eyes piercing into his masked gaze. “Wha-?”

A clawed, bloody hand brushed through his sticky hair, adding to the mess. “Shush, Owlet. Talon is here.” Nightingale made a soft noise in the back of his throat as Talon stood back up, eyes surveying the team.

“Deathstroke!” Robin’s guttural roar had Talon’s head snapping to see his tiniest Owlet lunging at
the mercenary. Deathstroke sidestepped the child easily, sounding amused as he mocked him. Deathstroke grabbed Robin by the arm, twisting it behind his back.

Talon stood in a fluid motion, Nightingale slumping back against the machine with a drawn out sigh. He rushed forward, sliding in between Robin and Deathstroke. Deathstroke made a curious noise in his throat as Talon threw a punch, making the man dodge.

“Slade…” The blonde girl Talon didn’t know whimpered as Starfire helped her up to her feet. She looked close to tears. “You lying bastard!”

A boulder shot past the girl, flying for the man. Talon was quick, catching the flying chunk of rock before it could get close to Robin.

The area seemed to still as the rock crumbled, leaving Talon’s cloaked form blocking Robin and Slade.

Talon raised a clawed hand, ripping the bloody robe off. The Titans made disgusted noises at his appearance but he paid it no mind, turning to Robin.

“You rest now,” he demanded, marching forward. Robin shrunk back, katana lowering. “Owlet is hurt. Owlet will go rest with Nightingale.” He raised a clawed hand for the sword. Robin reluctantly handed it over and Talon scooped Robin up, tossing him over his shoulder.

“Talon! This is-”

“No arguments. Hurt Owlet is to be benched.” Talon’s head cocked to the side, gaze sliding to Slade, who was watching the two curiously. “Deathstroke will leave before Talon kills him.” He gestured to the slaughtered guards, as if to make a point.

The sharp crack of a bullet sailing through the air was all the notice anyone had before a bullet cut through Talon’s temple, exiting through the other side. He fell sideways in a dead heap and Starfire gave a startled cry. Robin tumbled and rolled out of his hold, eyes widening behind their mask at the sight of the splattered blood and skull fragments.

“Oh no,” Nightingale groaned, using his good hand to hide his face. “Not good. Robin, get over here.” Robin wasted no time, barely sparing Talon’s body a glance. Only Nightingale could see the
crease between his eyebrows he was trying hard to smooth out.

Mother Mayhem stood by the trembling Brother Blood, his body curled into itself. His body was shrivelled and pale, sickly to the eye. The machine must have backfired on him before he could do whatever he wanted to do to the team.

Mother Mayhem’s gun was trained on Talon’s motionless form. Her eyes were wild and bloodshot.

“You ruined everything!” She shrieked. “You ruined everything!” Whatever else she had to say was stolen by the air leaving her. Talon had shot up, doing a handspring to propel himself in front of the woman. His claws sank into her stomach, raising her up.

“Oh my god,” the green Hero, Beast Boy, gagged.

“Wha-impossible. I shot you,” Mayhem spat out, blood trickling out the corner of her mouth. Talon hummed, eyes almost closing lazily.

“Have to do more than that to kill Talon,” he whispered and sunk a knife into her chest, piercing her heart. She fell slack on his claws.

“M-monster,” Blood whispered, wheezing. His gaze was wide as Talon dropped the woman. “Even I wouldn’t have been able to survive a bullet to the head.”

“Lucky you,” Talon mused aloud and stomped down on Brother Blood’s chest, his foot caving into his ribs. The man gurgled and choked on his blood, life leaving his eyes in mere seconds.

When Talon turned back around, Slade was gone and the Titans (besides his Owlets) were staring at him in unmasked horror. Even the blonde, Terra, they sudden recalled from pictures Slade showed off, was staring at him like he were a monster.

Talon stalked forwards and watched as the teens shifted in front of his Owlets protectively. He mentally snorted. As if the Heroes could keep him from his Owlets.

“It’s fine, guys,” Nightingale gritted out as he shifted, hugging his broken arm to his chest.
“Talon’s with us.”

“Another Bat?” The blue-armored one asked. His gaze was narrowed on Talon. “Scarab says he’s not human.” His eyes went wide against the black of his scleras. “He doesn’t have a heartbeat!”

Starfire’s hands lit up with green energy. Beast Boy’s face turned more feral, wild and animalistic.

“Stand down!” Robin snapped as he rushed forward, throwing his arms around Talon’s shoulders. Talon mentally despaired over the fact that Robin was mere inches away from being eye-to-eye with him. “Talon’s an ally!”

“He killed all these people!” Blue Beetle countered, gesturing to the bodies. “I thought you Bats don’t kill?!?”

“Talon is not a Bat,” Talon spoke up, moving to touch Robin’s shoulder. His hand slid down, feeling for any protruding bones in his arm. Robin relaxed under his touch. “Talon does not follow the Code.”

Couldn’t, honestly. It was one of the things Bruce just couldn’t rewire. And that hurt Bruce so much. To know he couldn’t stop Talon from killing, from taking lives. To know he was already too far gone, too corrupted and broken from the Court. It hurt him.

He felt like he’d failed before he even got the chance to try.

“Talon, a little help?” Nightingale grunted and Talon tugged Robin with him as they moved to help Nightingale to his feet. Nightingale threw his good arm around Talon’s shoulder, leaning heavily against him. “Well, this was a disaster.”

Terra flinched.

Talon held Nightingale’s good arm up, making sure the teen put most if not all of his weight against him.

“No more leaving the city without me,” Talon breathed out, tension unwinding from his body.
Robin and Nightingale perked slightly at the change in pronoun.

“Agreed. Father will be very upset. Again.” Robin casted a look at the corpses before looking to Talon. “Thank you for coming for us.”

“Of course Owlet,” Talon purred out, pressing a chaste kiss to the child’s forehead. He did the same to Nightingale’s temple, completely ignoring the Titans. “I’d destroy the world for you.”

“We know,” Nightingale chuckled half-heartedly. “Can we go now? I’d really like my arm set properly.”

“You guys are seriously just not gonna answer any of our questions?!” Blue Beetle exploded. Raven hung in the background, eyeing Talon warily. “He’s not alive!”

“Yes,” Talon agreed and then frowned, glancing down at him. “I will need to be taller to move the two of you.” Because he sure as hell were not letting his Owlets walk after being held captive and nearly killed.

“No-!” Nightingale gave an aborted whine as Talon moved a hand up, earring clasping into place effortlessly. Robin’s mouth opened and closed with a sharp click of his teeth and the Titans gawked as Dick hauled Robin up with one arm, slinging him around his shoulder to let him latch onto his back.

“Oh my god, Dick!” Nightingale hissed. “You aren’t supposed to blow your cover just like that!” Dick just shrugged, easily maneuvering the teen into his arms. With Robin on his back and Nightingale using his arms as a chair, he looked pretty ridiculous.

Didn’t stop the faint purr that escaped his throat though.

“You matter more to me than them knowing who I am,” Dick easily countered and adjusting his footing, hummed low in his throat as the Titans continued to just stare. “Isn’t Starfire Babs girlfriend, anyways? She’d find out sooner or later then.” The alien in question flushed at the mention of her partner.

“Father will be displeased,” Robin sounded in his ear. Dick snorted.
“When isn’t he, though?” Dick turned his attention to the team. “I only have the one car, so I’m going to head back first. Please don’t invite my Owlets out again. Thanks!” His smile was brittle and sharp, eyes flashing.

Raven flinched while Beast Boy cowered behind her. Starfire just watched them.

“Oh, and Terra?” Dick turned to the teen. She warily stared back. “Your father comes to Gotham every Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday. Have fun~!”

He left the deserted building, humming softly to himself.

“What the fuck,” Jaime breathed out. Terra and Beast Boy agreed with him.

There was a ringing in his ears as he stared at Bruce.

“Repeat that please?” Huddled against his side, Cass ran her thumb over his fingers. Jason, Tim, and Damian were situated along the couches in the study, Duke sitting criss-cross in front of Bruce’s chair.

Barbara and Stephanie were on Dick’s other side, offering silent support as Bruce exhaled a sigh. Behind him, Alfred’s expression was pinched and subdued.

“I’ve been working on a trial serum that’ll counter the effects of the electrum in your body,” Bruce repeated. “It’s still in a trial stage so I don’t know for sure if it’ll work but—”

“If it does, it can fix you,” Tim finished, breathless as his thoughts snapped into place. “You’ll be able to start aging again, and eating, and breathe and—”

“Not be a zombie?” Jason voiced, his tone more cracked than teasing. His eyes were stubbornly trained on the bookshelf behind Bruce. “So he’ll be...human?”
“If the serum works, yes,” Bruce spoke slowly. “Again, though, it’s a trial serum. I don’t know if it’ll even have any effect.”

Dick just stared. Was he dreaming? No but he could though, if the serum works. Bruce had - Bruce made - Bruce-

“I can be alive again?”

His voice cracked and black trails chased down his cheeks. He withdrew from Cass’s hands, wiping at the wet liquid. It was pathetically ironic how his body still mimicked crying and emotions despite not having the actual functions to do so.

“Yes,” Alfred spoke softly. Barbara wrapped her arms around Dick in a hug. “You can.”

{Talon sat perched on the top of the owl fountain, one leg drawn to their chest and the other dangling against the chiseled details of the owl’s breast. The shadows twisted as another Talon slipped out, slinking their way over to where Talon was.

“Gray Son,” the other Talon, Cobb, greeted. “Grandmaster has a mission for you.” Talon opened their eyes, the yellow reflecting off the pink liquid streaming into the poracein fountain. They leapt off the owl statue, landing soundlessly in front of Cobb.

“You will not be joining?” Talon wasn’t allowed outside without supervision yet. The Court was worried their perfect Talon, their Gray Son, would be snatched up or worse if out by themselves.

Grandmaster was even hesitant at times to let them out of their sights, keeping them close by or in their coffin when not on a mission with Cobb. With how perfect they’d turned out, the Court was paranoid it was too good to be true.

“The Court has determined that Gray Son will have their first solo mission.” Cobb didn’t sound pleased about the fact. Cobb stared at Talon for a moment, expression carefully blank. “You will
“What is the mission?” Talon followed at Cobb’s heel as the older assassin began to trace their way through the maze.

“The Batman has become a bit of a nuisance,” Cobb informed. “They want to use him to prove a point.”

Batman. Talon's claws flexed at the thought of staining them red in the bat's blood.

“You will succeed.” Cobb halted and turned, placing their hand on Talon’s head. “You are our Gray Son, after all.” Talon leaned into the touch, a purr rumbling in the air.

“Talon will succeed,” Talon echoed out and the two continued on their way.

Dim lights. Whispered voices. Cobb's sense of awareness came back as their limbs slowly loosened from their frozen state.

"Cobb," Grandmaster spoke up the moment Cobb shifted into a kneeling position, finding themselves in the center of the gathered Court. "We've found our wayward Gray Son."

Something blossomed in Cobb's chest before they squished it down.

"Bring our Talon back to us."

They threw a cardboard coffee sleeve at them. Cobb picked it up.

BIG DICK'S CAFE was printed on the sleeve.

Chapter End Notes
Oh hey an actual plot

Also, curious - I want to introduce Wally but I'm not certain as to the best route of how. Any suggestions? lol

Made a Batfam discord if any of y'all are interested!!

https://discord.gg/ZvMAP5a
Holy Shit. Wally was one of those self-insert OCs who get sent to alternate universes.

Hello hello! Please give a warm welcome to Kathendale! They've come on board to help edit my disaster of a story because I don't have the patience to edit and proofread my own stuff!

There is some minor descriptions for violence in here. Just to warn you.

Talon was stretched out lazily, one leg bent while the other dangled over the metal medical table. His arms were restrained over his head, bent to give them almost a relaxed posture.

“Okay,” Leslie spoke slowly, exhaling loudly, “I’m going to explain it one more time.” She walked around the table, shuddering as those predatory eyes followed her. “We’re going to open up your chest—”

“Yes,” Talon acknowledged.

“-use this pump-”

“What’s it called again?” It was Jason who’d asked, perched up by Talon’s left elbow.

“-a cardiopulmonary bypass pump and have it act as your heart. It’s going to create a circulation of the serum through your still bloodstream. Because we don’t know how this will turn you, we’re going to have to do small doses. We don’t know how many doses your body will need or take to reserve the more severe of...what’s happened.”

“Understood,” Talon hummed out, moving to face the ceiling. “Let’s begin.”
Leslie looked around the medical room. Despite it being in the Cave, it was well furnished with everything she needed. She nodded and gestured for the group to take their places.

Duke, Jason, and Bruce positioned themselves by Talon’s arms, Tim, Damian, and Cass by his legs. Cass and Damian straightened his legs out, hands hovering by his ankles. Stephanie and Barbara were by the monitors, Alfred settled into one of the chairs and ready to call it if anything happened.

“Okay.” Leslie exhaled and adjusted her gloves. “None of you will faint, right?” She’d watched them adjust protruding bones more time than she’d like but she had to be sure. This wasn’t exactly the norm for them either.

“We’re fine,” Bruce gritted out, his own latex covered gloves squeaking as he clenched his fists tighter. The rest of them, mirroring her with gloves and surgical masks and their hair tied back, nodded. They were all garbed in scrubs she’d snagged, protective eyewear replacing their masks. All of them wore covers over their hair, trying to be as sterile as possible.

Well, for as sterile as they could be in a cave.

“Alright. Are you sure you don’t want sedatives?” Leslie asked one last time. She couldn’t imagine wanting to be awake to be cut open - being able to feel it or not not even in the equation. Talon nodded.

“I’m making the incision.”

He continued to focus on the ceiling. He felt the cold tip of the scalpel sink into his chest, starting above his collarbone. It dragged down his sternum, cutting into his breastbone, and-

[He screamed, arching against the metal slab they’d forced him on. Hands pinned him down, stronger than steel.

“Talons do not scream,” a voice hissed above him before a knife was slicing across his throat. Warm blood bubbled up and drowned out his screaming. Pain exploded from the hands digging through his chest, clawed nail scraping against his arteries.
He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t- He couldn’t -
hecoudn’thecoudn’thecoudn’t-]

-Talon shrieked, loud and shrill. The restraint on his left wrist bent under his struggling, only for
the arm to slam back down as Jason all but laid down on it with a grunt. Leslie froze, seeing Jason
forcing all his weight down on the arm to keep it pinned.

“A little-FUCK-help?!” Jason cried out and Stephanie rushed over, metal chains in hand. The two
were quick to pin Talon’s arm back down onto the table, wincing as he continued to screech like
some sort of wounded owl.

“What’s wrong with him?” Barbara cried out from her spot by Alfred. Cass had a grounding hand
on Damian’s shoulder, keeping him still. Duke looked lost, hands moving to clamp over his ears to
dim out the painful noise.

“Focus,” Leslie snapped out, glad that the body wasn’t wiggling. She was quick in placing a
retractor, holding open the window she’d made.

She took a moment to just stare.

“Dear God,” she whispered and Stephanie made a choking noise behind her. His heart was black.
Pitch black. His veins were the same, the muscles and tissues a almost indigo hue. Whatever
they’d pumped into his body, it was beyond anything she’d ever seen before.

“Okay. Okay. We’re almost there.” Not really but if they were panicking over him screaming, she
didn’t want to think about what else could go wrong. Still bent over Talon’s opened chest, she
instructed Stephanie and Alfred on how to set up the pump.

The moment the serum was interjected into the pump and forced through his dead veins, Talon’s
head snapped back and his back arched off the table.

“Please please please please,” Talon shrieked out, yellow eyes unseeing. They could see the
serum’s bright yellow color streaming through his veins, passing through his pale face and neck.
Just like that it was gone. “I don’t want to die I don’t want to die. Please-”

“Oh my god,” Tim choked out, knuckles white as he gripped tightly to Talon’s ankles. “Is-is he
having a *flashback*?!” Damian looked sick to his stomach, Cass pressed against his back as she helped him pin Talon’s other leg down. Jason was making a sniffling noise and Stephanie had to turn away from the scene. Barbara was digging her nails into Alfred’s hand, both of them staring unwaveringly at Talon.

“Shh,” Bruce whispered, Duke having slipped to take over Talon’s other arm while the man ran a hand through Talon’s hair. “It’s okay, Dick. You’re safe. You’re not there. You aren’t dying.”

“Please Grandmaster! I’m sorry! Please please please!”

Leslie looked at how much of the remaining serum was left. There was nothing. She was fast, trying to keep her hands steady as she removed all the equipment. She backed up, watching as the chest pulled itself back together and stitched itself back up as if there was never a opened wound.

She couldn’t get over it. The regeneration abilities weren’t anything she’d ever seen before.

Seeing Leslie had finished, the Bats were quick to let go of Talon. Only Bruce stayed where he was, whispering comforts to Talon. His hand kept running through the man’s locks, the other rubbing circles along his jawline.

“You’re okay. It’s okay. You’re safe. It’s okay.”

Unseeing yellow eyes fluttered, slowly regaining clarity as the minutes passed. Talon blinked, finding Bruce in his face.

“Bruce?” Talon lifted a a hand, cupping Bruce’s cheek. “What’s wrong?” In the background, Tim made a pained noise. “How did it go?”

“No notable affect right now, but that’s just the first dose,” Leslie commented as she gathered her supplies. Her gloves were stained black. “Do you remember anything that just happened?”

Talon was slow in sitting up. He blinked at the black staining his bare chest and the table. “No. I. Um. Blacked out?” Talon’s eyebrows pinched. “Did you end up using the sedatives?”
“No,” Tim answered for the woman. “You had a flashback.” His eyes were red-rimmed and he wouldn’t meet Talon’s gaze.

Talon leapt off the table, getting in front of Tim in a heartbeat. He had to look up to meet the teen in his true form. Guiding Tim’s chin to face him, Talon frowned.

“What’s wrong Owlet?” Talon barely noticed Cass clamping his earring on for him. He was suddenly looking down at Tim, who was biting his lower lip.

“You just - did that hurt you?” Tim’s voice was cracking. “You just kept screaming.”

“I’m sorry,” Dick whispered and pulled Tim into a hug. Tim clung to him tightly. Damian slammed into them, forcing his way between the two of them. Cass, Stephanie, Jason, Duke, and Barbara drew close, Barbara placing a hand on Dick’s thigh as everyone piled on him.

“You scared me!” Stephanie cried out, her own voice sounding watery. “You kept begging.”

“Steph!” Bruce barked. He shook his head sharply. She just burrowed back into Dick’s side.

“Movie time?” Dick suggested when no one made a move to release him. Damian was trying to fuse into his chest, arms and legs wound tightly around his waist and shoulders. The child nodded against his neck. Tim drew back, sniffling. His nose was red.

“Lego Batman Movie?” He suggested and the group dispersed, wiping at their faces. Besides Duke. He just smiled at them all.

Alfred led them out of the medical bay, leaving Bruce and Leslie. She ran a hand through her hair, looking pale.

“I’ve never seen anything like that and I’ve seen things, Bruce. I’ve seen things.” Leslie huffed and shook her head. “When should we administer the next dose?”

“I want to do it every week. For now, it’s just sitting in his veins. Let’s slowly introduce it to his body and see how he reacts,” Bruce explained thoughtfully. “Would you like to join us for the
Leslie quirked her lips into a smirk. “No thank you. Lego Batman, was it?”

It looked like every single blanket and pillow located in the manor had been hoarded into the theater room. Dick sat in the middle of the gigantic nest, Damian snuggled in his lap. Tim and Jason were on either side of him, resting against him. Stephanie was using Dick’s bent legs as a backrest, propped up while Cass, Duke, and Barbara controlled the sofa. Alfred was situated in a small lounge chair, taking pictures of them as they waited for Bruce.

“Where am I sitting?” Bruce teased, Duke and Cass patting the empty space between them. He grabbed the offered blanket from Barbara and settled down, Duke and Cass making themselves comfortable against his sides.

“Lego Batman!” Jason chanted. “Lego Batman!”

“Alright, alright,” Stephanie grumbled, chosen movie-player. She crawled her way over to the blu-ray player, making sure she had the remote control for surround sound, the projector hanging overhead, and the DVD player itself.

Go big or go home, as they said.

“\textit{I don’t wanna do that!}” Jason mimicked and Duke broke into snorts, Tim echoing, “No” while beatboxing.

The \textit{Lego Batman Movie} had been a gift made for Dick by Bruce and Alfred last Christmas. There was only one copy ever made and the original material was destroyed after Dick had been given the DVD. Bruce had gone to lengths to make the movie for him, trying to be as satirical and awkward with the storyline as possible.

Since then, the DVD had been played more times than anyone could count in the year that it
existed. Each member of the Family knew the entire movie’s dialogue by heart and were always in the mood to watch it.

Bruce regretted making the movie. Just a little bit.

They sat through the movie, Duke snickering silently to himself whenever the Lego Bruce acted like a complete dork, while Tim and Jason recited the dialogue dramatically. It got to the point where Stephanie tackled Tim to the side because he wouldn’t shut up.

Dick just snuggled with Jason and Damian, laughing softly at the offbeat jokes.

It was worth the humiliation Bruce had to endure, making the movie. Alfred couldn’t agree more.

The introduction of one Wally West came in the form of toppled tables and Dick’s hat flying into Morgan’s face.

He’d sped into the cafe in a blur of red, stopping at the counter in a suave pose of nonchalant. As if he hadn’t just rushed into the cafe.

As if he hadn’t just used his super speed to more-or-less shove Joker against the wall and try to act cool about it.

His eyes were on Morgan, sending her a cheeky wink. She giggled, hiding her lower face behind Dick’s hat brim.

“Hey there buddy, can I get a-”

Blue eyes went wide as they locked on Dick’s face. For a second moment, the Speedster vibrated on the spot into a blur before stilling. The masked Hero’s mouth fell open and stayed there.
“Um.” Dick blinked, his own eyes widening as tears began to trickle down the Hero’s cheeks, staining his mask.

“Oh my god, not again,” Red Hood groaned from his table, Black Bat snapping multiple snapchats of the new customer.

Dying sucked. Dying really, really sucked. Wally understood this on a personal level. Now he understood why Jason always bitched and moaned and didn’t let anyone forget about the fact that he, y’know, died.

Wally remembered vaguely the Speed Force. He remembered his wife, his kids, his accomplishments and failures in life. He remembered his friends, family, his best bro in the entire world.

He remembered dying.

Nothing.

Everything.

His memories had come upon him like a tidal wave of pain and blood, triggered by his stupidly young self recreating the same accident that turned him into Kid Flash the first time.

The first time.

Somehow he hadn’t been stuck in the Speed Force. Somehow instead of staying dead, Wally had ended up being reborn in another universe. A universe that seemed to be a good dozen years behind his last life.

Holy Shit. Wally was one of those self-insert OCs who get sent to alternate universes.
Jesus, they really weren’t kidding about Heroes never staying dead.

It’d been easier to adjust to his Speedster powers after having dealt with them for so long in his past life. Barry had been surprised by how he’d taken to his sudden abilities like a fish out of water.

It was just nice to not feel like there was some unsettling reason why the world always felt so slow.

And then Barry had mentioned about how Batman wanted him to meet the Bat’s sidekick.

Wally’s heart had leapt to his throat. Dick? Dick? He could be friends with Dick again?

After not being able to even say goodbye to his best friend.

But the moment Batman and The Flash had gotten Kid Flash and Bluejay together, Wally had burst out crying at the sight of the stranger.

Because it wasn’t Dick. Did that mean he never became Robin? Were his parents alive then? Should Wally even look for him, chance ruining his perfect life?

His meeting with Bluejay, Jason as he later learned, went horribly and he was better off keeping a distance from the brat.

Years passed, things in the universe stayed the same, things changed, and Wally ached for his best friend and his late family. His wife. His kids. Dick.

He kept tabs on the sidekicks of Batman, hoping beyond hope that one of them would be Robin. It had been his mother’s nickname for him. His way of living on for them.

And then there was a Robin but it wasn’t Dick and Wally just gave up.
Life was a blur. Time continued on.

Barry mentioned a cafe in Gotham that had amazing energy drink infused beverages and that it was neutral grounds. Wally decided, ‘what the hell’.

He hadn’t been expecting to see Dick.

Dick, with eyes two shades too dark. Dick, with his hair just a few shades lighter than it should be, his skin a bit paler than he remembered. His teeth weren’t perfectly straight, having never gone through that awkward year of braces that Wally never let him live down.

He looked like his Dick but just slightly off, as if trying to go for an impersonation and getting just one or two features wrong. Enough to make Wally stare a little longer than necessary.

Enough to make him cry because it was Dick.

“Oh, oh my god,” the masked stranger blabbered out as they wiped at their face. “So embarrassing. I’m so sorry.”

“Are- are you okay?” Dick just watched the stranger as they continued to cry and wipe up their tears.

“I- yeah. I just. You look like someone I knew. I just - oh my god, this is so stupid.” The man continued to sniffle and rub at his face, shoulders hunching. “Can I just get a coffee or something?” He dug his palms into his eye sockets, trying to will away the waterworks.

He must have looked so pathetic, sobbing in a public eatery over nothing. So stupid.

A cold hand brushed against his cheek and he moved his hands to see Dick pressing a napkin to his cheek.
The other barista dropped the milk pitcher in her hand, gawking. The cafe was eerily silent.

“T-thanks,” Wally choked out and took the offered napkin, wiping at his face and mask. His cheeks were burning from embarrassment.

“Why don’t you go sit down and I’ll bring you your drink, okay?” Dick looked concerned but it was so off. It looked rehearsed like he spent hours facing a mirror, trying to perfect the art of basic facial expressions.

It looked nothing like the wide eyed, pouty-lip concern his Dick would offer turning Wally’s times of need. It wasn’t his Dick.

Wally just nodded and made his way over to the table Red Hood and Black Bat occupied. His movements were stilted and stiff, like someone walking on stilts for the first time. Neither rejected him as he sat down heavily, head ducked to avoid the stares of the patrons.

“What the actual fuck?” Jason hissed, leaning in close. “Is this a new way of flirting?”

“Flirt-?!” Wally looked absolutely distraught. The idea of using his very honest longing and misery for his best friend as a means to score a phone number sickened him. “I wouldn’t use a dead friend as a means of flirting!”

Even if Dick would have probably bro-fisted him for the balls of using his death to get a digit or 10.

His voice was louder than he intended and he winced, hunching his shoulders up. God, for all he could sympathize with Jason over dying and coming back, he was still a major asshole.

“Sad,” Black Bat stated obviously. Wally bit back the ‘no shit’ on his tongue. No, he had to be nice to Cass. If not, he’d have the entire BatFam down his back to slaughter him and string his intestines along the Bat Cave like a decorative garland.

Jesus Christ he had some issues.
He should be used to this, though. He’d spent the last 28 years of his life seeing ghosts of his family and friends in the people who lived in this world. It shouldn’t have affected him like it was right now.

But he’d convinced himself that Dick was either off living his life happy with his alive parents or never born. Until google became a thing he remembered.

He’d searched The Flying Graysons during his younger years, wanting to see if he could do anything for his best bro. He’d found the news articles concerning their death.

There was never a mention of a child, adopted or orphaned.

Wally had convinced himself that Dick had never been born then. It gave him less heartache, yearning for someone who wasn’t even there.

Wally tried this form of coping for a lot of his dead loved ones.

A to-go coffee was placed down in front of the Speedster, disrupting his thoughts. A plate of cookies and a cupcake followed and Dick slid into the chair next to Wally.

“Are you okay?” Dick asked. His tone was unbelievably flat to Wally’s ears. Like he didn’t really care or understand and was merely asking out of social obligation as the person he cried in front of.

“Yeah.” Wally picked up his drink, taking a sip. He reeled back at the sweet taste. It tasted like white chocolate and macadamia. Around him, he heard the patrons shifting and whispering. It made his chest clench. “Um. Thanks. How much-”

“On the house.” Dick tilted his head to the side, letting his bangs fall from out of the confines of the Flash bandana he was wearing. Wally stared at it. He couldn’t help it. He started laughing.

Jason and Cass jolted as Wally slammed his cup down, pitching his head back with a full-belly laugh. Dick just watched him, his expression shifting into a phantom of one Wally knew to be his
secretly amused look.

His eyes burned but he kept the tears at bay.

“Sorry, sorry. Thank you. Um. I’m just going to go.” Wally was by the door in a flash, a weight settling in his stomach at the thought of leaving Dick again.

But they were strangers. This Dick probably didn’t have the scar on his knee from when Wally dropped him running at full speed. This Dick didn’t share his first kiss exploits with the Speedster, flustered and lost and horrified at talking to Bruce or Alfred.

This Dick was a stranger who was like a mockery of who Dick was supposed to be. It pained Wally more than seeing Linda Park, happy and completely unaware of who he was and what they’d been in another time.

Because she was the same down to her minuscule mannerisms. This Dick?

A blank slate compared to his best friend.

“Um!”

Dick was behind him, a tight grip on his arm. Again, the cafe came to a complete standstill.

Mentally, Wally was slightly amused that no matter the universe, Dick’s magical charisma was otherworldly in that even psychotic murderers loved him.

Dick’s hand was cold. It was cold and tough with callouses.

Wally followed the hand up to Dick’s face and kept motionless.

Dick’s eyes were weird. They didn’t hold in light like they should. Dick’s eyes always sparkled with concealed mischief and anger, heated by inner demons he didn’t let out. Dick’s eyes were heavy and deep with grief and loss, with burdens placed on him by the world and Batman.
This Dick’s eyes, along with being shades the wrong color, were completely empty. No emotions got through the blue. If Wally squinted and got close enough, he could spot specks of yellow amass the pools.

Jason coughed and Wally found he was in Dick’s face, both men completely unaware to the audience. A few pedestrians in the street were squished up to the glass of the outside facade, peering in to watch. Joker looked murderous, Jason absently tapping along his gun resting on the table.

Two-Face was flipping his coin idly. Harley ran a finger down her mallet, smile sharp.

Yikes.

Wally drew back, cheeks heating again only because he couldn’t believe he was making an complete and utter fool of himself like this. Dick tilted his head to the side in an owlish manner, that secret bemused look coming back stronger. He didn’t look the least bit concerned with how uncomfortably close they’d gotten.

“What’s your name?” Dick asked, keeping a hold of Wally’s wrist. “I’m Dick.” He pointedly looked down to his name tag. It was so Dick-ish to have a smiley face sticker on it. Wally snorted softly.

“Just call me Flash. Or KF,” he answered in a whisper. He wanted to be called Wally, or Wals, or even Wall-Man. Something that sounded like home.

“Okay. You forgot your cupcake.” Dick held out the pastry with his free hand. It was encased in a napkin.

Wally dumbly took the napkin, staring at it like it held the answers to the universe. He looked up from the elephant sprinkles snowed on the buttercream frosting and he wanted to cry all over again.

Because it was his Dick’s smile plastered on a creepy imposter, warm and teasing and so so gentle.

“Thanks,” Wally choked out and was gone in a flash (pun intended). He stopped outside of Gotham
to take a bite of the cupcake. It was delicious. He shoved the entire thing into his mouth and just
crouched down, sobbing uglily as he chewed on the cupcake.

Fuck. It was delicious. Like Alfred’s baking but more sweet and moist and perfect. He raised the
napkin to wipe at his gross face and paused.

There was an ink smudge on the napkin and he blinked, looking at the material more clearly.

A phone number was scrawled out on the brown paper.

XXX-XXX-XXXX

Please call if you ever feel sad. You looked pretty bad. Stop by again!

Dick :)

“Oh my god.” Wally didn’t know if he should laugh or cry again. “Oh my god, you smooth
motherfucker!”

He was a hot mess, but somehow he’d ended up getting a phone number. What even was his life
anymore?

It was a week before Wally gained the courage to show his face in Gotham again. Villains in
Central City and Star City seemed to have heard that he’d “put the moves on the Barista”. They’d
been a bit salty, apparently. It was an embarrassing, horrifying nightmare.

The cafe was nearly deserted when Wally walked in at a normal, decent pace. He was in his
civvies, feeling like he’d have better luck of not being recognized as the sobbing, awkward
catastrophe he was before.

Besides the other worker, it was just Dick in the building. He looked up at the chime of the bell
hanging overhead and gave a smile in greeting.
It looked so fake.

The other worker, a girl half Dick’s side, set down her rag.

“Okie dokie, the espresso bar is cleaned,” she announced and tugged her apron off. “Now I gotta go pull an all nighter for my exam tomorrow.”

“Did Ivy help you at all?” Dick asked innocently, letting Wally take a few minutes to look at the menu boards along the wall. While the two coworkers talked, Wally let his eyes slide to the various canvases hanging along the wall.

Damian’s artistic talents and Tim’s natural photographic abilities were easy to spot decorating the bricks. Black and white shots of people roaming the streets, the Bat signal in the sky, even a few rare snaps of the Bats and their Rogue Gallery.

Damian’s sketches were more specific in scenery, older buildings that had a aged history to the cracked foundations, and of the night sky from atop a skyscraper.

“Fellow customers donated the images,” Dick spoke as the girl walked past Wally and out the door. “They don’t mind selling if you’re interested.”

“Nah, not much of a hang-on-the-wall kind of guy,” Wally easily explained as he let his eyes go back to the menu. “Oh shit, you have boba! Lemme get a taro milk tea! With extra boba!”

Dick gave a laugh, the tone a bit off, and put in the order. He gestured for Wally to take a seat and he did so, trying to keep his speed in check. Not even a minute later Dick sat down across from him, handing off the giant straw and the drink.

“No crying today?”

Wally completely missed the sealed lid and stabbed into his hand. He winced and was quick in puncturing the film, giving a sheepish smile to Dick.
“You Heroes always think you’re so smooth with your masks and your terrible lying skills.” Dick rested his chin in his palm, eyes almost narrowed playfully like a predator finding prey. “But it doesn’t take a genius to recognize voices, body heights, hair color, skin color, and general walking habits.”

Actually, considering the crazies they fought, it did. But Dick was always smart. Wally sipped on his drink innocently, sucking up a few balls and swallowing the pearls without chewing.

“Um. Yeah. Sorry about last time.” Wally ran a hand through his red hair, trying to pretend his cheeks weren’t heating up. “You just really reminded me of a really close friend of mine and I just...had a bad day.”

“I’m sorry.” He actually sounded genuine. “Did they die?”

“He’s not here anymore,” Wally spoke and took another sip of his drink. It was sweetened just right. “So, how long as this place been opened for?”

“A little over three years,” Dick answered easily, smile faint and expression almost tender. “It’s been a wild ride to get to where I am today.”

“Yeah? It’s a cool place and you must be doing something right to stay open in Gotham.” Dick gave a soft snort at Wally’s words and he smiled around his straw.

“Wally. Wally West.” Wally held a hand out. “Or Mr. Sandman to the lucky ladies who take me home with them.” Dick’s nose crinkled up in a ghost of a suppressed snicker and Wally internally leapt with joy.

“Like the song?” Dick ducked his head to hide a smile. “That’s horrible, Wally West. Dick. Dick Grayson.” He took Wally’s hand and shook it.

It was just so cold.

Dick was a walking heater, always up for cuddling during the winter when his body seemed to just radiate comfort and warmth. Though he suffered in the summer (while everyone else thrived from his booty shorts and low cut tank tops to stave off the heat), his high body temperature was a blessing and was a part of Dick’s overall charm.
His hand was cold, like ice, like a corpse’s. Wally kept their hands clasped, as if to share some of
his warmth with the other man’s. Dick didn’t seem to mind, just looking at their hands with open
intrigue.

“Are you this touchy with everyone you just meet or is it because I remind you of your friend?”

Wally withdrew his hand, letting it fall to his lap as he sipped at his milk tea.

“Um. A bit of both, honestly.” Dick was too. A very physical person. Always touching in some
way, be it a hand on the shoulder, a brush of arms, maybe feet on lap. He liked to touch the people
he was around and comfortable with. To make sure they were alive and safe.

“Would you like something to eat? On the house. It’s more of a sample than anything but…” Dick
shrugged. “I don’t have anyone to taste test it right now.” He gestured to the empty tables and
chairs.

“You let your customers taste test for you?” Wally’s mouth pulled into a huge smile. “God, this is
like heaven.” Dick gave another soft snort and vaulted over the counter, disappearing into the
kitchen. He came back not moments later with...a plate of pasta?

“It’s zucchini and buckwheat noodles,” Dick explained seriously as he set the plate down in front
of Wally. “With sesame seeds, tofu strips, some veggies… I wanted to give a...fuller item to the
menu.”

“How’s it taste?” Wally poked at it with the offered fork. Dick shrugged again.

“I don’t know. You’ll be the first to tell me.” Dick settled back in his seat, smiling.

“You don’t taste your own stuff?” Wally asked, twirling a clump of the pasta around the prongs of
his fork. Dick’s smile was more amused than anything at that question. Wally frowned and stuffed
the fork into his mouth. He blinked, startled.

“This is delicious!” Wally may or may not have used his speed to shovel the rest into his mouth.
There was no way in hell Alfred wasn’t teaching the Dick of this universe how to cook. “Oh my
“It’s not too heavy? Not bland?” Dick had a small pocketbook by his elbow, pen poised to write. Wally finished quickly and put his fork down.

“Nah man, it was great!” Wally licked at his lips, humming. “Maybe add a bit of spice? Give it a kick? But that’s me personally.” Dick nodded, hunching over to scribble out the feedback. “You seriously don’t taste your own stuff or it all just tastes the same to you?”

Who’d have thought that if not a crime-fighting badass, the Grayson would be a Barista/chef? Wally always pegged him for taking over Haly’s Circus.

“I don’t eat.” Dick paused in writing, staring at the table. “I’m sorry. I have no idea why I just told you that.” He looked up at Wally through his long lashes. Wally raised an eyebrow.

“You don’t eat? What, on the clock?” Dick’s frame wasn’t as slim as his Dick’s. It was a bit more filled out, like a average adult man who didn’t do crazy acrobatics may have.

“Yes.” The word came out slow and reluctant, like he’d wanted to say something else. “So Wally West, Mr. Sandman, what’s it like being the fastest man alive?”

“Bit more boring than you’d think,” Wally spoke with a wink. He’d bitten back the innuendo on the tip of his tongue, feeling like he couldn’t joke like he wanted to. “So, what made you want to get into the coffee business?”

“I like coffee.”

Wally waited for more. When Dick went to collect his dishes, it snapped into place that that was it. He liked coffee. Such a simple answer. Not a hint of theatrics in the explanation.

That’s another thing Wally noticed. While his Dick moved to impress and to perform, this Dick moved with deadly precision and grace of a silent stalker. Dangerous and methodical in each movement. There was the underlying grace and fluidity of his years in the circus, Wally could immediately spot that, but something else.
“So do you do the Heroism full time or you have a job?” Dick asked as he came back, a coffee mug in hand. He took small sips, eyes closing partially to bask in the warmth and aroma of the dark liquid.

Wally averted his gaze.

“Eh. Can’t tell you all my secrets,” Wally joked. “How about you? I bet your parents were ecstatic that you decided to go to school for coffee making.” He internally winced. Why did he mention the dead parents.

But it brought up questions that no news article could cover. What’d happened to Dick Grayson?

“My guardian was just happy I turned my interests towards coffee and not...things he frowned upon,” Dick laughed into his mug. Wally snickered but his mind was running around the world in a minute. His guardian. Had he been picked up by Bruce Wayne after all? But why not the public announcement? The media presence?

“So are you okay to be open when it’s so dead? Isn’t that like, a waste of money?” Oh god, was he really ending their conversation here?

“Hm.” Dick turned sharp eyes to his cafe. “I’ll lock it up for a bit. Hey.” His eyes snapped to Wally and a small smile graced his lips. He looked a bit like his Dick. “Want to come to my place and watch a movie?”

“Um.” Shiiiiiiiiiiiiit. Abort West. Say no. ABORT. “Sure.” You had one job.

Dick nodded and stood, moving to the front door. He locked it and flipped the sign over to say ‘CLOSED’ and flicked the lights off.

“I’ll clean up later. You can leave your trash at the table.” He waved a hand and gestured for Wally to follow him. Wally trailed after him in almost a daze, mind clouding. God, seriously, what was his life anymore?
His Dick, Nightwing, would probably be laughing himself sick if he knew what was happening.

Wally was led through the kitchen and out of the backdoor. His eyebrows raised as Dick fluidly scaled the wall to grab at the fire escape ladder, bringing it down.

“You live above your business?! Dude! That’s some extreme dedication!” Wally’s voice was loud and echoed against the walls of the alley. Dick gave a laugh, surprised, and smiled as he went up the rickety poles.

“I lived here first!” He tried to justify as Wally followed him up the ladder and into the window of a very sad looking apartment. His eyes moved from the couch to the TV to the mini fridge before finally settling on the bed.

It looked new and unused, the Batman bed sheets pulled over the king sized mattress. A bat plush doll was nestled amongst the pillows.

A Superman body pillow smiled at Wally. He maintained eye contact with the fabricated eyes, mind blank.

“God dammit Jason,” Dick grumbled to himself as he marched over to the bed, grabbing the body pillow. “Sorry. One of my brothers thinks he’s funny.”

No matter the universe, Dick’s adoration for Superman would never change.

“It’s fine. A bro won’t tattle on another bro’s body pillow.” He sounded completely seriously and if it weren’t for the smile threatening to break free, Dick would have believed him.

“What movie would you like to watch?” Dick pointed to his stacks of DVDs and Blu-rays and Wally crouched down, peering at the titles.

“You have the Avengers?!” Wally shot up with the DVD. “Let’s watch this one! I love comparing them to the Justice League!”

“Sure,” Dick spoke, grabbing the blankets off his bed and throwing them onto the couch. “Do you
need a pillow too?"

Wally stood frozen, watching as Dick seemed to form some sort of...nest...with the blankets and pillows from his bed. And he had a lot. Like, Wally was caught off guard to see not one, but five different Hero themed comforters on the bed.

And the pillows just kept coming out of thin air. What the actual fuck.

“Oh. Um. Sorry.” Dick seemed to have realized what he was doing and ducked his head again. “I’m used to making my nest with my Owlets- um. Brothers.”

“Owlets?” Wally voice, his own words sounding distant to his ears. “Um. It’s chill. I like blankets. Besides, no offense dude, but your place is like a freezer.” He made a show of rubbing his arm.

“Oh. I don’t pay for heat.” Dick shrugged. “Blankets.” He stared at them as if they would speak. Dick swapped places with Wally, letting the man plant himself on one side of the couch. He pulled a few of the blankets around his shoulders and drawn up legs and waited for Dick to join him.

If he thought hard enough, he could pretend he hadn’t died and left Dick behind. He could pretend they were doing one of their ritual movie nights. He could pretend.

“And I’m telling you that the super soldier serum would have nasty effects on him!” Dick snapped out, kicking a foot out childishly to dig it into Wally’s thigh. The movie’s ending credits were rolling, not the two were paying attention. They’d sunken into the cushions, facing each other while twisted awkwardly to accommodate each other.

Wally was curled onto his side, one leg tucked to his chest while the other rested on the floor. Dick was all but stretched out, his feet practically in Wally’s lap. Not that the Speedster minded. It was almost familiar and very much welcomed.

“And I’m calling bullshit. Look, it gave him super strength and stuff! It’s like it triggered his meta-
gene! If anything, you could argue that Captain America is a Metahuman who was just awakened by chemical interference.” He poked at Dick’s big toe harshly.

“You’re an idiot,” Dick shot back immediately and it was so painstakingly familiar that Wally couldn’t even pretend to be offended. “His biological makeup was altered. There has to be effects done to him. You can’t change someone’s makeup and not expect there to be something. Memory loss? Shortened life span?” His words grew tenser. “Dead zombie?”

Wally felt the sudden shift and the light hearted bickering fell flat.

“Dude?” Wally sat up and Dick did as well, drawing his legs up. “You good?” He’d forgotten. He’d actually forgotten that this wasn't his Dick. This was a stranger he’d just met for the second time today.

How stupid could he be?


“You good, bro. So who’s your favorite Marvel character?” Wally was good at changing subjects. “I like Spider-Man!”

“Really?” Dick chuckled low. “I guess Deadpool. I can relate to him.” His voice trickled off. “Anyways, got time for another movie?”

“Dude, I don’t have any responsibilities,” Wally lied. Lied. Right to his face because if he could spend the night watching movies with the person who was supposed to be his best friend, then he was going to damn well do so.

“Sweet. I have Winter Soldier.” Dick moved to switch the DVDs out.
Dick hadn’t thought much when the new Speedster graced his presence in the cafe.

He was used to Barry Allen’s humorous quips and appreciative tipping to the glass jar by the register. He was used to Bart’s weird slang that Tim had the misfortune of picking up. He was used to the universal constant that Speedsters were happy, quirky, and all around swell people.

He was not used to a Speedster bursting into tears at the sight of him, looking like all he wanted to do was curl into a ball and die. This must have been the infamous Third Flash, Wally West. He’d heard Tim and Jason complain about him a few time. Apparently his humor was darker than Bart’s or Barry’s and he liked to ‘troll’ people.

There was something there, though, under the tears and heavy darkness in his eyes. Like he was staring at Dick, expecting something that wasn’t there. He was searching for something, someone, in Dick’s words and features and the Talon mentally wondered what he’d find. He could see it in the way the Speedster’s expressions switched and spasmed in seconds when Dick talked or acted.

He reminded Dick of Tim, a little. Of carrying a heavy burden too heavy for his frame but wasn’t saying anything out of stubbornness and some sadistic way of torturing himself. It made him sympathetic, he assumed the emotion was, to the crying man.

He took pity on the guy and, against his own set of rules, had passed off his phone number to the metahuman. He’d only heard good, albeit weird, things about the man, so it wouldn’t hurt to give him his number right?

Bruce was always saying he needed to make more friends that weren’t customers in his cafe. Did this count?

He could see it in the way Wally made aborted motions to reach out for him or to open his mouth to say something, only to have it die on his tongue before the words even formed. He could see it on the way Wally brushed their arms together or touched his shoulder or hand. He could see it in the way when Wally didn’t think he was looking, he’d study him intently, as if memorizing or comparing his image to something only he could see.

Wally was looking for a ghost in Dick.

He wondered just who’s corpse he looked like.
As he got to meet Wally West, he found he liked to see the Speedster smile. And laugh. And look like he wasn’t one step from tumbling off the edge of a building.

Because, as he already knew, he didn’t have an equal. Bruce was forever labeled Grandmaster in his mind and nothing would change that (save for him), and his Owlets and Pups (because he could only see Barbara, Stephanie, and Cass as baby bats just like he could only see his Owlets as baby owls) were his to protect, care for, and love. He mentally listed himself as below them, not feeling he could stand on the same pedestal as his Nest.

He was Talon. He was expendable. He knew this.

But Wally. Wally treated him like they’d been friends for decades. He constantly pointed out things that he was sure Dick would like, and he did. His humor was just perfect for Talon’s skewed sense of morals and understandings of jokes and sarcasm.

His Nest treated him like a brother, a son, a protector.

Wally treated him like he was a friend.

There was a difference and Dick hadn’t even known until he’d met the ginger.

“We should totally go!” Wally was leaning childishly against the counter. Dick laughed as he steamed a pitcher of milk. “Come on dude! It’s for one night only!”

Wally had found a local theater in Central City that was performing a Batman Musical. A Batman Musical. He couldn’t miss this opportunity.

Settled at his usual table, Two-Face shot the Speedster a warning look. Wally had came to the conclusion that he was just going to be hated when in his costume. He could live with that - not like he wasn’t already hated.
Harley was watching the two were a suspicious expression scrunching her face up. Catwoman looked like a cat who’d found a moth or a mouse.

“I work. I can’t just-”

“We got this, Boss,” Ketti quickly cut in. “You said it starts at 6?” She cast a look at Joker clock hanging on the wall. “You’ve got time to change and go.”

“Girls,” Dick started with a frown.

“Don’t worry,” Spoiler called from a booth, a pack of cards spread out between her, Black Mask, Red Hood, and the Joker, “we’ll keep an eye on things!”

“What the fuck are you doing?” Jason whispered harshly to the girl, only to grunt when she slammed a boot into his shin.

“Let’s go dude! Come on, come on! It’ll be fun! Please!” Wally begged, breaking out the water-works. Dick stared at him blankly for a moment. He did that, Wally noticed. His face would just fall as if not computing before snapping into an expression a few seconds too slow to be natural.

“Fine!” Dick finally relented and Catwoman gave a content purr that sounded loudly over the grumbles and sneers of the cafe.

Dick tore off his apron and his hat, stomping his way up the stairs to his apartment. Wally hung back, tapping nervously at the counter.

“You like him, don’t you?” Morgan cooed out like a little shit, smile mischievous and ready to slaughter him emotionally.

“He’s becoming a close friend,” Wally corrected, frowning. He never understood that - couldn't two people be close friends without having to force romantic implications into it? Ketti snorted.

“Yeah, one you want to make out with.” Behind them. Spoiler kicked Red Hood’s shin again. He hissed and swore at her.
“Um. No.” Wally squinted at the two girls. “I like him just as a friend, you gremlins.” Because while Dick was nice, he wasn't Nightwing. And Nightwing - Nightwing would forever hold a special spot in his heart that not even his past wife could take. They laughed and he ignored them, glancing at the clock again. Uhg! Dick was too slow.

“I’m going go to check on him,” Wally said to no one in particular, shooting out of the cafe and up the stairs before anyone could even register he had spoken. He knocked once, waiting two seconds, and opened the door.

“You’re so sloooooo oooooo oh holy shit.”

Because standing in front of Dick’s opened closet, dripping wet and completely naked, was a pale, corpse-like looking teenager.

Their skin was pale, their frame wiry and reminiscent of Dick when he was Robin, and scarred to hell with prominent black veins running over their body. Their yellow eyes were wide and startled, bloodless lips pressed tight.

The teenager dropped the baggy sweater, the color an ugly gradient of blue and purple, and stood completely still as Wally just stayed in the doorway.

“You-” Wally swallowed, looking at the teen. It was Dick. When he was a teenager. He had the same face shape, like a rounded heart, and button nose despite the slim, hollowed cheekbones. “You cannot wear that sweater. What are you thinking?”

“What?” It sounded so quiet, brittle and breathless. They wasn’t breathing though, Wally had a perfect view of their motionless chest.

“Dude, I don’t care if you look like a hot mess, but at least have a bite more taste about it. Obviously if you wear this sweater, you can’t wear those highlighter yellow striped jeans to go with it.” Wally was towering over the teen-sized Dick, hands shaking as he rifled through the closet. “What is your fashion sense?”

“I’m color blind,” came the dazed answer. Wally’s hands stilled on a plain long sleeve shirt and he dropped his hands, looking down at Dick.
Talon stared back up, yellow eyes unwavering as Wally’s hands rested on their shoulders.

“What happened to you?” Wally whispered finally, lip trembling and tears already threatening to spill over. “What happened, Dick?” His trembling fingers rudely intruded on his friend’s personal space to brush against the black veins criss-crossing along his face.

Because he wasn’t breathing. He wasn’t breathing and he was so cold. Like a corpse. He wasn’t breathing and he was cold and what had happened?

“A lot. You’re impatient,” Talon whispered, afraid speaking too loud would upset Wally more than he already was.

“I wanted to stop and get food before the show,” Wally countered, tears trickling down his cheeks. He drew his hands away as if scorned, shaking his head as he tried to accept the image in front of him.

“Would this be a bad time to mention I can’t eat?”

Wally made a pained noise in his throat and tugged Talon into his chest, squeezing him tightly. What had happened? Could he have prevented it? He hadn’t remembered his past life until it was too late but maybe if he had looked immediately -

No. No. There was no point in beating himself up. What’s done is done. Wally could only hold Talon in his arms like a protective cage and hope somehow, this wouldn’t fuck up their friendship.

Talon nudged him away and Wally flushed, remembering his friend was completely naked. He was across the room in a second and those pale hands raised up, clasping an earring through his ear.

Dick stood there in all his naked glory, still dripping wet. Wally averted his gaze, cheeks burning.

The two were silent as Dick changed into clothes, his colors clashing horribly. Only Dick could make neon green skinny jeans looks attractive against a pastel orange hoodie.
“So...um...can I ask for an explanation?” Wally finally looked to Dick, seeing that face shift into something of a mockery of ashamed. Seeing how he really looked, it made sense.

“We might miss the musical,” he countered, voice falling flat.

“This is more important. You’re more important.” Wally was on the couch in a flash, patting the seat next to him. “If you share, I’ll share.”

His heart hammered in his chest. He hadn’t told anyone of his memories. Hadn’t ever really felt the need to. He could always explain away his ability to know when certain events were gonna happen or who certain Villains or Heroes were.

But he felt like he owed it to Dick, after rudely intruding on something he wasn’t supposed to know.

Dick wavered, looking between the couch and the door to the window. He was looking at his escape routes, Wally noted. He was planning on running. One look at Wally though had him deflating and he slumped down beside the man, leaning their shoulders together.

“I’m not alive,” Dick whispered softly. “I was murdered and brought back to life by a very bad group of people.”

His chest hurt. His non-beating heart felt like a burden to carry in his chest. He wanted to slice through his ribs and flesh, shift through the veins and nerves that littered his useless sack of bones, and tear out the offending, dead organ. Because it shouldn't hurt. It shouldn’t hurt for someone to know who - what - he was. He’d willingly revealed himself to the Titans because they didn’t matter to him.

Only his Owlets had mattered.

But sitting here, thinking about the raw tenderness and distraught layering Wally’s voice when he’d questioned his appearance…

It hurt.
It’d hurt a lot, like when Bruce had Ordered him not to kill the Joker. It was a crushing, unbearable weight against his temples and chest, taunting him with caving in his skeleton.

“When I was 6, my parents died.”

Wally held Dick’s hand, staring blankly at the black TV screen. It’d been an hour since Dick had revealed his time with the Court. An hour of silence, of blank staring, as Wally let his thoughts snap into place.

The Court of Owls. Had they been in his last universe? Were they targeting Nightwing? Could he have potentially been taken from Bruce Wayne’s hands too, if fate had dictated it?

How long had Dick suffered at the hands of the Court? What had they done to him? The scars littering his body were from before he’d been killed. He’d spotted at least two separate knife cuts along his throat. He’d probably been through hell.

“Wally?” Dick questioned softly. “Are you...alright?”

They’d miss the Musical. Wally really couldn’t have cared less. Dick had been suffering and Wally had forced himself into some stupid form of denial.

God, he could have saved him.

“I could have saved you,” Wally choked out suddenly, hunching forward. He rested his elbows on his knees, drawing Dick’s intertwined hand to rest along his forehead. “I could have saved you.”

“No.” Dick’s voice was like ice. “You couldn’t have. You didn’t even know-”

“But I did!” Wally exploded, shooting up. He paced back and forth in front of the coffee table. “I knew who you were! I knew who your parents are! If I hadn’t forced myself to believe-!”
“Wally.” Dick’s eyes flashed yellow. “Calm down.”

“You don’t understand!” His voice had risen and from the open window, they could a hush coming from the outside world. “I KNOW YOU! Your name’s Richard John Grayson! Your best friend in the circus was an elephant named Zitka!” Dick stiffened like a statue. “Your first language was Romani, followed by French, and then English. You had an irrational fear of mirrors when you were 4 because you got stuck in the House of Mirrors—”

Wally’s voice cracked.

“-and you were my best friend and then I died and ended up here.” He slumped down to the floor, cradling his head in his hands. “And I tried to move on without you all but it hurts because I failed you.”

Hands touched his and he looked up to see Dick kneeling in front of him, frown in place.

“It’s okay,” he whispered, slowly drawing Wally’s head to his shoulder. “It’s okay.” His body was cold and hard and not Nightwing’s but Wally hadn’t felt so comfortable in a long time.

“I have a confession to make too,” Wally sobbed out into Dick’s shirt. “So, when I was 12, I met this kid named Robin...”

Dick sat on the couch with Wally, curled up with the man. Wally let himself be cuddled, resting his head against Dick’s shoulder.

“So, dimension-hopping is a thing,” Dick mused aloud.

“Being an actual zombie is a thing too,” Wally shot back and relaxed further into the arms around him. It was oddly comforting. “...are we telling Batman?”

“You sound like you’re scared of him.” Dick snorted and then paused. “Oh my god, you’re scared
“My first meeting with him was horrible,” Wally argued. “You try being 12 and trespassing in the Bat Cave, told that Batman was not there, only to literally walk into the man! It was terrifying! I did a few laps around the world! The world!”

Dick chuckled into Wally’s hair. The Speedster felt something warm blossom in his chest at that.

“It’s something one doesn’t easily forget, you know!” Wally looked at their tangled legs. “So, what’s your favorite color?” There just wasn’t any energy left to think deeply about cuddling with his best friend. There just wasn’t any energy to think after spilling his heart out to the man.

“I’m color blind,” Dick reminded dryly but Wally could feel the smile against his scalp. “I remember always liking the color blue.” His eyes were closed. “My mother...I think she had pretty blue eyes.”

“I bet. You do too. Well, uh, you did.” Wally shifted around until he was facing Dick. He tried not to think about how close they were. “Your eyes are a bit off, but I’m guess it’s because of the illusion?”

Dick nodded, unconcerned as Wally raised a gloved hand. He stopped and dropped it back to his lap, suddenly aware of how close they were. Face twisting uncomfortably, he wiggled until he was on the opposite end of the couch.

"Bruce just tried to collect any image of me and use his mental memory of me," Dick explained softly, looking up at the ceiling. "So the coloring may be a bit off. The Court erased all mentions of my existence, anyways, so not like anyone's going to care."

Wally hummed. It was kind of refreshing, though, to see the blue eyes and think Dick - Talon - and not Nightwing. His chest ached for Nightwing, for his best friend, and even though he had a new friend, it just wasn't the same.

It wasn’t necessarily erasing Nightwing or replacing him. It was just that with this new discovery, Wally could see Dick as his own person and not try to find Nightwing in him. It eased up on the intense turmoil in his chest and mind and let him breathe easier.
He just had to continue to make new friendships than dwell on the ones he’d lost.

"So." Dick moved up from the couch, walking around his coffee table to get to his kitchenette. "Marriage, huh? Do you miss your wife and kids?"

"Of course I do," Wally snorted as if it were a stupid question. "But - I mean - that was their Wally's life. I'm still me, despite being in an entirely different universe, but I don't have the same scars. My memories differ slightly. I'm a different Wally, despite my memories." He closed his eyes, letting the fluttering images of decades before slip past his mental fingers. "Besides, even if I met my wife, it wouldn't be the same. Our experiences are so different and I'd hold expectations. That wouldn't be fair to her."

"That's true," Dick mused, head tilted to the side. "That's very thoughtful of you. And extremely sad."

Wally shrugged as Dick made them coffee.

"Your Nightwing," Dick began hesitantly, "you were in love with him?"

Wally blinked, taken completely back by that sudden question.

"Uh. What?" Wally asked stupidly. Dick shrugged his shoulders.

"When you talked about Nightwing, you sounded like Babs when she talks about Kori. Is that why you were so interested in me? Because I remind you of your Nightwing?" Dick faced Wally, expression morose. "I'm sorry to say I can't fill that spot for you."

Wally just continued to stare at him.

"Dude, what?" He honestly couldn't process anything right now. "No. what - no. No. I - I like you, Dick, but as a friend!" He hurried to say when Dick opened his mouth. "I'm not looking to date anyone right now and definitely not you." Wait, shit, that sounded back. "I mean! Like, I just...

"You only want your Nightwing, right?"
Wally nodded, shoulders slumping in relief that Dick got it. He understood.

"That's fine." Dick looked more comfortable and pleased. "I like being your friend, Wally West. It is different from my Owlets and Pups, I enjoy your company." He smiled. Now Wally knew why it always looked so awkward on his face.

"Ditto, dude." The two stared at each other in companionable silence.

"What is going on here?" Batman snarled from Dick's fire exit, the window up and his body leaning heavily on the brick window sill. Wally, much to his own embarrassment, shrieked and jumped a good foot in the air. Dick moved to help Batman fully into the apartment.

"Wally's my new friend!" Dick chirped while Wally gripped at his chest, trying to calm his pounding heart. "He's funny, just like me! He's got memories from an alternate universe!"

Silence.

"Dude," Wally wheezed, absolutely betrayed.

"What?" Batman looked ready to kill a man.

Chapter End Notes

Anyways. I'm not a medical student or have any sort of knowledge about medical equipment or procedures. So I hope I didn't completely fuck up Dick's serum injection scene. It's rushed just because I didn't want to botch writing it lol

Wally!

So, originally, I was going to have Wally's situation with the Speed Force be similar to the comics but I've not touched a single issue of any of the Rebirth comics so nope. Instead, you get Wally from the Canon DC timeline who died and had his memories implanted into Roasted!AU Wally who only remembered after he got his powers back.

Yeah.

I hope this turned out okay.
Dick is asexual. He doesn't have any sexual attraction to people. Romantic attraction? Yeah! He's all about kissing and hugging and snuggling and cuddling. Anything too hot or heavy? Nah fam. Pure romantic fluff is where it's at for him. But I will address it with his and Wally's growing friendship.

But first, Bat-Dad.

ALSO! I MADE A BatFam discord server! :D

https://discord.gg/ZvMAP5a

edit: as of 10/07/2019, all mentions of Birdflash have been removed.
“You don’t.” Wally was at a utter loss for words “-you can’t just- Dick - dude - what the fuck !”

“What?” Dick asked, looking as if he honestly didn't know why spilling such a secret was such a catastrophic fuck up. “Batman probably had an inkling of a guess, anyways.”

“I did,” Batman confirmed as he moved to almost shield Dick with his body, “but you just confirmed it. Are you a friend or enemy, Wally West?”

Wally just gawked at the two. What the fuck? This - okay, well actually, this seemed about right. Bruce Wayne was a paranoid bastard who had contingency plans upon contingency plans. It really didn't surprise him that Batman had his musings and doubts.

The man could read a weakness off the Martian Manhunter after a conversation, for God’s sake.

“I - jesus, I’m a friend!” Wally blurted, tearing at his hair. “Seriously. You can take me to the Watch Tower and have J’onn interrogate me if you want!”

Oh god. He did not like that look in the man’s eye. How could he even tell he had that certain glint - the cowl blocked his eyes!?

“Well… you said it.” Batman stepped closer. Wally groaned loudly in frustration.

“FINE! Jesus, all of you are just so pushy…” The Speedster grumbled as he allowed Batman to clasp special handcuffs around his wrists. If he didn't know the man on a vaguely personal level, he’d be insulted.

As it was, he was just mostly annoyed. He missed that hilarious musical for this.

He thanked all that had his back that his intimidation from Batman mellowed out. Especially with how chill this Bruce Wayne was.
“Well, if you’re leaving, then I’m going back to work.” Dick moved from leaning against the
cabinet, eyeing the two. “Play nice.”

“Always,” Wally uttered weakly while Batman just nodded and kept his gaze on the Speedster.
Dick left and the air seemed to relax a bit.

“So, glad to hear you don’t want to date my son,” Batman said after a minute. “Because then I’d
have to break every single bone in your body.”

“Yes sir,” Wally intoned without missing a beat. Batman cracked a smile - an honest to god smile -
and then sighed.

“I had my suspicions. Mostly when you met Jason as Bluejay and began to cry about him not being
‘Dick’.”

Wow, since then? Wally was mortified. He thought he was a pretty decent liar too.

"You'll be able to explain yourself fully. I just want to make sure you aren't a threat to my family or
Gotham, understand?"

"I get it," Wally admitted. "I do. I'm willing to share my memories. I think…” Guilt, fear,
confusion, longing. "I think I should share them." He’d been holding all of it in for 17 long years.
For him, with his sense of time, that was ten life-times over.

“I think that’s a good idea.”

Wally West had always been an enigma from the moment Bruce met him to right now in the
present day. There had always been this weariness in his eyes, like he’d been through hell and back
several times over and still expected more pain. It unsettled Bruce.

After the disastrous meeting between their proteges, Batman and Flash agreed it would be best to
maybe have them only work together when absolutely necessary.

The child’s reactions to Bluejay was one of deep, swallowing disappointment and remorse. He bawled his eyes out, sobbing about someone named ‘Dick’ and ‘Robin’.

(Only months later, when a Talon fell into their nest, did Batman begin to piece together the puzzle.)

Small things popped up over the years. Notes in mission reports, comments made in passing, taunts and teases meant to be light-hearted.

The Speedster knew things he shouldn’t - things he possibly couldn’t know.

So, reasonable as he was in a world of Gods and Aliens and Talons, he deduced that it had to be some sort of Seer-type situation.

That or something involving memories.

He kept tabs on the man throughout the years, always mindful of what the Speedster was getting up to. Who he talked to, where he lived, who he teamed up with. Besides Roy Harper and the older generation of the Teen Titans, he associated mostly with Donna Troy.

The Speedster was harmless. Idiotic by certain aspects, sure, but harmless. He’d been worried, if he was being honest, that the Speedster was trying to make the moves on his oldest. But he was happy to see that an unlikely (and probably sought after) friendship was just being built.

Bruce could admit he may be a bit overprotective of his...black sheep of a child. You couldn’t blame him though - Dick didn’t exactly have the best social habits. Besides Cassandra, he was the worst out of all of them. Even compared to Damian.

Why were all his children socially inept?

It also worried Bruce that someone wanted to get close to the man. In Gotham, Dick had become somewhat of a citizen idol. He was untouchable to the patrons of his cafe, a celebrity to those who stopped at the city or heard rumors from other towns. There was a wall around him, for all his practiced manners and friendliness. He didn’t let anyone get close.

But Wally had slipped in unnoticed and wouldn’t leave his kid alone and Bruce wasn’t having it.
Jason had texted him a Bat signal emoji and his location. When he’d gotten there, fearing someone had stupidly decided to do something to the establishment, it’d been to the cafe in an uproar over a date.

Now, he knew his child. Dick did not date. He had no interest in people that way. Sure, he was affectionate and very physical, but it was in a purely platonic and animalistic way. He touched when he needed to know they were still war, still alive, or when they were hurt. As if he could pass along his regeneration abilities to them. He held them when they needed comfort, like a lioness protecting her cub.

A date? There was just no way.

Harley, Ivy, and Catwoman were adamant that the Speedster wanted to date Dick while Black Mask, Two-Face, and even the Joker were in denial over the claims. Stephanie sat back with Cass, munching on a muffin while Jason rallied his brethren in having a witch hunt for the Speedster.

Batman mourned his dumbass children. If they just took a moment to stop and think, they’d know there was no way Wally and Dick could be on a date. Dick was very vocal and blunt in his ideals on relationships. But his children felt threatened, scared Dick’s attention would be stolen from them.

A goon had made an off-handed comment about not seeing the two leave the apartment, setting off another screaming rant from Jason.

Bruce had taken a long look at the cafe, seeing Dick’s employees just recording the entire thing, before scaling the fire escape.

He’d heard them talking, their voices soft. Enhancing his cowl ear pieces, he listened in on them talking. Idly, he knew Barbara was probably on the frequency as well to hear the private conversation as well.

Did they have shame? Sure. Did it matter when Dick was involved? No.

But he was happy he hadn’t needed to act. Wally and Dick were both mature, level-headed adults. And Wally seemed as bewildered by the idea of dating Dick as Dick did to anyone else who asked him out.
The cafe was in an uproar when Dick walked in through the kitchen. At once, everything came to a stand-still.

Dick raised an eyebrow, resting his hip against the counter as he crossed his arms.

“I don’t date,” he stated simply. “I don’t like people like that. Mind your own business.”

It was with that sentence of finality that his Owlets and Pups seemed to snap back to themselves and the other patrons settled down bashfully.

“I knew you weren’t dating,” Jason adamantly exclaimed, scrambling to Dick’s side. “You know that, right? I believed in you.”

Dick exhaled.

“Owlet, go sit down.”

Jason stiffened. Oh, Dick was receding into himself. Distancing himself from everything and everyone. He only did that when his mind was running rampant. Something must have been bothering him.

“Boss?” Ketti asked gently, worrying at her bottom lip. “Are you okay?”

“No.” The bluntness of that word made her blink, alarmed. “I’ll be back. No one follow me.” Before anyone could respond, he slipped out through the front.

“Holy shit, is he heartbroken?” A goon whispered.
“No,” Tim responded after a beat. “He can’t get heartbroken.”

He had no heart to break.

“Aw man,” one of Black Mask’s men grumbled loudly, “I wanted ta introduce my son to ‘im too!”

“I thought you had a daughter?” Black Mask asked, confused. The man shook his head.

“My son now,” he clarified.

Alfred was proud to admit that he’d become a master at reading each child well enough to know their mental state by their body language only. Jason’s tell was constantly clenching and unclenching his hands, Tim sipped on water without even sparing the coffee maker a glance, Stephanie twisted her hair up until it knotted, Cass tapped out morse code onto the kitchen counter, Damian carried around his stuffed Batman doll (which was absolutely adorable), and Duke’s accent got heavily the more overwhelmed he felt.

Dick would sit on the kitchen island counter, swaddled in his Hello Kitty fleece blanket, and stare blankly into nothing.

“What’s on your mind?” alred asked, setting down a steaming mug of coffee in front of the Talon. He held his own mug close, settling down into one of the chairs as Dick slowly brought himself out of his daze.

“Am I just a constant reminder of a failure?” Dick asked softly. Alfred held his tongue, knowing never to interrupt the Talon. Dick always clammed up, believing he was burdening people with his ‘inconveniences’, if he was talked to before getting everything off his chest.

It was something Alfred still struggled to remedy.

“Am I something that needs to be fixed? Am I broken?” Dick stared down at his hands, not really seeing. “Am I not good enough as I am right now?”
He moved his eyes back to the far wall, eyes glazed. “I don’t mean how I don’t breathe or bleed or
die. I just… Wally said he could have saved me. Said he could have prevented me from going to
the Court.”


“Why is it that suddenly my tragedy became his?” It was whispered. “Why did my suffering act as
a medium for his own? Can’t he separate his own grief from mine?”

He shook his head.

“I don’t - it doesn’t make sense to me. It bothered me, when he said that. He sounded so broken,
admitting that. As if what I’ve had done to me was something he had to take on as his own
personal burden. It’s frustrating. I didn't know he even existed until a few weeks ago.”

“Am I just overreacting? Am I just overthinking this? Being selfish?”

No, Alfred held back. Not at all.

“I like Wally. He’s like my Owlets and Pups but…different. He’s… not of my Nest but he is.” Dick
frowned. “Is that having a friend? Not one of my Nestlings, but an actual friend? Because
everything kept thinking we were going to date but I—”

Alfred braced himself. He knew what was coming.

Dick frowned. “I can’t be in a relationship.” Dick picked up his mug for the first time. He didn't
drink from it, just stared at the dark contents, pensive. “I can’t date anyone. They’ll expect stuff I
can’t give…”

“Such as?” Alfred was gentle as he patiently waited for Dick to sort out his thoughts. He was
treading in dangerous waters - one slip and Dick would clam up and no longer speak of the matter.
But this was important. This was overdue.

“Sexual stuff.” Dick averted his gaze. “I don’t - I can’t give someone that stuff. I don’t…feel that
stuff. I don’t want it.” Dick hunched up and Alfred let him, keeping his posture comments to
himself. “I…I don’t know. I just don’t…feel that way? Towards people?” The man raised one of his
hands, scratching at his head. “It’s confusing.”
“How to explain it or how you feel is confusing?” Alfred looked down at his mug. He was trying to be soft in his tone, not wanting to startle the Talon.

“Both?” Dick slumped forward. “I like Wally, but I don’t want to date him. I like Jason, but I can’t see myself kissing him passionately. I think Babs is very nice looking but not enough to do anything more than hug her or cuddle. Is that weird? Did the Court ruin me that way too?”

Alfred nearly dropped his coffee. “Lord Heavens, no!” He placed the porcelain down before he threw it in a sudden rage. “Master Dick, there is nothing wrong with you. What you feel is completely normal!”

Dick stared up at Alfred like a kicked puppy, watery eyes and all.

“Some people just don’t have sexual desires. Some don’t have romantic. Some don’t have either.” Alfred reached a hand out to lay over Dick’s. “That is completely normal and nothing is wrong with it.” He locked eyes with Dick. “Or you.”

“...It’s normal?” Dick whispered softly. “The Court didn't break me?”

It hurt his heart to hear such words. They never properly sat down and divulged into what happened during the 9 years that Dick was with the Court. They hadn’t ever wanted to pressure him or cause him to relapse due to a flashback.

Now he regretted it because how long had Dick gone about his life, thinking the Court broke him in ways that they couldn’t?

“No.” Alfred made sure his tone was stern. “They didn't.” He squeezed Dick’s cold hand. “You are perfectly normal, Master Dick. You are as normal as I am or Master Bruce is.”

Dick stared at Alfred, processing his words.

“And do not let Mr. West try and make your trauma out to be less than it was because he believes he had any sort of involvement in it.” Alfred’s gaze turned stern. “Mr. West was eight years old at the time. There was no way he could possibly be in any way, shape, or form, the cause or a cause of your experiences with the Court. Do you understand?”
“Yes.” Dick’s eyes dropped and he bowed his head forward. “I do.”

“Very good, sir,” Alfred spoke, hiding his smile behind his coffee mug. “Your happiness is important to us and I wish you would talk to us more. You don’t have to hide from us, Master Dick.” He patted Dick’s hand. “You are just as much my child as Master Bruce’s.”

Dick sent him a blinding smile and slid off the island top. He downed the rest of his coffee and pressed a kiss to Alfred’s forehead. “Thank you Alfred. I’m really thankful I have you.”

Alfred sent him off with a wave and sat peacefully.

He wiped at his eyes.

Diana, Clark, and Barry looked up as Batman led a handcuffed Wally into the conference room.

“What the hell?!?” Barry roared, shooting up from his seat. “Get those cuffs off him now!”

“Calm down,” Batman dryly stated as he undid the links. Wally, just for show, rubbed at his wrists. “I was making sure he didn't run.”

“Why did you bring him here?” Diana asked, eyebrows pinched as she looked between the Bat and elder Speedster. She hoped a fight didn't break out.

J’onn floated in after a beat of silence between the members. He looked curiously around at the tense atmosphere before facing Batman and Wally.

“Oh, you’re telling people now?” J’onn dropped to his feet. “I was wondering when you’d start telling people. It’s not healthy to bottle all that up. The guilt you carried was painful to feel.”
Wally grimaced.

“What!? What’s he talking about!” Barry rounded on Wally. “Explain! What’ve you been hiding?”

“U-Uncle Barry.” Wally shrunk into himself, gaze locked stubbornly onto the floor. “I- I’m so sorry. I - I didn't mean to keep it from you but I was so scared and confused-”

“Wally, son, it’s okay.” Barry was gentle as he touched his shoulder. “I won’t be mad. What’s wrong? What happened?”

Wally sucked in a breath and squeezed his eyes shut.

“For - for the past 17 years, I’ve had memories of my past life.”

Silence.

“Is this some kind of joke?” Barry’s tone was utterly flat. “Seriously, what’s going on?”

“He’s telling the truth,” J’onn defended as Wally shied away from Barry and almost bumped into Batman. “His accident triggered his previous life’s memories of when he was a different Wally West.”

“...A different Wally West?” Diana sounded confused. “What does that mean?”

Everyone jolted at the sudden flash of colors in their minds. Barry stumbled backwards, recognizing the colors of the Speed Force. The other members tensed at the sudden intrusion into their minds.

Another flash.

-A woman, her black hair long and curly, smiling as she kissed a younger looking Wally-
- Two children, twins from the looks of them, tackling Wally into hugs and hanging off him-

- A man, dressed in blue and black, laughing loudly as he flipped over Wally-

- The same man, staring out at the night sky, turning to smile at Wally-

- A tiny child, dressed in bright red, yellow, and green, hiding behind Batman’s leg and covered by his cloak, peeking out to smile almost apologetically at Wally, who was being held still by Barry-

- ”Hi!” The tiny child, domino mask plastered along baby-fat cheeks. “I’m Robin! I’m Batman’s partner!”

“Sidekick!” Wally, dressed in his Kid Flash costume argued. “You’re his sidekick!”

“Nuh-uh!” Robin dropped from the bars he was perched upside down on, placing hands on his hips. He tried to look intimidating for a 9 year old. “We’re partners.”-

- Blue eyes alit with laughter and joy stared back at him, the man perched up on the ledge of a tall building.

“Congrats on the proposal! I’m gonna be your best man, right?” It was said teasingly, the wind rustling his black locks. His dark skin seemed to glow in the sun and Wally snorted.

“You gotta be Nightwing for it,” he explained. “So Linda doesn’t figure out who you are.” The man hummed and flipped, body twisting as if weightless. He landed into a crouch beside Wally and sat down, bumping their shoulders together.

“Of course, dude. What are best friends for?”

“Sure Dick, sure,” Wally snorted.
A screamed resounded across the room as Donna nearly toppled out of her chair. “WHAT DID YOU DO TO YOUR HAIR?!” She looked down-right flabbergasted. Kori actually fell out of her chair, laughing hysterically while Roy just buried his face into his hands and shook his head.

“What?” Dick tugged on his trimmed bangs. “I cut it?”

“Dude!” Wally wheezed. “You got a mullet!” He gestured to Dick’s Discowing suit and mullet. Dick had the audacity to gasp, offended.

“It’s a traditional style! Business in the front-” he turned around “-and party in the back!”

**PARTY BOI** was embroidered onto the suit’s buttcheeks. Donna fell on top of Kori, gasping for breath. Wally was behind Dick in a flash, scissors snipping through the disgusting thing he tried to call a hairstyle. Roy just continued to shake his head, shoulders shaking up and down-

-A red suit, a lightning bolt insignia plastered on the chest part. Arms wrapping around his waist, a kiss to his shoulder.

“Looks good on you, handsome,” Linda chuckled from behind him. He snorted.

“Yeah, but you’re my only lightning bolt.-”-

-Jolting up, stomach rolling violently. He could hear Barry’s panicked voice telling him not to move, to breathe, not to panic. But he had to panic because where was he who was he he remembered oh god he remembered-

-He died he died he died he died-

-Linda stumbled backwards, eyes wide. “Oh, sorry, didn’t see you there.” There was no recognition in her expression, no wrinkles from laughing too much, no added weight from having twins. Just a young Linda looking at him like he was a stranger and it hurt. He couldn’t work up the courage to talk to her, to make an excuse to get her number because this wasn’t his Linda-
“Dick just smiled sadly. “I’m poisonous.””

-”I’m dating Kori!”

“Fuck yeah my man!”

“We broke up.”

“Aw dude, that sucks.”

“I’m dating Babs!”

“Aw hell yeah dude look at you go!”

“She dumped me.”

“Dude what the fuck.”

The Heroes found themselves on their knees, stomachs twisting from the onslaught of memories. Wally rubbed at his forehead, nose scrunched up as a headache slammed into his skull. Uhg. Ouch.

“Night...wing...?” Clark gritted out, eyes squinted up to fight back tears that weren’t his to shed. “Why was...?”

“In my other life-“ Wally winced at how hoarse his voice sounded “-you were like an Uncle to Dick. When he got too old for Robin, he talked to you about a new persona. You helped him.” Clark looked lost at that piece of information before getting lost in his thoughts.
“Kid…” Barry was choked up, throat bobbing up and down. “You never said anything.” Wally nearly cowered behind Batman.

“I didn’t know what to say. I couldn’t - I was confused and lost and just… I’m so sorry, Uncle Barry.” Wally hung his head. “This universe isn’t that different from my old one. I thought I could handle it without needing to say anything after I adjusted.”

“You adjusted?” Barry spat the word out like it was filth. “Wally- you - you dumbass!” He had his arms around his nephew and hung on tight, squeezing him. “You miserable sweet-hearted dumbass.”

Wally clung back just as tightly, his shoulders shaking silently. The members in the room averted their gazes respectfully. Once the two Speedsters pulled apart, it was surprisingly Diana who spoke up.

“So, what now?”

When Dick returned to the cafe, it was almost scarce. He wasn’t surprised - it was 4am. Besides a woman tucked into the corner and the few black and blue goons, it was just Morgan manning the counter.

“Welcome back,” she greeted as Dick waved. He leaped over the counter, tugging on his hat.

“Thanks. Need any help?” There didn't look to be too many orders, just a few drinks and a black coffee. Morgan handed him a 24oz to-go cup of coffee and gestured to the hung over looking woman in the corner.

“Just give her her coffee?” She smiled sweetly. Bless Morgan for not bringing up his crazy night. Dick nodded and turned on his heel.

He weaved through the empty tables and chairs, stopping in front of the woman’s table in no time at all.
“Here you go! Do you want some food to go with it?” Dick asked, setting the coffee down in front of the woman. She smiled thinly, making a show of picking up the coffee with her thumb and index finger as if the cup was dirty.

Dick’s metaphorical hackles rose at the rude gesture. Alarm bells rang through his head as they made eye contact.

“Oh no thank you.” Ice washed through him, his mind stuttering to a halt as the woman stood up. “This is more than enough, Gray Son.” White masks, dark shadows, whispering coos of claims and soothing lullabies that he was theirs. The woman’s smile turned sharp, dangerous, and she took a sip. “You’ve had your fun. It’s time to come back.”

“I-” Dick swallowed, almost taking a step back. He could not show fear in front of her. Talons did not feel fear for them. For what she was. An Owl. She was an Owl and she was here in his cafe. They never entered his cafe. He had been safe. Undercover. Hidden in plain sight.

She was an Owl.

She was an Owl.

*She was an Owl and she was in his cafe.*

Dick couldn’t move.

They knew. They found him. They knew where he was now. They’d bring him back; throw him back into the labyrinth. Reset everything Bruce had tried hard to fix. He’d be placed back in his coffin, kept at the Grandmaster’s side.

She was in his cafe.

“The coffee’s delicious,” the woman spoke as she stepped closer, getting in Dick’s personal space. The few goons in the cafe glanced over before turning their attention to their phones, seemingly disinterested. Dick couldn’t move. “Maybe we can ask Grandmaster to let you be our Coffee Bitch?”
“Get out.” He squinted, hoping his eyes wouldn’t flash. They must have for the woman jerked back, eyes widening. “Get out of my cafe. Now.” His hands twitched and he leaned his head down, close to her ear. “Don’t forget what I am. You think I don’t still kill?”

The woman’s complexion was a bit paler when he pulled away, smile false and eyes daring her to try anything. She ducked around him and hurried out, unaware of the many pairs of eyes on her retreating form.

“You okay, Boss?” Morgan asked as he made his way back to the counter. He threw his hat off, a hollow THWAP resounding across the eerily silent as it smacked into the cubby under the counter. Morgan’s eyes shot to it.

“I’m going to go lay down.” He knew his tone was as empty as his eyes. He shoved past Morgan and slipped through the kitchen, his hands shaking. The shadows around him were twisting, growing closer. Reminding him of just how close he actually lived to the Court. How much of a fool he was.

They were playing with him. They’d always just been playing with him.

He was back in the labyrinth, back at his Grandmaster’s side, at his beck and call. He was back in the darkness, talons dripping red. He was back in Cobb’s shadow, following at his heel.

Silence buzzed through his skull and he jolted, suddenly tucked up into a tight ball on his futon. He blinked past the complete darkness of his apartment and released a shuddery breath. He should alert Bruce -

No. No. The Court would hurt his Nest. He couldn’t.

*He couldn’t bring that to them.*

The sharp talons he’d grown up with dug into his mind, tearing at his sense of security. For now, though, he would pretend.

He was good at that.
If you don't think the cafe treats Dick's personal life like some sort of soap opera special, you're wrong.

Kinda disappointed in this chapter? A bit? Oof.

Pups are baby bats, in case anyone is confused lol

Here's the discord server!
https://discord.gg/meZfsG

Edit: as of 10/07/2019, all mentions of BirdFlash have been removed.
His cell phone read 04:27AM.

He paced, prowling around his apartment as he sunk his teeth into his thumb, tearing into skin. Black liquid trickled lazily down his drawn up hand, steady at first before tapering off, only to stream down again when his heal skin broke open once more.

Blue eyes, empty and dull, stared unblinkingly ahead as he made his rounds. His steps were memorized, determined from a worn path along the wooden floorboards.

His curtains were drawn, lights turned off and all exits tightly locked shut. His steps were light, soundless, the only minuscule noise coming from his clothes rubbing together. His gaze flickered over to his window.

The Court knew where he was. They knew who he was, who’d he become.

He crouched down, curling into a tight ball as his teeth sunk in deep, biting through bone. Black goop surged through his mouth, cold, tasteless, and gone in an instant. He withdrew his thumb and looked at the healing appendage. He brought his hands to his chest, squeezing his eyes shut.

He didn't want to go back. He didn't want to go back to them.

They were in an enormous dining room. Two Talons stood behind their Grandmaster, silent and still as statues as they framed his throne. The Grandmaster was positioned three steps up from their gathering, watching his Court dine.

The Owls were spread out across the stretching long tables, tablecloths a tasteful red against the pristine bone china. Their masks were lifted delicately to give access to their mouths, silverware disappearing under to feed them. The children Owls were silent as they ate, their table manners breed from years of strict teachings, while the adults made light conversation.

His hand was in Talon's hair, petting him like one would a cat. His cheek was tucked up against
his thigh, body bent and lax like a doll. His clawed hands were but ghosts against his knee and shin, merely placed there like an artistic display.

Grandmaster continued to thread his fingers through Talon’s long locks, humming softly under his breath as his Owls mingled. Behind his mask, sharp eyes surveyed his Court. They were all so obedient. So loyal. So pathetic.

Not like his Gray Son. Not like his Perfect Talon. None were as loyal, as obedient, as quintessential as the assassin against his side, laying at his feet like a beast under it’s master’s hand.

Talon felt his Grandmaster’s finger flex, just slightly, along his scalp in the direction of the Owl with the too-tight suit around his exposed gut. In a flash Talon was down the landing and crouched on the table in front of the Owl, knife sinking into his chest. A clawed hand was sinking into his tilted throat, cutting off any screams. The Owl fell backwards and Talon was back at his Grandmaster’s side, hands behind his back as his master pressed his palm to Talon’s cheek.

“He was a traitor,” Grandmaster addressed the stunned silence. The two Talons behind his throne shifted just so, as if stirred from the sudden blood shed. Grandmaster gestured with his fingers for Talon to resume his position on the floor and went back to running his hand through the child’s hair. “He was feeding money and information to the police. Staging a internal take-down. We do not allow traitors in our Nest, isn’t that right Gray Son?”

“Yes Grandmaster,” Talon intoned blankly, a soft purr rumbling through his throat as Grandmaster tucked his long locks behind his ear. Those gloves fingers wiped at the speckles of blood against his upturned cheek and chuckled.

“See? Even a puppet understands. McGovory couldn’t even compare to our special Talon.”

Tense, forced murmurs of agreement met the Owls. While they did not feel personally attacked by the sudden kill, the sight of the man’s blood staining the white tablecloth did little to give them an appetite for dessert.

Grandmaster settled back comfortably in his throne, hands never straying from Talon’s scalp. Talon sat, waiting, for the next Order.

Dick gave a whine, shoving his fists against his eyes as if to hide from the world.
“I don’t want to go back,” he whispered into the darkness. “I don’t want to go back.”

His cell phone read 04:45AM.

Dick stopped in front of the kitchen door, frown on his face as he placed a hand on his stomach. That felt...weird. For a brief moment, just a single brief moment, his stomach had made some sort of...twinge.

“Um. You okay Boss?” Ketti asked, eyeing him. Dick looked up, blinking. “Stomach ache?”

“I don’t know,” he replied honestly. “My stomach just kind of...twinged.” Batman, chugging down a dark roast across from a black and blue penguin, looked over at him. It was 3:15 in the morning, the cafe’s business coming to a lull for the night.

“Are you hungry?” Ketti questioned, frowning. She never saw him eat. She always pegged him for the type to eat by himself, away from prying eyes. “Grab a snack.”

“...hungry.” Dick stared at her like he couldn’t make out the language she’d just spoken. “I don’t think I’m-“

His stomach twinged again. He flattened his palm against his abdomen. Ketti watched him and huffed. She crouched down, digging through her backpack. She pulled out a cereal bar, handing it to him.

“Here. Go in the back and scarf that down.” He stared dumbly at the offered snack. She shook it at him. He took it, staring at the wrapping.

It was a puff-rice cereal bar.

“Go. Shoo, shoo. So I don’t have to listen to you whine about needing food,” Ketti teasingly shoved at him. Batman stood up from his table, nodded to Penguin who tipped his tattered hat at
him, and left. Dick let himself be pushed into the kitchen and he left through the exit, meeting Batman in the alleyway.

“You’re feeling hungry?” Batman’s gruff voice held a hint of...something. Eagerness? Hope? Caution?


“You are,” Batman agreed and motioned to the fire escape. Dick scaled it and Batman followed him into his apartment, closing his curtains behind him.

He took off his cowl, sighing as he looked around. Finding a pen and paper, he settled down on Dick’s couch. “You’ve been on the serum for a month now,” he noted aloud, “so your body might finally be reacting to the chemicals. Try to eat.”

Dick stared down at the cereal bar. The last time he tried to eat food was that piece of fruit with Jason. He gulped and peeled back the wrapping. He sent Bruce one last hesitant look before chomping down on the bar.

He chewed. It tasted like nothing. Like cardboard. Like sand. At least coffee had a taste, no matter how bitter. He swallowed and clamped a hand over his mouth to keep any vomit at bay.

Nothing came up.

Wide blue met wet-looking blue and Dick threw himself at Bruce, knocking him into the armrest.

“I can eat!” Dick screamed out with a watery laugh. He wasn’t vomiting it back up. There wasn’t black goop forcing out the foreign object. “I can eat!”

“Yes you can!” Bruce exclaimed, hugging Dick to his chest. “It’s working.” Dick burrowed into the kevlar and laughed breathlessly. “It’s working.”

“It doesn’t taste like anything though,” Dick whispered as he pulled away. He shoved the rest of
the cereal bar into his mouth, almost bouncing from nerves. He swallowed it and wiped at his eyes. “But I can eat now.”

“Yes you can. Though I wonder…” Bruce squinted at Dick. “Do you actually need the energy or your stomach was just starting back up?”

“I don’t know. We can run tests?” Dick shrugged. “Can I eat more?” He had nothing in his fridge though. He just wanted to *consume*.

“Let’s wait and see what’s going to happen to that cereal bar,” Bruce warned. “I need to know if you have stomach acid to help break down the food you eat. Does your body absorb the sugars and proteins in the food or will it just settle in your stomach until it has to be-”

Dick hugged him again. “How cares, I can eat!”

Leslie, as it turned out, cared *very much*.

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Dick was perched in the middle of his bed, papers scattered around him in a messy circle. Childish doodles littered some of the pages; messily, barely legible writing on others. He pushed his bangs back, nibbling on a chocolate-covered biscuit. Ever since they’d discovered he could eat again, he was rarely ever without something small to munch on.

He said he just missed the ability to swallow and hold it down and not feel like some empty puppet with broken machinery inside.

(Jason had grabbed him by the shoulders and had told him in his most serious voice, “Never *ever* say that again.”)

“Change that part,” Catwoman spoke, sitting at the end of his bed, papers piled on her crossed legs. Her cowl was off, her body-suit replaced with a soft tank top and boxer-shorts. Beside her, shifting through more papers, sat Damian and Bruce. “We can knock that wall down and make it into a restroom.”
“But the plumbing goes through here,” Bruce commented as he leaned over his son, pointing to the blueprints stretched out between them. “If we make that into a restroom, we’ll have to add more pipes.”

Selina shrugged. “Luthor’s paying for it so not my problem. We can set up a grooming station where the original plumbing was installed.” She tapped her capped pen across one of Dick’s scribbles. “Mark down a peach color. We want to go for soothing tones to keep the precious babies calm.”

Dick wrote it down.

“So, you’re starting to eat?” Selina riffled through another stack of papers and tossed three pages of different litter boxes out of the stack. “Good for you, Kitten. I’m happy for you.”

“What’s the number for the humane society?” Dick asked without looking up from his notes. “Are you really happy for me, though, or just saying that?” Selina gave a purr as she passed over the list of animal shelters and humane societies in the city.

“Kitten, I’ve known you since you were still carrying Jason around like a teddy bear,” Selina laughed. Her eyes were sad, clashing with her light-hearted tone. “Of course I’m happy for you.”

“I still don’t understand why you kept her a secret,” Damian spoke as he handed over another sketch of their possible logo. “If she’d been in on his existence since the beginning, why have we never met her outside of the costumes?”

“It’s complicated,” Bruce answered gruffly. “We had a past, we have a present...and we’ll have a future.” Bruce’s eyes flashed to the small thin band wrapped around Selina’s ring finger. She sent him a wink. Damian made a gagging noise.

“So back to your healing body,” Selina spoke, all but pouncing on Dick and knocking various important documents off the bed, “tell me everything! Do you breathe now?” She eyed his face, studying him for the slightest hint of discomfort.

“No,” Dick spoke and shifted, letting Selina navigate his head into her lap. She ran her fingers through his hair. “My stomach just... does things and then I eat. I don’t think I have stomach acid so I have no idea what I’m actually doing to the substance I consume.” He stared pointedly at one of their
papers, trying to pretend the gentle ministrations of her hand didn't bring up memories of light laughter and white masks.

The Court found him. Should he say anything? He didn't want to. Bruce would take him back to the manor. He’d close down the cafe, maybe move him to another country. He’d keep Dick captive again, locked away for his own good, hidden away from the predators of the night.

“What’s wrong?” Damian asked, looking up from a book on proper cat grooming. “Grayson?” Dick flinched and curled into himself at the last name. The Owl had called him Gray Son. She branded him with that god-awful title of a mark. Bruce and Selina traded silent looks.

“I’m fine Owlet,” Dick exhaled softly. “Everything is fine. Can we set up a little kiddie pool for the cats?”

“The cats may not like that,” Damian countered automatically, falling into a long rant on why water wasn’t the best for cats.

Dick let the child speak, feeling those claws sink down deeper. He clenched his hands into fists, fighting back the hysteria.

Dick looked at the empty lot, trying to visualize how the Cat Cafe was going to look. He hadn’t actually been interested in it when Selina had all but demanded it but now that he was nearly two weeks away from beginning the interior construction...he was honestly pretty keen for it.

He still wasn’t going to handle the felines himself but that was besides the point.

“It’ll look nice.”

Dick turned to see Cass leaning against the propped open door, arms crossed and smile lopsided. Dick waved the girl in and she stepped forward, eyeing the cracked concrete flooring and the metal sheets covering the walls. Splotches of white paint and wires poked out against the skeleton like frame.
“I hope. Damian and Selina stayed over last night to discuss the final details. Bruce took the paperwork and plans to Luthor this morning,” Dick explained as Cass slid into step in front of him. She held a hand out, smile gentle.

“Dance with me?”

Dick mirrored her smile, though more hesitant in letting it come to his face, and accepted her offered hand. He pulled her in a comfortable distance and allowed her to take the lead.

She began with a twirl.

"You're upset," Cass observed as she led Dick through a series of intense foot-work. She spun them around three times in a triangular shape. Dick hummed in thought.

"I'm not-"

“Don’t lie to me,” Cass snapped out, dipping Dick. Once he was brought back up, she continued with swaying them around the room. "You are upset. Withdrawn. You... hide from us. Why?"

“I don’t-” Dick nearly dropped Cass’s hands but she kept them tight. “...I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You have to,” Cass pressed, allowing Dick to pick her up in a twirl. He continued to hold her, spinning in circles. “What upset you?”

“An Owl.”

Cass’s eyes widened momentarily before settling into sharp understanding. She planted her hands on Dick’s shoulders and hoisted herself up, Dick’s hands gripping her waist as he lifted her up above his head. Three spins and he let her down. They continued to step around the empty lot.

“The Court knows where I am. Who I’ve been pretending to be.” His voice cracked and he bent his
head down, resting his forehead against Cass’s. They stayed in place, swaying side to side as Cass held her older brother close. “I don’t want to go back.”

“You won’t,” Cass promised with steely conviction. “We won’t let them take you.”

“You can’t tell Bruce,” Dick blathered out, eyes going wide. “He’ll take me back to the manor. He’ll lock me up. I can’t leave my cafe - I don’t want to. This is my life now. I don’t - I can’t leave it.”

Cass cupped his face, trying to calm him down. “Breathe.” Okay, that was stupid. She continued on. “We have to tell Dad.”

“No no no-”

“We have to,” Cass repeated, trying to properly convey how serious she was. “He needs to know. You’ve been compromised. We need to protect you.”

“Cass-” Dick bit back his words as Cass stepped up on her tip-toes, pressing a kiss to his nose.

“We will protect you, big brother. You’re ours, not the Court’s.” Cass stepped back, moving to hold his hands. They’d stopped dancing. “Now, let’s go tell Dad.”

Dick didn’t budge. The girl halted and looked back at him. His smile was heartbreaking.

“I can’t,” he repeated in a whisper. “Bruce will hide me away. I can’t do that. If I go with you, he will keep me from leaving.” Dick stepped forward and pressed a kiss to Cass’s forehead. “Go. Warn him. I’m staying here.”

His sister frowned deeply at him, her eyes searching his for an answer she never voiced a question to.

“Fine. I will be back. Be safe.” Dick snorted as they finally pulled away from each other.
“I run a cafe that hosts most if not all of the criminals of Gotham. I think I’m the safest person in the world, at this point.” Cass flashed a smile and left, moving to her parked motorcycle. Tugging on her helmet, she waved before zipping up her leather jacket. Dick watched her ride off, his smile slipping.

He turned, walking over to his cafe.

Time for work.

It’d been an hour and Cass wasn’t back yet. Dick checked his phone. She’d messaged him that she’d made it to the manor, but after that, radio silence. Oh boy. Bruce wasn’t happy.

The bell chimed and Dick put his phone away, looking up to greet his new customers.

In the corner of the cafe was Deathstroke, staring sadly at his cup of tabasco sauce, tensed.

Nightingale made a hissing sound between his clenched teeth while Red Hood snorted. Behind them, Starfire, Beast Boy, Blue Beetle, Raven, and Terra gawked between Dick and Deathstroke.

“Oh shit,” Deathstroke swore and shot to his feet. Dick cleared his throat.

“You aren’t going to leave, are you?” Dick’s smile was sickeningly sweet. Deathstroke slowly sunk back down into his seat.

“Slade,” Terra hissed in warning. Starfire grabbed her by the back of her uniform shirt. “You bastard. What are you doing here?”

“Enjoying my...drink…” Deathstroke stared longingly at the espresso machine. “Can I please have some actual coffee?”
“No,” Dick replied airily and gestured for the Titans to sit. They looked hesitant, wary of him, as they filed into a booth table. “No fighting in my cafe, got it?”

Jaime snorted. “Like you’re one to- OUCH!” He rubbed at his side, which Nightingale had elbowed with a pointed glare. Red Hood slung an arm around Starfire’s shoulders, keeping her trapped in the booth.

“Hey Boss, can you get me a pasta salad from the kitchen?” Morgan asked, looking up from the computer. She was taking Beast Boy’s order.

“Of course!” Dick smiled as Beast Boy flirted with Morgan, resulting in both Raven and Terra using their powers to haul his green butt back to their table. Dick slipped into the kitchen just as another customer stepped up to order.

He came back out just as Morgan was completing the Titans’ drinks. Damian stormed into the cafe, Flash - Wally - trailing behind him.

“Grayson! I demand you order your annoyance to stop picking me up from school! It is unprofessional!” Damian snapped out as he tossed his book bag onto an empty table, nearly taking Deathstroke’s head off.

Wally and Dick hadn’t really discussed anything since Batman took him to the Watch Tower. They just kind of silently agreed to act the same. To stay friends. Apparently being friends with Wally involved him getting invested in Dick’s Nest.

“Hi Little Wayne!” Dick chirped out, leaning against the counter to smile at his tiny Owlet. “What homework do you have?” He tilted his head to the side. “And I didn't ask that, your father did. He caught wind that the Flash was taking a break in Gotham and hired him for bodyguard duty.”

At least, that’s what the public thought. Really Wally just wanted to get to know all of Dick’s Owlets and Pups since they seemed...more emotionally stable than the ones from his last world. He wanted to know the secrets that even his Nightwing failed to learn to raise the wounded Bats. Also, apparently Bruce had him on a bit of a leash that involved his memories. So the convenience of him frequenting Gotham was more for show than the reality.

“And can I help?” Harley piped up as she bounced down the booth-bench, dragging her coffee with her. “I miss homework.”
“Who misses homework?” Wally snorted, moving to sit opposite of the kid. “I can help with math.”

“What makes you two think I need your help?” Damian replied, sticking his nose in the air. He glanced over at the Titans, who were eyeing him unabashedly. Nightingale was trying not to laugh while Red Hood openly buried his face into his friend’s shoulder, snickering.

“This place gets more wild with each passing shift,” Morgan mumbled as she handed a plate of vegan snacks to the man unprompted. Dick smiled and passed the food over, beaming when Damian stuck a vegan cookie into his mouth.

“Uuum I think I need to go back to school,” Harley spoke as she peered over Damian’s shoulder to look at his homework. “Wait, what’s that squiggly line?”

“Oh man, this is the fun math!” Wally chimed in, bouncing in his seat. Damian sent the Titans a pleading look. They ignored him.

“I’m going to start cleaning the espresso bar,” Dick called to Morgan, who flashed him a thumbs up.

Her attention turned to the next customer, the hooded guy who’d been by the last four days. She smiled in greeting.

“Welcome back! That makes five days in a row!” Morgan greeted. The guy, she was pretty sure it was a guy, didn't show his face. Not uncommon for where they lived though. He tipped a lot and was always polite so Morgan, Ketti, and Jessica liked their fast-becoming regular.

Dick focused on steaming the cleaning chemical in a pitcher of water, patient to scrub off the dried milk from the steaming wand. The cafe buzzed around him like soft background noise and he smiled to himself, hearing Harley randomly guess answers to Damian’s homework.

“What can I say?” The pitcher fell from his slack grip, the sound in the cafe fading away until all he could focus on was that smooth timbre behind him. “Something about this place keeps me coming.”
If he could breathe, it’d surely be caught in his throat. If he had blood, it’d be frozen in his veins. If he was alive, he’d be praying to whatever deity to keep him that way.

He turned slowly, acutely aware that the cafe seemed frozen, trained on him. Morgan was staring at him, eyes wide, her gaze moving to the scalding water-cleaning mixture coating his arm.

Despite the hood and his features hidden in the shadows it provided, Dick knew he had brown hair. He had brown eyes and almost purple looking veins that criss-crossed his face. He had an uneven fake smile from memories of his time alive and bore his weight on his left more than his right.

His handle with a knife was meticulous and heartless. He could and would kill everyone in this cafe with them being none the wiser if Ordered to.

William Cobb smiled at Dick, practiced and mimicked. He raised a hand, wiggling his fingers slowly in a painfully uncomfortable wave.

Chapter End Notes

The Grandmaster is creepy, y'all. Like, not inappropriately creepy but he's def creepy.

Just so y'all aware, this story isn't ending anytime soon. Despite the sudden introduction of a plot, this story still has a ways to go lol

Next chapter will be Damian's Introduction chapter! :D Oh boy!

edit: as of 10/07/2019 all mentions of Birdflash have been removed from this chapter
And to think, half a year ago, she was surviving, not living, out on patrol. Not knowing that a broken ankle would change the rest of her life.

Did I say Damian was next? Oops. I lied. Stephanie's next. Babs will be after her (oof should have had Babs first), then Cass, then Damian. Duke will be last.

Your friendly neighborhood grammar nazi has edited this chapter :)

“Um.” She blinked, hanging upside down. The hand on her ankle kept her suspended, the golden claws attached to the hand pricking at her covered skin. “Can you, like, not?”

“You almost fell,” the figure explained. She was dangling over a drop of a roof, her only anchor being the hand holding her up. It didn't sound promising. “You must be more careful.” The hand belonged to a man, tan skin and blue eyes. He was a good three heads taller than her and built like a surfer. He guided her to the ledge of the roof and dropped her down.

Blood rushed throughout her body and black spots danced across her vision. She gave a groan, only for it to increase in volume as Batman and Nightingale landed down behind them.

“What are you doing?” Batman’s voice was a fierce growl and she stiffened, scurrying backwards. Her movements ceased as the stranger stepped in front of her protectively. Was he standing up to the Batman? “You aren’t supposed to leave the Cave.”

“Nightingale has a fever. I was worried,” the stranger argued, motioning to the vigilante beside
Batman. He made an offended trill in his throat. Batman's head jerked to his partner, who shuffled backwards.

Was this real life?

“Snitch!” Nightingale snapped childishly. “And who is she?” Another figure landed down behind them and she had to pinch herself. It was Red Hood, holstering his guns.


“I have a name!” She snapped out before she could stop herself. They all turned their attention to her and she sunk into herself, mentally chiding her stupid move. “Um. I’m Spoiler. Hi?”

Another shadow fell and she groaned. Jesus, were they all just going to fall from the sky?

“Batgirl,” Batman greeted.

“We having a party here? Oh, hello,” the girl in the half-face cowl greeted. “Who are you?” Her red hair swayed in the wind.

“Spoiler,” Stephanie introduced again. She winced and moved to stand. Her left ankle made a crack and she slumped with a shriek. She drew her leg up to her chest, cradling her wounded ankle. “HOLY SHIT YOU BROKE MY ANKLE!” Fire laced up the joint and her voice broke as she gave a sob.

“You were falling,” the guy - Dickie as Red Hood called him - stated simply. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think I grabbed you that hard.” Stephanie gave a whimper. This sucked. Here she was, trying to be a Hero on her own, and she got downed by a dude without a mask.

“Oh my god,” Nightingale groaned, hiding his face in his gloved hands. “Dick, no .”

“Spoiler,” Batman piped up. “As in Stephanie Brown, daughter of Cluemaster?” If Stephanie wasn’t crying, she’d be creeped out by him knowing who she was.
“Yes?” She whimpered as Dickie knelt down next to her. He tugged her pant leg up, revealing her already swollen ankle to the cold air of Gotham. She hissed out at the sudden intrusion and tried to draw her leg back. Dickie held her ankle steady.

“I’m sorry Pup,” Dickie spoke out and Stephanie noted how all of the Bats went completely still. “I’ll take you back to get fixed.”

“Back?” Her voice raised in hysteria, scrambling out of his reach. “Back where? Oh my god, please don’t kidnap me.”

“Too late,” Dickie spoke seriously and before she could blink, he had her in his arms bridal style. His hold was far more gentle than she was expecting and despite her building panic and shock from her broken ankle, she felt oddly comfortable. “You’ll like the Cave. It echoes when you yell.”

“Yay?” Stephanie whispered, uncertain. She tentatively wrapped her arms around the man’s shoulders and saw the Bats whispering furiously to themselves. It was amusing to watch Batman let out a series of grunts and grumbles while Red Hood and Nightingale made high-pitched whines. Only Batgirl looked calm and collected, watching them with an air of bemusement.

“So Spoiler,” Batgirl saddled up to them, smile sympathetic, “you’re going to go back to the Cave with Dick and me. We’re going to have your ankle patched up, okay?” Spoiler rested her head against Dick’s shoulder, her body trembling. She forced herself to nod. “After that, we can talk, okay sweetie?” Stephanie gave another feeble nod.

Her ankle hurt and she just wanted to curl up in bed and sleep.

She must have dozed off because when she opened her eyes again, she was in a plush bed, her ankle in a heavy cast, and a giant teddy bear was cuddling her.

“Uh.” She looked around. Her uniform was off, leaving her face exposed and her hair in a messy bun. Her bruises from patrol were plastered up and any blood she’d had on her was cleaned off. Not creepy. Not creepy at all.

“You’re up!” Dick chirped, looking up from his book. In the light of day, he actually looked really attractive. A complete jerk who broke her ankle, but his smile and dimples made up for it.
Stephanie just stared.

“Hi. You passed out before we got back so we just set your ankle and cast it while you were asleep.” Dick explained, uncaring to her unwavering gaze. He closed his book and smiled at her. “I’m Dick. Nice to meet you!”

“...Hi.” Stephanie fiddled with the teddy bear’s large stuffed arm. “Um. Where am I?”

“In my room,” Nightingale’s voice sounded from the doorway and she looked over.

It wasn’t fair. Nightingale was not supposed to be hella fucking cute. What the actual fuck. Stephanie felt her cheeks heating, internally screeching “HNNNNNG” in long tangents because. Wow. First Dick, now Nightingale? She was afraid, actually terrified, to see what Red Hood and Batgirl looked like.

Oh my god, what did Batman look like?

Wait, he looked familiar. Stephanie squinted at him before her eyes went wide. “Holy - you’re Tim Drake-Wayne. Oh my god. Oh my god, is BATMAN BRUCE WAYNE?!?” She hadn’t meant to scream it but it still came out as such. Tim winced, rubbing at his ears while Dick laughed at her scream.

At least someone was enjoying this kidnapping.

“Oh my god, I - why do I - why are you - are you planning to kill me?” Stephanie used the giant teddy bear - and it was Tim’s, Motherfucking Nightingale’s, teddy bear - as a shield. “Because I know your secret now?”

“You’re living alone,” another guy spoke up, leaning against the doorway behind Tim. He had white streaks in his hair, his gaze cold as he smirked at her. Jesus take the wheel. If that hot Abercrombie & Fitch looking model was Red Hood, she was going to throw herself out the window. “Cluemaster is in jail right now. Dick’s weird about child abandonment.”

“Child-” She snapped her head over to Dick. “I’m not abandoned. My dad’s just in jail.”
“You’re 13-”

“You’re 13-”

“14,” Stephanie corrected haughtily.

“14 and living alone. You went out patrolling by yourself, lack the experience and expertise to do
such-” she flushed “-and nearly died last night. I may have broken your ankle, but it’s better than
being a blood splatter on the street.”

Stephanie stared at him. How he’d said that - the splatter part, it’s like he’d spoken from
experience.

“So, you’re going to stay here for now, okay Pup?” Stephanie reeled back.

“I’m not a dog,” she hissed out, ready to throw the bear at him. Dick blinked at her owlishly.

“Oh no, Pup. Baby bat?” Red Hood gave a bark of laughter at Stephanie’s responding gobsmacked
expression. “Welcome to the family.”

“I’m suing,” she blurted out.

Despite the weird idea of boarding at the Wayne Manor, life was...easier. She didn’t wake up cold,
she never went hungry, and she got all the nice eye candy she could ever ask for in the form of
shirtless crime-fighters sparring.

Life was interesting.

Dick hovered close to her at all times, carrying her around after she tripped using her crutches the
one time. He braided her hair and painted her nails when Barbara - Batgirl - slept over and claimed
the media room as their Nest for the night.
There were a lot of bird metaphors that were passed around in the Manor and Steph felt like she was missing a joke. For a bunch of Bats, they liked to make a lot of avian jokes centering around Owls.

Steph got close to Tim. He was funny, charming, a bit geeky but in an endearing way, and watching him face-plant into his cereal every morning was her favorite way to start her schedule.

She helped Alfred and Dick around the house while everyone else was gone, either at work or school. Jason came and went through the week, always greeting her with a hair ruffle and a chaste kiss to Dick’s temple.

She’d questioned it, asking if they were an item. Tim had just stared at her in unconcealed horror and had whispered, “Never let Jason here you say that.” She never brought it up again.

A month passed and she got her cast taken off. She still let Dick carry her around. She still watched Tim face-plant into his cereal.

She still stayed.

Finding out about Dick’s past hadn’t been on her to-do list. She’d been offered to patrol with Red Hood and Nightingale and, not wanting to miss a chance to prowl the streets, had gone out with them.

She’d ended up kidnapped by a bunch of mobsters. Red Hood had been shot in the stomach and Nightingale had been beaten over the head with a metal pipe. He was out cold.

Batman hadn’t saved them.

No, Talon had.
He dropped down in the warehouse like a leaf falling from a tree, silent and elegant in his descent. Jason gave a bit off sob of relief, seeing him, while Stephanie just watched him slaughter everyone.

This skeletal figure took out the mobsters in less than minutes. He got shot, stabbed, hit, but he moved as if he hadn’t. She could see the wounds, see the black blood - and it had to be blood - but he stilled moved.

Was he sent to kill them? An enemy from another mob family? Were they about to die?

But then the figure stepped towards them and cooed sadly like a wounded Owl.

“Oh Owlets, Pup,” a very familiar voice had whined out and it hit Stephanie that in front of her was Dick. Tiny, dead, murder-machine Dick.

She blacked out.

She’d taken to braiding his hair. She loved how long it was, in his Talon form. She braided it and added fake flowers and ribbons or pulled it into space-buns and ponytails. Jason always took pictures, smiling cheekily, while Tim just offered up sympathetic nothings to his oldest brother.

Dick didn't mind. He purred.

Steph was a little in love with him and his purrs. She was a little in love with his odd quirks born from his childhood and his horrendous fashion sense.

She was a little in love with Tim’s burning-wood scent when they cuddled or his soft voice when he helped her on homework (because of course she’d ended up being enrolled into school. Bruce had looked horrified when she mentioned she never went).

She was a little in love with Jason’s off-tone singing when he baked in the kitchen and his passion
when he went on a rant about Shakespeare and other classic literature.

She was a little in love with Bruce’s strong arms when he cradled her after a horrible nightmare involving her father. She was a little in love with his gentle pats and his cheesy Dad jokes.

She was a little in love with Babs’ sharp eyes as she stuck up for her when they had Girls outings. She was a little in love with the woman’s warmth and care when she helped her through puberty (because malnourishment gave her a late start on things).

She was a little in love with Alfred’s soothing tones as he taught her the proper way to bake cookies from scratch. She was a little in love with his grandfatherly vibe, how he made her soup when she felt sick or snuck her ice cream when she was feeling down.

She was utterly and completely in love with the Bats and she didn’t think it was just a bad thing.

Three months passed and the guest room became her room.

She was more than okay with it.

The day Babs was shot and her mantle of Batgirl stolen from her, Stephanie was reminded of just how scary Dick was. She’d forgotten that underneath his layers of ugly cat sweaters and physical affection that rivaled everyone else’s in the world, that he was a killing machine.

And apparently had been Ordered not to kill Joker.

So she sat there, curled into a tight ball, as Dick punched the Cave wall. His knuckles split open, the bones of his hand tearing through his flesh before healing. Over and over again.

Over.
And.

Over.

Again.

Babs just held Stephanie’s hand, sitting in her new wheelchair and watching solemnly. None of the Bats got close, fearing the worst, though Steph saw Batman hand a dart of some sort to Jason.

“Gotham needs a Batgirl,” Babs whispered to Steph over the sickening crack of flesh tearing and bones breaking. “Can you hang up Spoiler for a while?”

“Anything for you, sis,” Stephanie said seriously. She squeezed Barbara’s hand tightly, determined.

“Is it ever weird?” Stephanie asked, chin digging into Dick’s chest. He was propped up on pillows, Barbara using his left shoulder as a pillow. Jason was curled against his right, drooling into his sleeve. She was stretched out on top of him, Tim using the dip of her back to rest his head as he fiddled with his cellphone.

“Is what weird?” Dick’s fingers threaded through her hair. She’d complained about wanting to cut it, only to screech as Dick snagged the scissors from her hand and banned her from doing it. Apparently he had a thing for hair. Who knew?

“Being undead,” she asked and nearly elbowed Jason in the face as she shifted to touch his cold cheek. He leaned into the touch, humming.

“No,” he responded. “Though I know it bothers you all.” Stephanie cupped his cheek, rubbing her thumb back and forth absently.

“I mean, kinda. I’m laying on you and it feels like I’m laying on the cold hard ground,” she
laughed faintly. Tim glanced at them before reaching back, pinching her butt. “OUCH! You little—”

Dick grabbed her face before she could move to attack Tim and blew a raspberry against her cheek. She squealed, effectively waking Barbara and Jason up. She reeled back into Tim’s chest, face red and eyes wide.

“What was that?!” She shrieked out, laughter ruining her stern expression.

“Oh, he just recently got into that,” Jason slurred, rubbing his cheek against Dick’s arm. “He says it makes up stop arguing.”

“No shit,” she laughed out, rubbing at her slobbered cheek. “Ew, gross. The only one who can kiss me is Tim!”

“Why would I wanna - ow!” He rolled out of the way of her kicks. “You’re a bitch!”

“You’re a jackass!” She shot back and gave another laughing shriek as Jason snagged her around the middle, squishing her between Dick and Barbara. Barbara wrapped an arm around her middle, shushing her.

“Guys, it’s 5 A.M,” Bruce’s exasperated voice sounded from behind the closed bedroom door. “Please stop...doing whatever you’re doing.”

“Sorry dad,” they all called out, completely not sorry. He gave a sigh and opened the bedroom door, seeing his children all clumped up on Dick’s guest bed. He lived in his own apartment but always crashed with them when Barbara stayed the night.

It may also have something to do with the fact he didn't sleep, so he didn't have a bed in his own apartment. Bruce didn't mind, it meant he still saw his wayward eldest.

“Wanna join?” Tim asked, tangled in Jason’s and Dick’s legs, his face illuminated by his screen. Bruce stared at them before charging at them. Babs and Steph screeched as Dick rolled on top of them, shielding them with his body. Bruce body-slammed into the mattress, sending Jason and Tim flying off and crashing onto the floor.
He burst out laughing, ducking under the assault of pillows Stephanie and Barbara attacked him with. Dick crawled off the bed to help his dazed Owlets up.

“Is he drugged?” Tim wheezed, the air knocked out of him. “I think he’s drugged.”

“I’m not,” Bruce laughed out, the girls finished in their attack. He sat beside them, helping Barbara adjust into a more comfortable position. “It was just...tempting.”

“Tempting,” Jason wheezed as he clawed up Dick’s legs. He hugged him around the waist, glaring at Bruce. “Catapulting your kids off the bed is...tempting.”

“You have no idea,” Bruce answered seriously and Tim groaned.

Stephanie snickered into Barbara’s shoulder, trying to hide her tears of joy.

And to think, half a year ago, she was surviving, not living, out on patrol. Not knowing that a broken ankle would change the rest of her life.

Chapter End Notes


So, poll. Do you want the interaction with Cobb to be crack or serious? Because I can work with either.
Warning(s): Slight description of gore/violence, a scene (yes scene) of talk of male genitalia. Please take caution with the very last scene if that makes you uncomfortable. Nothing sexual. More of dirty humor.

Chapter brought to you by: justa_reck talking to me on discord, Batman Ninja, Dark Nights: Metal, and all you amazing lovelies.

Lmao Chameleon_Incognito mentioned in one of their comments that they were a regular in the cafe. You all are. You can never escape. Next drink's on the house from me ;)

This chapter has been edited by your neighborhood grammar nazi.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[Cobb stood there, towering over the child’s form. They were in the labyrinth, in a secluded corner on the opposite side of the coffins chamber. The child’s chest was barely rising, his ribs visible under his tattered shirt. Blood lazily leaked from the gashes in his chest, his eyes dimming by the second.

He stared, watching those pale lips open in soft gasps for air. This was his blood. His heir. His.

He knelt down, pressing the thin needle into the crook of the child’s outstretched arm. The liquid went in and the child’s eyes flashed yellow. It was supposed to do that, apparently. This new serum, whatever it was, was working wonders on Gray Son. The first of his kind, the ultimate Talon.

Cobb brushed the child’s bangs back as the gashes began to stitch themselves back up. He hummed softly, a child’s lullaby he’d memorized years ago when he thought he’d be a proper father.

Dull blue eyes bled speckles of yellow, his pupils thinning out just a bit. His flesh was just a little bit cooler than that morning.

Cobb continued to hum, waiting for the child to awaken.
“Holy crap! You okay, Boss?” Morgan was at his side in an instant, pressing a rag to his wet arm. He mechanically took the offered fabric, wiping at his skin. Cobb raised an amused eyebrow at him.

“What did he order?” Dick intoned softly, his voice sounding too far away to his own ears. Morgan frowned and searched his expression for a moment.

“Just a coffee. I can get it-” Dick shook his head.

He was currently the safest person in the entire world. In this single moment, standing in his cafe, he was protected. Not even the Devil himself could take his soul. He had not only metahumans, aliens, and half-demons currently watching his every move, but also deranged psychopaths that made killing a sport.

It gave him courage. It gave him the push he needed to shrug off those claws, just for a moment, and straighten his back.

“Can you clean up my mess for me? I’ll get his coffee,” Dick spoke, his smile brittle and empty. Morgan’s eyebrows pinched up and he skirted around her. He maintained eye contact with Cobb, aware of how the cafe was frozen, watching the two.

He grabbed a 24 ounce to-go cup, slamming it down with force in front of the man. Still maintaining eye contact, he grabbed his tabasco bottle and popped the top off, pouring the entire contents into the cup.

Cobb stared.

“Tha’t’s-” the Talon blinked “-tha’t’s hot sauce.”
“I’m glad that old age and bright lights haven’t blinded you.” Dick capped the cup and pushed it in Cobb’s direction. “Sit down.”

“Gray Son—”

“Sit.” Dick leaned forward, Romani dripping from his tongue like the black ooze in his veins. “Down.” Cobb stared at him, looked to his cup, before looking back up at Dick.

“Is that any way to treat your grandfather?”

Morgan wheezed, choking on her spit while more than half the customers spat out their drinks. Dick’s expression went blank.

“Deathstroke,” he called after a beat of silence, “you want a spiced chai?”

“I’d fuck Trigon for a single espresso shot,” the mercenary cried out in desperation and Raven shuddered.

“Take him out back.”

Harley dropped her latte, eyes wide in barely contained joy. The cafe was frozen. Slade moved to stand up, his visible eye sparkling in desire for a hit beverage.

“Okay, okay, I’ll sit,” Cobb relented after a moment. “Jesus kid, has the streets of Gotham ruined you?”

“No, I think you did a swell enough job at that.” Dick’s mouth was running on autopilot. His hands trembled under the counter. His vision was zeroed in on Cobb, watching his every moment. He was safe here.

He had control here.

“Join me?” Cobb asked, sniffing at his cup. He pulled it back with a snort. Dick saw Damian
whispering to Wally, who’s eyes went wide and his complexion paled. Jason and Tim were subtle in their movements, slipping out of their booth without sound.

“Sure. Morgan, you alright by yourself?” He poured himself a cup of coffee and the girl nodded hesitantly. The cafe just observed the two as they found an empty table, Cobb taking a position to where he had eyes on the entire cafe. Dick placed his back to the customers, trusting them.

Jason and Tim moved to a table closer to Dick, ending up in the booth with Harley, Damian, and Wally. They all wore serious expressions, shamelessly eavesdropping.

Cobb moved slow, making his movements deliberately noticed as he grasped Dick’s coffee. Dick watched him, face blank, as the Talon brought the cup up to his lips and took a sip.

“Amelia never made a cup of coffee this delicious,” Cobb whispered softly, his expression softening. “She attempted it three times before giving up. She could never get the water to be hot enough. Finally said it was the work of servants. You make it the work of Gods.”

“That was my great-grandmother, right?” Dick asked, studying him.

His memories of Cobb were warped, at best. He had memories of the man holding him, walking around the labyrinth on the days when Dick wouldn’t even lift a finger. He had memories of the man cutting him apple slices, feeding him until his stomach stopped working. He had memories of the man slicing his throat open, of tearing his intestines out and making him pick that back up and stuff himself back together. Of breaking every bone in his body, of bashing his head in, or choking him until he understood the true horror of suffocating to death.

“She was supposed to be, yes. Maybe if she had… Look at you.” Cobb’s voice held a note of melancholy as he took another sip. “Owning a cafe, making delicious coffee. Who’d have thought that 11 years ago, this is where you’d turn up?” He reached across the table and brushed Dick’s bangs back. Dick’s empty gaze didn't waver. “Do you hate me?”


“ Heard you got a friend,” Cobb suddenly explained, pointing to Flash - Wally - who flinched back. “Look at you, with friends. Do they know what you are?” He leaned closer. "Do they know what you've done?"
“Please don’t talk about them,” Dick snapped out. His fingers were digging into his thighs, tearing skin.

“What? Want me to talk about your siblings?” Dick’s eyes flashed dangerously. “How about—”

“You’re his grandpa, right?” Harley suddenly shrieked out, completely erasing the tension in the cafe. Cobb raised an eyebrow at her. “Do you have pictures of Dickie-poo as a baby in diapers? Any embarrassing photos of him running around in his birthday suit?”

“Why would you ask that?” Wally, bless his heart, wasn’t used to Gotham’s craziness yet. “Why would you ask anyone that?”

“I think I do,” Cobb responded, rummaging through his pockets.

“What?” Dick reeled back. Jason slammed his hands on the table and made a move to lunge for the man. Or the pictures. The cafe didn't exactly know which.

“BABY BUTT DICK?!” Harley all but shrieked, crawling over the table to get to Dick’s side. “Give them to me!”


“You were a cute baby and the Court wanted me to keep tabs.” He shrugged. “It seemed like a fair trade. I stalked you, I got photos.” He tugged out his wallet, unfolding it to reveal small, worn photos. Harley shoved Dick’s head down, squealing loudly while Red Hood joined her.

“Oh my god, he’s on an elephant!” The clown cooed, beaming at the image. “He’s so tiny!”

“Oh my god, he’s on an elephant!” The clown cooed, beaming at the image. “He’s so tiny!”

“He was,” Cobb agreed, his gaze soft. Wally pressed himself against Dick’s back, peering at the pictures.

“Oh shit man, I’ve seen these before.” He ignored a few peoples’ curious looks. “Yeah, yeah, Nightwing used to keep a shoebox of this kinda stuff.”
“Have you informed Batman?” Damian whispered softly to Nightingale, who nodded stiffly.

“Yeah. He’s on his way,” the teen responded. His finger tapped nervously on the table.

“Slaaaaade,” Dick whined, crushed under three people’s weight. “Please.” Slade moved to get up again, a hand moving to his katana. “I’ll make it any drink you want, as many as you want. Just please. Remove him.”

“I’m hurt,” Cobb admitted, putting his photos away. “I come here to warn you that the Court wants you back-” Dick stiffened “-and this is how I’m treated.”

“I’m not going back.”

And just like that, the bravado was gone, slipping under the cracks as white walls came up around him. Just like that, his confidence, his ease, was drained from him like his red blood and replaced with cold, empty nothing. “I’m not going back.”

“You aren’t,” Cobb agreed. “I’m not taking you back.”

“I’m - what?” Dick exhaled loudly. All for show. He couldn’t breathe. Cobb leaned close, his lips tugging downwards.

“Look at you. You’ve been ruined.” Red Hood’s hand moved to his gun at that comment. “The Court would try their damnedest to fix you. Make you perfect again.” Cobb’s eyes closed. “They’d break you more than they already have.”

“Look. You have friends,” Cobb gestured to the cafe’s patrons. “Family.” His eyes pointedly looked at the Heroes surrounding him. “Is this what you would have been, had the Court never gotten you?”

“No,” Dick admitted softly, because he’d been granted knowledge of who he could have become if he never met the Court. He’d heard how his life could have turned out, blanketed in black, blue - in red, green, and yellow. “But this is my life now.”
“You escaped,” Cobb reminded. “No, more like kidnapped. I was sent to collect you. But watching you - watching this place… You’ll die if you go back to the Court.”

“I’m already dead.” White walls, bloody handprints, torn fingernails from clawing at the marble flooring. “They’ll retire you.”

“I think I’m done being Talon.”

Deathstroke jolted at the name. His eyes flashed to the Titans, who were watching with rapt attention.

“I think you are too.” Cobb got up. “The Owls will be watching. Let’s make this believable, alright?”

His memories of Cobb were warped, to be completely honest. He remembered nights when the man would let him curl up in his lap, sobbing for his dead parents. He remembered the man being almost gentle as he corrected a punch or a knife jab. He remembered the reluctance to leave him alone with Grandmaster, of his hesitancy to have him do a solo mission.

He remembered a man, dressed in a hat and scarves that covered his face, cradling his sobbing face to his chest as he carried him out of the Big Tent. Of wiping his parents blood from his hands and pressing gentle kisses to his wet cheeks.

He remembered waking up after becoming Talon fully, of sitting there in blank nothing, waiting for instructions. Of those clawed fingers running through his hair, cooing at him. Cobb oversaw his training, oversaw his missions, oversaw his time outside the Coffin. Cobb oversaw everything so no other Talon or Owl could get to him, so Cobb could be the only one to punish him, murder him.

Cobb chugged the last of the coffee, slamming the cup down on the table. “Alright kid, show me what you’ve got.”

He lunged. Wally had Dick in his hold and was behind the counter before Cobb even fully moved. Wally shoved Morgan and Dick into the kitchen, eyes wide.
“Don’t move,” Wally whispered as Red Hood fired a bullet at the assassin. “You’re not supposed to reveal yourself, right? Stay here. Protect your employee.” He glanced at Morgan, who was gripping tightly to Dick’s shirt. She’d never experienced a fight in the cafe before. None of them had.

“No, he-” Wally was gone before Dick could finish his sentence. Harley had snagged one of Jason’s guns, firing it off wildly. Cobb ducked and weaved, the bullets burying into his form from her haphazard aim. Bullets shot around the cafe and Dick hugged Morgan to his chest, blocking her from a stray bullet.

She screamed but Dick just ushered her further into the kitchen. He shoved her into a corner, unconcerned over the bullet in his shoulder. “Stay here. Call Batman. If it goes quiet, run out the back. I’ll give you overtime.”

“I DON’T WANT OVERTIME PAY!” Morgan screeched. Dick left the kitchen. Cobb had Damian in a choke-hold, jumping about the cafe as if he were playing an intense game of ‘the floor is lava’. Nightingale was being held up by Blue Beetle and Beast Boy, Raven and Starfire trying to trap Cobb and free his hostage. Red Hood was reloading, Harley swinging her mallet wildly at Cobb’s knees.

Slade was crouched behind the coffee machine, guzzling down cup after cup of the dark liquid. He froze like a deer in headlights, catching Dick staring at him. He dropped his cup, caught coffee-handed.

“Just.” Dick sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I don’t - fuck. Just go protect Morgan, please. You’ll have redeemed yourself then.” Slade scurried past him.

What was the date? Could he push his Weekend Adventure sooner and just? Take a vacation or something?

He stared at the chaos, mourning the broken tables or shattered lights. Easy to replace but still. It was the principle. No fighting.

“Stop,” he called out. No one listened to him. He saw Terra glance at him before ripping the ground up, creating a hole in his wooden floor-boards. Did she just - she just ripped up his foundation.
He sighed and buried his hands through his hair. He wanted to do something - cry - murder - something.

Batman chose this moment to blow the building’s roof off with the Batwing. Dick’s face went comically blank, watching the plaster and christmas lights rain down on his unsuspecting customers. He heard Morgan shrieking profanities from the kitchen.

His cafe. His apartment.

Dick.exe has stopped working.

He walked around the falling debris as Batman and Black Bat fell from the plane, landing on the crumbled plaster. Everyone was gawking at the Bats.

“Come here Cobb,” Dick spoke, his voice sounding too distant to his own ears. Cobb’s and Damian’s eyes trailed down.

“You’re holding a knife,” the Talon pointed on, setting Damian down onto the ground. “You’re pointing it at me.”

“I just want to talk,” Dick denied, his head tilting to the side. “Come here Grandpa, let me love you.”

“Holy shit I think he snapped,” Jason stage-whispered to Tim, who just stared dumbly at the two Talons.

“I think I’ve stayed here long enough,” Cobb responded warily. Dick was in his personal space, eyes empty of life as he peered up at the man.

“I think so too,” Dick whispered lowly, the tip of his knife pressing into the hoodie’s fabric. “You ruined my cafe.”

“I did not-”
“You.” Dick sunk the knife in and Cobb shut up. “Ruined.” He raised his other hand, gripping onto Cobb’s shoulder to keep him still. “My.” He dragged the knife up, the sickening sound of slicing flesh echoing throughout the silent area. “Cafe.” He dropped the knife and planted his hands on either side of Cobb’s head.

“There’s a no fighting rule in my cafe for a reason. I don’t like my Nest being disrupted.” He twisted and the echoing snap of his neck breaking made a few of the patrons flinch. Cobb crumbled into Dick’s arms and he huffed.

Narrowed eyes turned to the gawking customers. Wally looked sick to his stomach, staring at the corpse limp in his friend’s arms.

“Cafe’s closed. Get the fuck out.”

Everyone dispersed.

Dick crouched down next to Cobb’s healed body. He’d played possum, staying motionless until everyone but his family and Wally were left. Morgan was guided out of the kitchen by Slade, looking shell-shocked.

“Until this is fixed, you guys are getting paid vacation,” Dick explained to Morgan, who dumbly nodded. “Slade, can you walk her home?”

“Sure,” Slade spoke after a moment. “Come on, kid, let’s go.” He guided her by the shoulder out the door, taking care to not jostle her. He didn't want to somehow end up on Dick’s shit list again.

When Slade and Morgan were gone, Cobb sat up.

“Jesus kid, you’ve gotten stronger in the years,” Cobb grunted as he straightened his neck, rubbing at his jaw. Wally gave a disgusted wheeze from behind them before grabbing Dick around the wrist, hauling him away from the man. Dick blinked as Batman, Red Hood, Nightingale, Black
Bat, and Damian slid between them, forming a barrier between the two.

“What do you want with my son?” Batman’s voice was a shuddering growl, reminiscent of his first night back on patrol after Jason’s death. He gripped two batarangs in his gloved hands, ready to shank Cobb if he even moved funny.

“Your son?” Cobb laughed, standing up. “He was mine before yours, Batman. You merely kidnapped him. Look at him, he developed Stockholm syndrome.”

Dick frowned, insulted. Uh, rude.

“Fuck you,” Jason snapped out, clicking his safety off. “We healed him! You guys were the ones who scrambled his head up like eggs!” Cobb hummed, not denying the accusation. Rather, he agreed.

“The Court is under a new Grandmaster,” Cobb finally stated as he flexed his hands, checking his weapons. “They go by the Parliament of Owls, now.” The Bats stiffened. “They believe in some crazy Bat God called Barbatos and are hoping to bring Gray Son back.”

“...What?” Wally squeezed Dick's wrist tight, mind blanking. He just got Dick - a Dick - back into his life and now their friendship was already being threatened?

“Another Bat God?” Nightingale looked horrified. “Oh my god, what is with people using Bats as their Gods?”

“Another?” Cobb paused. “What do you mean by another?”

Damian snorted. They looked at him. “What? I personally find it funny that a bunch of owls are worshipping a Bat God. Reminds me of that adventure to Feudal Japan where they thought Batman and Grayson were Gods.”

“You’ve got to be joking.” Cobb’s voice was weak.

“What.” Wally looked at them, Cobb’s blank expression hilarious. “No, seriously, what?”
“That was fun!” Spoiler called as she dropped down from the ceiling, Signal behind her. “Dick opened up a tea shop!”

“Don’t remind me,” Batman groaned finally, ducking his head. “I end up somehow separating 2 years instead of five minutes and he’s the Emperor’s personal Tea Maker. Gorilla Grodd literally surrendered for tea. Tea.”

“Again, what?!” Wally looked so lost.

“It was a fun time,” Tim sighed mournfully. “Who knew Japan could be so peaceful back in the old days? That entire clan of Bat Ninjas were cool too.”

“I’m so glad I wasn’t involved,” Duke whispered. He hadn’t been with them for that. Nor had he ever heard this story.

“Except that those Oni-things thought Dick was some sort of Demon God,” Jason piped up. The Bats groaned, remembering. “I think it was the only time we ever willingly joined up with Harley and Joker to fight off demons.”

“What the hell?” Cobb spoke up. No one listened to him.

“But seriously,” Batman interrupted, coughing. “Why are you warning us and why do they want Dick back now of all times?”

“I don’t know.” Cobb shrugged. “I don’t know how you think we’re treated but we don’t get to ask questions. This new Grandmaster, they’re working directly under the Judge of Owls.” Dick gave a whine, shuffling backwards into Wally’s arm. “Ah, you remember them, I see.”

“Judge of Owls?” Cass asked, frowning behind her cowl. “Who is that?”

“The true Leader of the Court,” Dick whispered softly, eyes wide and unseeing. “They visit every few years. They were there when I was first brought to the labyrinth.”
“Yes,” Cobb sighed. “Anyways, they want Gray Son. Apparently he’s important to the resurrection
of this Barbatos God.”

“How?” Tim questioned, frowning. “Because he’s a Talon?” Cobb shook his head, looking
apologetic that he didn't have the answers.

“It’s a possibility, considering he was their first Talon on the new serum.” Everyone looked at
Dick. “The serum was different from what they’ve used on us. He’s...special.”

“**Special Gray Son. Our perfect, special Gray Son.**”

Dick closed his eyes tightly, banishing the memories of his former Grandmaster away. He
swallowed. “Why are you telling us this?”

“I had a change of heart.” Jason snorted. “It’s true. Gray Son’s the only Talon who was rewired to
not have emotions. We were allowed to keep our humanity - or rather, there was no other choice.
They hadn’t advanced in the serum enough to take it away.” Cobb smiled ruefully at Dick. “So we
had to cut it out of him.”

“That’s all I know though,” he finally finished. “Now I will return to the Court. I will be terminated
for my failure. They will send more out for you. You should lay low.”

“Not like I can exactly continue working.” Wally flinched at the hard grip on his arm as his friend
looked around his ruined cafe. He eyed a few tables that he’d smashed with his super speed. Oops.

Cobb nodded and took a hesitant step forward. The Bats tensed, ready to fight.

“You were so tiny,” he admitted. “I thought you’d die within the first week.” Dick turned his head
You kept surviving. You really are the perfect Talon, Dick.”

Dick’s head snapped back to face him. “My child, Dick.” Cobb’s smile was small and sad, his eyes
shining with unshed tears. He looked smaller than Dick ever remembered. Tired, like the fight had
left him.

“I know.” The man took a step back towards the door. “You have every right to. I made you hate me. You could not love in the Court, little one. Love is a weakness.”

“Goodbye,” Dick whispered after him, shoulders slumping.

“Goodbye Dick Grayson. I am happy that even after everything, you found a family.” Cobb nodded to the gathered Bats and Speedster. “Remembered. Lay low.” He didn't wait for them to speak. He turned on his heel and left.

[“You have to be fierce,” Cobb demanded as he circled around Dick. He was crouched on the floor, vomiting up blood. “You cannot have weaknesses.” A large gash stretched across his shoulder, to his opposite hip. It was steadily oozing blood. “Weakness means failure.”

Cobb grabbed Dick by the hair, hauling him up. He cried out, his broken leg setting ablaze in pain.

“Failure means death.” He kicked Dick away from him, letting him crash into the wall five feet away from him. “You need to survive.”

Cobb was in his face, hand gripping tightly to his throat. Dick choked and spat, trying to claw at the fingers tightening around his neck.

“You need to live, little one.”]

It was fine.

Everything was fine.

Dick moved back into the manor while his apartment and cafe were being remodeled. None of his
Owlets or Pups seemed to mind - every night they all slept in his bed. Damian was extra clingy, pressing into him whenever he could. He was terrified of the idea of Dick being taken away. They all were.

Dick was put on house arrest. Barbara stayed a week to show him how to work the Comms and computer to play at guiding his family during their patrols.

Joker regularly caused trouble, painting coffee cups on buildings in blood.

Dick was oddly flattered.

He kept Ketti, Morgan, and Jessica on a paid vacation, even though he knew that it’d be probably at least a month before his cafe was fixed.

It was fine.

Everything was fine.

Wally visited. When he could. He’d gone back to his own city, having neglected his duties as long as he could. In the two weeks Dick had been back at the Manor, Wally only stopped by once. He’d had to immediately leave, parting with a first bump and a promise for them to go do something friend-like. Like fight bad guys or go bowling. Y’know, bro stuff.

It was fine.

Everything was fine.

“Why is Owlet 60 miles outside of Gotham City? By himself?” Dick’s voice was like steel over the comm link. Silence met his question. “Fine. I’ll go ask him myself.” He pushed himself away from the computer, marching his way over to the motorcycles. In his ear, Oracle laughed.
“He stole the Batmobile,” Batman gritted out. Red Hood snorted, his snorts turning into full blown guffaws. “I’m on my way. You are forbidden from leaving the Cave, Dick.”

“Bite me,” Dick snapped out. He felt trapped, suffocated. His days consisted of helping Alfred around the Manor and then monitoring his family through the Comms. He hated it. He missed working in his cafe, speaking to his regulars. He felt like he was back in captivity his first few months in, under tight surveillance. He wasn’t trusted to be alone.

He couldn’t breathe. His siblings clingy protectiveness bordered on oppressive, acting like he couldn’t protect himself.

He couldn’t breathe.

Dick ignored Batman’s threats as he mounted the bike. He gave it an experimental rev and the Comms went silent.

“Are you...about to ride a motorcycle? Do you even know how to ride?” Jason’s voice sounded. “Because in the 11 years I’ve known you, I’ve never seen you ride a bike.”

“Babs taught me,” Dick explained and was off.

He found Damian in the snow-laden woods on the outskirts of Ichabod, dodging an attack by some large man wearing a doll mask. Dick was soundless as he scaled the trees, masking his presence with the nature’s natural noise.

“I was protecting them!” The man was screaming. “I was keeping them safe! Safe away from the horrors of the world!”

“You’re nothing but a perverse psychopath!” Robin screamed out. He was favoring his left leg. Dick’s eyes narrowed and he watched as the man charged at Robin. Robin slipped on a patch of ice under the snow and careened backwards.

The man was on him, pinning him down with his heavily body. Robin grunted, clawing at the hands that grabbed him.
Blood splattered across Robin’s face and his air left him in a visible puff. Dollmaker slumped over, head clean off. Dick kicked his body off Damian, watching it bounce away. Robin stared up at him, seemingly dazed.

“Wha- you shouldn’t be out!” Damian hissed, scrambling to stand up. Dick bent down, easily picking up his tiniest Owlet.

“We’re past Gotham limits. The Court doesn’t operate here,” Dick countered as Batman made his appearance, shoulders tensed in barely concealed anger. “You were bested, Owlet.”

“I hurt my leg,” the child reluctantly snapped out, crossing his arms over his chest. He shivered from the cold and Dick helped to wrap his cape around his shoulders.

“I’ll look at it when we get back. Have the car drive itself back to the Cave,” he addressed Batman. “Take Owlet back to the Manor. I’ll clean up here.” He gestured to the dead body. Batman stubbornly ignored the red snow, his hands clenched tightly into fists.

“The police are five minutes out,” Batman reported and took Damian into his arms, cradling his son to his chest. Dick nodded and the two left.

Dick stared down at the decapitated body, his vision tunneling.

“They’ll send the Talon for your head.”

Dick looked up and over, seeing a hunched figure perched in the trees. Black spandex, gold accents, belts full of knives.

“You were thinking of the nursery rhythm just now, weren’t you?” The Talon dropped down. A chatty Talon, how rare. Dick eyed them warily. “Hey, don’t worry, I’m not here to fight.” The Talon’s stepped were surprisingly loud. “I was...inspired by you.”

“...Inspired.” Dick shifted his footing, letting one of his knives slid into his open palm. “How?”

“Getting away from the Court,” the Talon spoke, crouching down. They fiddled with the red snow.
Sirens sounded in the distance. “It took real balls to abandon them for the Batman.”

“I didn’t-” Dick clamped his mouth shut. Why was he trying to defend himself? Why was he trying to defend the Court? He looked down at his bloody hand.

“Name’s Calvin,” Calvin introduced. “Calvin Rose. I just escaped the Court.” His tone was breathy, dazed, like he was only saying it to cement it into his own mind.

“I’m Dick,” Dick spoke after a moment, feeling a kinship to the man. He understood that dream-like feeling of not believing. Not understanding he was free. “If you ever need a place to stay, look for Big Dick’s Cafe.”

Calvin gave a raspy laugh. “Did you seriously name it that?” He stood up, tilting to the side as the sirens grew louder.

“It’s under construction right now. But when it’s complete, you can stay. It’s safe.” Broken walls, white masks, “Maybe you can be the Coffee Bitch”. “It’s safe.”

Calvin stared at him silently for a moment. “Thanks.” He was gone just as the flashing red and blue stretched through the trees and danced across the snow. Dick stood there for another moment longer.

It was fine.

Everything was fine.

They were in Keystone city. Alfred had looked at his boys and had, politely, told them to get out of the Manor and go enjoy a family outing. Dick decided to make it an Adventure and Oracle helped him scroll through the deep articles for the best cafe in Keystone.

When it’d been chosen, plane tickets were purchased, hotels were booked, and a week-long
vacation was scheduled for Bruce and Tim.

Duke was excited. He got to skip school for a week. Damian just fought over who got to sit with Dick on the plane. Barbara and Cass won out. Dick got window seat.

No one seemed to mind.

After checking into their hotel, Bruce decided to crash for a much-needed nap. Damian looked longingly at his slumbering father before deciding to stay behind, saying he was going to nap as well. Dick kissed his forehead, whispered a promise for afternoon cuddles, and left with his Pups and Owlets to find a local cafe. It wasn’t the Adventure pick, but nice nonetheless.

Which was how the group found themselves packed into a round table surrounded at all sides but other customers. Dick excused himself, his cell phone ringing. Lex Luthor’s name flashed across the screen, meaning it was about business. He left to go outside, leaving everyone to sit in silence.

Jason slumped over onto the wobbly circular table. It wasn’t Dick’s cafe but it had a decent assortment of drinks. They even had boba, something he was quickly growing to love after too many Adventures.

He was bored. Booooored. Dick was his usual form of entertainment when they were out in public, the Talon somehow telepathically keyed into when his anxiety spiked. Sensory Overload was a bitch of a side effect to suffer from being brought back to life. Thankfully Dick seemed to understand.

Tim and Duke were both on their phones, Stephanie, Cass, and Barbara chatting about the latest boxing match that’d shown on TV. God, why couldn’t any of them be normal? His eyes slid to where Dick was pacing back and forth in front of the window, expression animated as he talked into the receiver.

A lightbulb went off.

“I can’t stop thinking about Dick,” he confessed to his tablemates, Duke nearly choking on his boba pearls. Behind Tim and Stephanie, a table of girls whipped their heads over to look at who’d spoken.
“What?” Tim, ever the eloquent one, blinked stupidly as he set his drink down. Jason huffed dramatically, rolling his eyes. He leaned forward, nearly on top of the table.

“I can’t stop thinking about Dick,” he repeated louder. The couple to their left fell silent, turning to stare in unconcealed amusement and horror. “I don’t know why but I’ve been obsessing over Dick for the last, like, month.”

Which was true. Ever since the threat of the Court taking their big brother away to be some sort of gear in a plan dealing with a Bat God was revealed, he’d been paranoid. Paranoid and overprotective.

“Dick.” Tim’s lips threatened to twitch into a grin while Duke just sunk down into his plush chair and glued his phone to his face. Cass, Stephanie, and Barbara had turned their full attention to the two. “Let’s talk about Dick then.”

“Thank you.” Jason gave another theatrical huff. “God. I love Dick.” An elderly woman sitting beside them scoffed. “I really do.” Three tables over, a girl was coughing and wheezing, her boba drink tipped over onto its side. Thank god for sealed lids. “I can’t live my life without Dick.”

“Oh my god, please kill me,” Duke whispered softly to himself, squeezing his eyes shut as if it’d turn him invisible.

“If I could, I’d marry Dick,” Barbara piped up. “You know if I wasn’t dating my attractively amazing Tamaranian girlfriend.” The mention of Starfire had Stephanie biting her lower lip to keep a straight face.

“I love talking about Dick!” Stephanie chimed in, trying to keep her voice steady.

The workers shared looks, trying to figure out if this was seriously happening in their cafe.

“I love Dick too!” Steph bounced up and down, Cass leaning over to hide her snickers. “Dick’s just so hot!”

“Dick is fucking sexy!” Jason hollered, slapping a hand on the table. “Dick just fills that void in my heart.”
“I get out of bed in the morning for Dick,” Cass spoke with solemn seriousness, her cheeks red from suppressed laughter. Barbara coughed to cover a bark of laughter.

“I came back to life for Dick,” Jason answered back, just as serious. Tim covered his mouth, snorting like a pig. The cafe was in stunned silence, just listening to the group.

“I live each and every day just to see Dick,” Stephanie chimed in, tone deceivingly innocent.

“Man, Dick’s just the absolute best. My camera roll is full of Dick pics.” Stephanie continued, smile wide and almost maniacal. Tim snorted loudly. “Dick is my favorite.”

Duke stared seriously at Jason as Stephanie continued her love letter to Dick. "You have a Dick complex. You all have Dick complexes!" He paused, the color draining from his face as he realized what he'd just said. "Wait - NO-!"

Tim patted Duke on the shoulder consolingly. “It’s okay Duke, we know you love Dick too.”

“Oh my fuck -!” Duke threw his cell phone at Jason, who caught it. Cass and Steph struggled to conceal their laughter. Barbara was laying face down on the table, body almost convulsing with silent sobs of laughter.

“I-” Tim coughed and tried to keep his voice steady “-I have a good night’s rest because of Dick.”

That ruined it. Jason tossed his head back in howling laughter while Stephanie exploded into high-pitched giggles. Duke covered his face with his free hand, groaning loudly, and Tim dissolved into wheezing cackles. Cass fell against Stephanie’s shoulder, tears streaming down her cheeks as she cackled. Barbara was just dead to the world, wheezing soundlessly as she tried to take in air instead of release it.

“Why are you guys laughing?” Dick asked, having come back from his phone call. The six looked up at him in stunned silence for a moment before they nearly toppled out of their chairs.

“I love you Dick,” Jason cried out, wiping at his wet face. Dick’s confused expression lit up into one of endearment.
“I love you too Jason!” He wrapped his arms around his brother, giving him a quick peck on the cheek. The cafe continued to stare.

What the fuck.

To no one’s surprise, someone had filmed the entire conversation and posted it online. Bruce saw it after his nap and Damian woke up to him sobbing, begging for advice from his dead parents.

Why were his children like this?

Chapter End Notes

Time to sing "wHAT AM I DOING~" featuring "THIS MAKES SENSE" and "WHAT'S CONTINUITY" with a guest appearance of "FUCK IT I THINK THIS WORKS"

I honestly, since I began to write this fic, decided on Cobb being that secretly enamored Grandpa who, given the chance, would write essays on why his grandchild is better than yours.

Also, Duke is the only sane Bat out of them all. Wally hasn't been poisoned by the insanity that is Gotham yet and honestly, when you sit back and look, the Bats get into some crazy stuff.

I have no idea when next chapter will be. Probably next week.

Also! AFTER THE 30TH OF JANUARY, MY POSTING WILL BE SLOWER. If I don't update as constantly as I've been, please just be patient. I'm not going to abandon this fic. I just currently don't have a life that's important. But I will have a life after the 30th lol

Y'all been spoiled by my lack of friends, responsibilities, and social life.

server link! :D

https://discord.gg/mezZfsG

Edit: as of 10/07/2019 any mention of Birdflash has been removed.
Espresso Shot 13

Chapter Summary

This chapter has been edited by your neighborhood grammar nazi.

Chapter Notes

edit: as of 10/07/2019, all mentions of Birdflash have been removed

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jason organized it to where Roy and Kori would be in the city during their Adventure. It was an awkward first meeting - Roy never traveled to Gotham and Dick only out for his Adventures, so the two surprisingly never met in the 11 years Dick was free.

Because of this, it was a bit stifling to meet up at their Adventure cafe. Kori had all but flown over to Barbara, settling into her lap and pressing soft kisses over her cheeks and nose. Roy stuck close to Jason and Tim, knowing the two the best, eyeing the stranger he didn't know.

Huh, so this was the famous mysterious older brother. For some reason, Roy had been imagining someone….different. More like Bruce Wayne, less like an underwear model with a complexion that most people could only achieve through photoshop.

He was sitting at his own table with what looked like the entirety of the cafe’s drink menu spread out in front of him. Cass and Steph were on either side of him, sipping at certain drinks within their reach. He had a notepad out, scrawling things on it when the two spoke.

Huh.

“Hm. Your spiced chai is better,” Stephanie reported, giving a smack of her lips. “I think I taste a hint of vanilla in this though.”

“Yeah?” Dick looked up, pen pausing. “Open the lid?” Stephanie did so and showed him the contents. He hummed, studying the swirls of cinnamon along with the foamed milk. “It looks like they put some paprika in this. Interesting.”
“He can tell just from looking?” Kori blinked, content to stay in Barbara’s lap. Babs laughed, running a hand up and down her girlfriend’s back.

“Yeah. As you’ve seen, he’s doesn’t...actually look like that.” She gestured to Dick. Roy stared. This was news to him. “Because of his condition, he can’t taste. So he learned to spot ingredients. We’ve been his guinea pigs for years.”

“Wow,” Roy blurted and flushed when empty blue eyes flickered up to him. He was still just standing awkwardly by the tables, hovering by Jason’s shoulder. Tim had moved to join Damian and Duke, munching on a basket of fries they’d ordered. “Um. Hi. I’m Roy. Roy Harper.”

“Hi,” Dick said in greeting, waving. He motioned for the two to sit. “So you’re Jason’s best friend?” Jason wheezed, kicking Dick under the table. Roy blinked before a shit-eating grin tugged on his lips.

“Is that what he calls me? His best friend?” He threw an arm around Jason’s shoulder and the man ducked, cheeks burning. “Aw Jay, I’m touched. I didn’t think you cared.” Kori laughed as Jason elbowed him in the ribs, teeth gritted.

“Shut up! I do not! Stop making things up, Dick!” Jason grumbled and no one commented on the fact he hadn’t removed Roy’s arm. Dick smiled behind the brim of his dark roast coffee.

“I’m not lying, Owlet. Doesn’t he always blabber about Roy when he’s drugged on pain meds?” He looked to his Owlets for help. Duke pointedly was ignoring everyone, drawing Damian into a phone game. Tim nodded smugly. Jason kicked both of them under the table.

“I’m surprised I’ve never met your brother,” Kori finally spoke up, eyeing Dick. “I wish our first meeting had been...more pleasant.” Dick’s eyes crinkled up and he flashed a all-teeth smile. Roy shuddered and Jason pinched his hand.

“How’d you two meet? Why am I just meeting him now?” Roy huffed, crossing his arms over his chest.

“You’ve been spending time with your daughter,” Jason shot back with an eye-roll. “And we’ve been kind of...hush-hush about Dickiebird.”
“Though not enough that people don’t know that I’m associated with you,” Dick said with his own eye roll. “That tabloid about my outing with Bruce made top news. Harley and Ivy wouldn’t stop asking me about him. Back before I made it perfectly clear I don’t do dating or relationships, they thought Bruce Wayne was my sugar daddy.”

“Ew,” everyone at the table spoke at once, Jason looking disgusted while Damian’s face twisted into one of pure rage. “No.”

“Yep!” Dick looked to Cass, who tapped on his arm.

She pointed to her drink. “It’s bitter.” He lifted the lid. Stared.

“Cass, it’s black coffee,” Dick explained patiently. Cass nodded and then stole Stephanie’s chai. He huffed.

“So what is it he’s doing?” Roy whispered into Jason’s ear, leaning close. He didn't miss the assessing gaze Dick traded between the two of them.

“He tastes, or has us taste, every single drink on the menu and record it. He likes doing research on what is successful or appealing and tries to work it into his own menu.”

“...His own menu?” Roy’s eyebrows raised. “He owns a restaurant?” Cass laughed softly while Duke snorted. He flushed, feeling like a fool.

“No, a cafe. It’s the most popular one in Gotham,” Jason explained. Roy racked his head for any news he’d heard about Gotham having any sort of famous eatery. Usually the news only covered the latest death toll or how many times Bruce Wayne got kidnapped that month.

“Wait. You mean that neutral cafe that Villains and Heroes go to?” Roy’s eyes widened. “Dude!”

“Yep!” Dick beamed proudly. “That’s my cafe.” His face fell. “It’s currently under renovation though. We had an issue.”
“Issue,” Kori piped up, tone amused. “It was certainly...something.” Her green eyes sparkled in mirth. “Only in Gotham, as they say.”

“Only in Gotham,” the Gotham citizens recited out, raising their cups in toast. Roy and Duke looked disturbed, despite the younger Hero being a Gothamite himself.

And just their luck that after they set their drinks down, robbers burst into the cafe and shot their guns off into the ceiling. The patrons screamed and ducked to the floor.

Jason gave an almost silent huff beside Roy. “Jesus, can’t even go a day…”

“Everybody down! Now!” Another bullet lodged into the ceiling plaster. Stephanie just sunk down in her seat, disappearing under the table. Tim squeaked as her hand snaked out, snatching him by the shirt collar and tugging. Cass shoved both Damian and Duke down onto the floor, shielding them the best she could with her body. Kori shifted protectively in Barbara’s lap, eyes glowing momentarily.

Jason yelped as Dick hooked his feet around Jason’s one leg and yanked. He toppled out of the chair, pulling Roy with him.

Soon it was just Dick and the employees facing the robbers.

“Are you deaf, bitch? I said get down!” One of the robbers snarled, pointing their machine gun at Dick. The other two guns were trained on the terrified employees. Dick felt sympathy for them - they probably weren’t used to being around so many guns daily.

“I heard you,” Dick said levelly. He didn’t look bothered by the gun in his face. “This is a cafe, not a bank. Why don’t you act civil about it? What, don’t have enough money to get a cup of coffee?” Dick stood up, reaching for his wallet. “I’ll pay for you.”

“What the fuck?!” The robber growled. “Sit the fuck down! I’ll shoot you!” His hands weren’t shaking. They seemed calm, collected. Professionals.

Why rob a cafe, then? Dick’s eyes slid over to the sobbing employees. Not acting - genuinely scared. His eyes moved to the cash register. When he’d paid for the drinks, he’d caught sight of the register contents - barely held enough to cover $200.
From his experience and the books he read, the business safe usually only ever held *maybe* $300 at all times for change exchange and payouts for emergency shopping trips. That was *maybe* $500 or $600 dollars they were risking everything for. It made no sense.

So it had to be something else.

Time was moving in slow motion for Dick. His eyes quickly scoped the cafe’s interior, ignoring the sluggish, distorted yelling from the robber as he caught sight of the new wooden paneling in the wall. New walls, paneled for easy removal and placement. Three of the panels were two shades of grey different from the other drab colors, hinting to newer conditions.

It was the only thing in the cafe that looked new. There were no power cords that extended from the panels or any weather damage that Dick could spot in the surrounding area. The ceiling looked dry, the tables and booths clean and unscuffed.

Dick’s gaze snapped back into focus as the gun pressed against his forehead. The cafe was silent, tense. On the floor, Cass made a hissing noise.

“Did you hear me? I said get down.” The robber looked furious, finger hovering over the trigger. The other two robbers were watching him, waiting for guidance. He was the leader then.

“And I told you to be civilized. This is a cafe, not a bank. What, did the owner not give you the drugs you paid for?”

The robber went stiff, eyes widening behind their ski-mask. Dick relaxed his posture. Compared to Gotham and his customers, this was nothing.

“If you’re looking for the drugs, check that wall over there. Now stop pointing the gun at those girls and calm down.” Dick took a step forward and the man shuffled backwards, finally showing a hint of hesitance in his steps. His finger fell away from the trigger. He glanced at where Dick gestured to, jerking his head towards it. One of his henchmen scurried over and pried a panel open.

Packs of wrapped white substance fell out of the wall.
“Uhg, boring,” Tim grumbled into Stephanie’s neck. She rolled her eyes. “It’s always cocaine. Why not something exciting for once?”

“Shut the fuck up!” The gun fell to Tim and a bullet snapped against the flooring beside him and Stephanie, ricocheting off the marble and embedding into the ceiling above them.

“Oh no,” Duke whispered. Babs groaned and hid her face in Kori’s arm. Oh no indeed.

The gun was wretched from the robber’s grip and a hand secured around his throat. His feet brushed against the flooring as he was lifted up, startled brown meeting poisonous yellow.

His two partners froze in alarm.

“You don’t ever point your gun at my Owlets,” Dick snarled low, his facial muscles twitching as he tightened his grip on the man’s throat. “You should have listened to me.” He dropped the gun, dragging the man towards the door. “In Gotham, you’d have been killed before you could have fired your second bullet.”

A few customers winced at the mention of Gotham. No wonder the strange bystander was so calm. Dick nearly pulled the door off its hinges, throwing the robber out face first. He whirled to the remaining two. “Leave.”

They didn't have to be told twice. They dropped their guns and the drugs and hauled ass out of there, leaving Dick to glare holes in their retreating backs.

“Oh my god,” one of the baristas whispered weakly. She gripped onto the counter, trying to hold herself up. “Oh my god.” She failed and slumped to her knees. “Oh my god.”

A rush of wind and a blur of red marked the entrance of Flash.

“I’m here, I’m….late.” Wally blinked, expression perking up at the sight of Dick. He quickly collected himself. “Um. What happened?”

At once everyone was talking, customers and employees alike screaming over themselves as Cass
just helped everyone to their feet. Wally sent Dick a curious look, who just shrugged and nodded his head at the abandoned drugs.

“You might want to call the police about an underground drug ring going on in this cafe. The employees are innocent,” Dick whispered and then tilted his head to the side. “I thought you lived in Central City.”

“I moved a while ago. I still just patrol there and in Star City when I have the time,” Wally responded dismissively. “I’m going to call the police now.” Dick nodded and moved to his table. He touched Tim’s and Stephanie’s cheeks, making sure they hadn’t been hurt.

“Sorry. I lost my cool,” he apologized. Stephanie and Tim just covered his hands with their own and smiled soothingly at him.

Roy just stared.

“Wow. You guys are nuts,” he said, not beating around the bush at all.

“Gotham is literally almost the crime-capital of the world,” Barbara started with a shrug. “Second only to Blüdhaven.”

“Seriously?” Roy looked between them. “That’s your excuse? Because it’s Gotham?”

“Dude,” Jason said as he slung an arm around Dick’s shoulders, “you’ve known me for 10 years. You should be used to this already.”

Roy sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I know I just…” He faltered. Duke patted him on the arm. He understood completely.

“Anyways, cops are showing up,” Tim alerted the group. “That means we should bounce before Bruce dies from a heart-attack. I can see the headlines now: Jason Todd, ALIVE?! MYSTERIOUS RESURRECTION-” Stephanie covered his mouth.

“Hush,” she shushed in his ear. Tim nodded and slumped against her shoulder. Roy just shook his
God, and he thought Jason was bad. He forgot how awful the rest of the siblings were.

“It was nice to meet you two officially!” Dick smiled as Cass scaled his back to curl around him. He didn't even bat an eyelash at her. “Next time you’re in Gotham, my cafe should be open. Stop by with Lian!” They waved as they left, Dick and Wally trading smiles.

“I can see why Jason had a crush on him,” Kori mused as she saddled up to Roy’s side. “He’s...charming.”

“I’m so glad Jason got over his awkward crush phase,” Roy just mumbled.

"Is he though?" Kori teased with a wink and began sauntering away. "He looked pretty smitten for Dick."

"Don't joke like that." Roy jogged after her. "Don't joke like that Kori!" Roy paled. "Oh my god, now it's stuck in my head! Kori!" The alien princess just laughed at her friend, speeding up.

Their vacation came to an end and Dick found himself back in his bed, surrounded by his siblings. Their soft snores, or Tim’s loud texting, soothed over the silence in the bedroom.

“Go to sleep Owlet,” Dick whispered quietly to Tim. Tim sent a glare over his shoulder before turning back to his phone. “Who are you texting at 2 in the morning?”

“Kon,” Tim answered sleepily. “He had a nightmare. I’m keeping him company.” Even as he spoke though, his head bobbed up and down.

“Tell him to have some warm milk and turn your phone off,” Dick whispered back and nudged at him with his foot. “Owlet.” Tim gave a groan and flopped face-first into the blankets, letting his phone drop to the carpet. The moment the device was gone, Jason’s arm snaked around his waist.
and hauled him around.

Tim’s cry was a cut-off squeak as he found himself between Stephanie and Jason, Jason nuzzling into his hair while Stephanie scooted back to be spooned by the younger teen.

“Took you long enough,” Stephanie grumbled wearily, letting out a tiny yawn. “Hug me.” Tim complied, pressing his chin against her shoulder. She hummed and shifted to get closer to Dick’s side. “Night. Love you.”

“Love you too,” Tim slurred out, eyes falling shut. Jason propped himself up on his elbow, resting his hand against his temple. He smiled down at his siblings before meeting alert blue eyes.

“Go to sleep, Jason,” Dick ordered and Jason rolled his eyes.

“Not tired, Dickiebird. I’d say to sleep but…” Jason’s smile fell. “So besides eating, anything change?” Dick shook his head.

“Nope. I can only hold down small things too. Anything heavy in grease or fat is automatically spat back up.” Dick ran a hand through Cass’s hair, the woman burrowing further into his chest. She was curled up in his lap, Damian nestled against his other side.

“Hm.” Jason’s eyelids fluttered. He snapped them open. “Does it scare you?”

“Regaining humanity?” Dick looked over to the drawn curtains covering the window. “A bit. I won’t be able to protect you all as well as I have.”

“You’re still ridiculously strong,” Jason countered and flopped back down, resuming his cuddling. “You still get up after being shot through the skull. You’re fine, Dick.”

He was out in seconds and Dick settled back against his pillows, staring blankly at the ceiling. He let his eyes close, falling back into his mind.

He came out of his memories and thoughts with a blink just as the sun was peeking through the curtains.
Dick’s body went rigid. His mind blanked and his pupils expanded against the blue of his eyes.

A sliver of translucent yellow drew a line across the burgundy carpet, chased from the navy blue curtains. The colors were vivid and popped out against the off-white wall and the dark chestnut furniture complimenting the room.

His eyes slid down, almost painfully slow, taking in Cass’s ink-black hair. Her long dark lashes fluttered against warm tawny beige cheeks. Her lips were a soft pink, the tip of her button nose matching. Her fingernails, relaxed against his unmoving chest, were a bright lavender. His body shuddered. It was almost overwhelming, compared the normal bleak tones of grey, white, and black he'd grown used to for 20 years.

Damian’s black hair (with undertones of red shining through in the sunlight) blurred as black tears filled his eyes. Damian’s medium brown skin was dusted in hints of a vibrant rose, centering along his high cheekbones and around his pouted pink lips. His black sweatshirt was Dick’s, long and swallowing him as he hid himself under the emerald green comforter. He bit back a gasped sob, not wanting to alarm his siblings. No, no, he could do this.

It was fine.

Everything was fine.

Stephanie’s hair was spun gold, rippling across the black silk pillows like streams of sunlight. He could spot tiny yellow - almost white - peach fuzz hairs across her scalp and along her light fawn cheeks. Her red bow-shaped lips were open, a thin trail of clear drool leading a path to Dick’s night-shirt.

Tim’s own ebony locks seemed layered in blue highlights, the silky strands falling over his dark eyelashes. His pale peach skin tone was washed out by the dark purple half-crescents under his eyes, stretching down his high cheekbones. His red turtleneck clashed horribly against the comforter, making his complexion even more pale.

Jason’s complexion was sun-kissed with various faint pink scarring near his temple and chin. The white strands clashed against his dark brown hair, his tips a washed out black. His nose was a bright red, the blushing hue spreading to his cheeks as he puffed out little gasps of air between his chapped, red lips.
Dick raised a hand - tan, but not as dark as he remembered vaguely from memories of blinding lights and blood-smeared marble - and gently touched Jason’s cheek. His dark eyebrows furrowed as he burrowed into his pillow, grumbling. He made a weak attempt to swat at Dick’s hand, his knuckles and the tips of his fingers flushed.

“Hey,” Duke greeted as he threw open the bedroom, “Alfred wants you...guys...are you crying! ?” He stood in the opened doorway, eyes wide as he gawked at Dick. At his loud entrance, the tangled bodies jolted and snorted in various states of awake.

At hearing Duke’s exclaim of tears, Jason’s and Cass’s heads snapped up, sleep blinked blearily away. True enough, Dick was just staring unwaveringly at Duke, new beads of black liquid trickling down his cheeks.

Dick scrambled out of bed, reaching the newest member in seconds. Duke stiffened as hands cupped his cheeks, Dick walking backwards towards the curtains. He stumbled after him, still kept in his hold, and winced as Dick ripped the curtains clear off the metal rod, bathing the room in blinding sunlight.

“It’s too brrrriiiight !” Stephanie groaned, cracking an eye open. She squinted and moaned, burrowing her head back into the pillow. After a second her head lifted, eyes narrowing at Dick and Duke.

Duke’s skin was a sepia, reddish-brown, contrasting with the soft brown of the wooden furniture behind them. His eyes, under the intense rays of the sun, were like carefully carved obsidian in a fire’s light, giving off a goldish sheen. The skin around his lips and chin were a few shades darker, giving away to tiny blemishes and imperfections. His tight black waves glistened with faint streaks of grey, no doubt induced by the daily stress their type of occupation introduced in no short supply.

“Um.” Duke blinked, his black lashes kissing his flushing cheeks. “You’re kind of close.”

“Your eyes are gorgeous,” Dick breathed out, his thumbs swiping under the teen’s eyelids. Duke’s eyes widened even further. On the bed, Stephanie gave a gasp. “Like. I don’t even know what to compare their color too.” His hands were shaking badly, he noticed, as they cupped Duke’s cheeks.

“...color.” Duke’s eyebrows pinched up, his voice cracking. “Um.”
Pounding footsteps charged at them and three different pairs of hands spun Dick around. He was met with glistening, watery turquoise with tiny flecks of electric green. Jason didn't even seem to care as he shoved Cass and Tim away, grabbing Dick’s face.

“What-” Jason swallowed, his bottom lip trembling “-what color are my eyes?” Dick’s fingers ghosted over his cheeks, his smile trembling.

“They look like a mixture of green and blue,” Dick breathed out, releasing a choked laugh. His eyes were still letting the water-works go. “And you got some, like, glowing green in there.”

“Oh my god,” Jason croaked, biting his bottom lip. His breath hitched and he shook his head back and forth. "Oh my god." He rested his head against Dick's chest, gripping at his shirt like a scared infant. "You - my eyes- you-" He couldn't form a coherent sentence anymore.

“Mine?” Cass questioned softly, touching his arm. Dick’s eyes burned into her brown eyes, the sunlight making them glow like the burning embers of a fire. With the added color, her eyes literally seemed to burn, smoldering and fierce.

“Brown, but they almost look red,” Dick spoke softly. Cassandra’s smile was fragile.

“Mine?” Tim was beside Dick, head tilted up and blood-shot eyes staring wide. They were a soft blue, like robin eggs. He remembered robin egg blue, it being his favorite Crayola Crayon when he was a child. Tim’s eyes were the same color, outlined in dark circles and angry red veins against the whites of his eyes.

“A beautiful blue,” Dick whispered and Tim ducked his head, sniffling. He shuffled into Jason, hiding his face in his brother’s back. Jason was still against Dick, shoulders shaking up and down.

“My turn, my turn!” Stephanie elbowed her way between Jason and Dick, huffing as she looked up at their oldest. Her eyes were a pale blue, like moonlight against a clear night sky. There was an outer ring of green, her right eye having a small splatter of hazel in the bottom corner of her iris. Framed by her blonde hair, her gaze was alluring and dangerous all at once, giving off a mischievous glint at the right angle.

“Gorgeous,” Dick breathed. “Like moonlight.” Stephanie opened and closed her mouth, face crumbling. She seemed to mentally fight herself before giving up, throwing her arms tightly around him. She burst into echoing wails as he hugged her back.
“TT.” Damian sat on the bed, looking away. His voice was nasally. “You’ve regained your ability to see colors.”

“Come here Owlet.” Dick called out pleadingly. “Please?” Damian hunched into himself and didn't move. Dick carefully extracted Stephanie from his chest, handing her over to Cass and Duke. She continued to cry, wiping at her red-rimmed eyes.

Dick sat down at the edge of the bed, guiding Damian’s chin to face him when the child made no move to look at him. Damian’s eyes were green like emeralds, sparkling and shining as tears threatened to sob. Dick wiped at his tears with his thumbs, making soft coos.

“Why are you crying, Owlet?” Dick pressed a kiss to his child’s cheek, reveling in the fact in his mind, it was no longer a dull shade of grey. Having a color to match it gave it warmth, life, and Dick tugged Damian into his lap, cradling him. He could see the life in his child's eyes. He could see the fire burning behind the green, the determination to do good. He could see the green, the red, the fleshy tones that showed they were alive. That they were living, surviving, enjoying life.

“I don’t know,” Damian confessed. “I - I don’t know.” He gave a wet sob, hiding his face in Dick’s shirt. Dick rocked him back and forth, shushing him. His shushes stuttered out before he buried his face into Damian's dark hair (it was black, it was *black with undertones of brown and red*) and let out a heart-stopping sob. Stephanie tackled them, Cass slower in her physical assault for contact. Tim and Duke piled on top of them, Jason squishing himself between the bed's headboard and Dick to hug him.

And that was how Alfred and Bruce found them, wondering what was taking so long. Dick looked up and laughed wetly, all of their eyes red and faces in various states of ugly.

“You’ve got black hair and blue eyes too!” Dick’s laugh turned almost hysterical. “Why does everyone-”

Bruce tackled them all, nearly toppling them off the bed. Alfred turned, wiping at his eyes.

He might as well go call Wallace and Barbara and inform them of the new development. For now, he'd leave and gather the color charts he'd been saving for this exact day.

Chapter End Notes
Hey so, I made this into a series. LOL The only other story is a fic that's just compiling the Extra shots into one fic so you can read them separately. Would you all like to me to continue posting the Extra Shots in this fic as well, or just in their own little fic?

HERE'S MY BATFAM DISCORD LINK

https://discord.gg/ZvMAP5a
Chapter Summary

He wasn't silent, he was muted

Chapter Notes

This chapter has also been posted in Double That Order, Please!
You'll also find a chapter titled 'First Kiss' in that story. Read it if you'd like.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He knew she was there. She didn't know how. But she knew that he’d noticed her the moment she’d crouched down low on the rooftop. He was weird. His chest did not move and with the lack of motion, his words were mute.

He was empty.

What she could not hear, she saw. His body seemed to speak a completely different language than anything she’d ever learned before. There was an unusual stiffness to his letters, a stutter in his speech pattern, as if his movements were fighting themselves.

He let his legs dangle over the edge of the rooftop, hands scraping long nails down the granite decorating the stone ledge. He looked over at her.

“Would you like to join me?” His tone was vacant. Desolate. His words meant nothing. He gestured to the empty air beside him. “I won’t claw you, don’t worry.” His fingers flexed at his words though, that void around him increasing.

She backed up, falling into the veil of shadows. His expression rippled like a reflection on water, a cheap look-alike to an actual emotion. It was what disappointment was supposed to sound like, harsh and a whine.
She was gone and he turned back to star out at the night sky hanging over Gotham.

He noticed her again. This time, he wasn’t alone. The two with him were loud. They were loud, their bodies screaming.

One of agony, of being broken, mended, and broken again. The sheer pain they radiated made her heart physically clench. She could feel his drowning sorrow, the bitterness hidden under waves and waves of self-hatred.

The other was loud as well, but more obnoxious. Their body language was searing with rage - rage and a distant sorrow. The unspoken tones they emitted were melancholic at best, cold and wet like the winter’s rainfalls before they turned into flurries.

They were loud, clear, and only made the other one’s silence more prominent. Sitting with them, she could hear how the agonized one sung words of love and longing, of hesitance and admiration. Of deep, haunting regret and bone-crushing horror.

Sitting with them, she could hear how cold and empty the winter rainstorm one was, how frigid he was behind the false glow of his sun-smile. Their loneliness was turned up to max volume next to the one without sound, the one who’s volume seemed to have been turned all the way down.

The silent one looked over again.

“Hi!” The cheerfulness he tried to leak fell flat. His eyes were dead, his movements even more so. It was weird. She’d never been able to not read someone.

Everyone had life in their movements. Everyone had a voice to their gestures.

But not this man.
“Who are you- whoa!” The angry one nearly toppled off the roof if not for the silent one grabbing him around the stomach. He settled him back down safely and the angry one stared. “Who is she?”

“Another one?” The agonized one whined out. “Dick, you’ve got a problem.”

The silent one, Dick, gave a laugh that felt like glass shards digging into her skin. She sunk back, away from them.

“Hey, wait!” The angry one called. She left.

He was alone this time. She’d found herself watching him the last week, cataloging the loud, vibrant people around him. The angry one and the agonized one were almost constants beside him.

The one who broadcasted loneliness and a crave for affection was more rare by his side, her blonde hair gorgeous to look at. The other one, with the fiery hair and the bright smiles that matched her singing heart, even rarer. The dark one, drowned in death and sadness and darkness, was a shadow to the silent one. Watching, always watching, as if guarding.

They all screamed their love for the silent one with their bodies though. She heard and read it in the ways that they leaned against him or touched him, their shoulders relaxed to his presence.

They all were lonely but the silent one made it a bit more bearable for them.

He was alone this time.

He was dancing along the ledge of the wet rooftop, singing out loud to the stars as he twirled in circles. His body was a blank canvas. She couldn’t understand a single thing about him.

She watched him slip on the wet granite. She watched him tip over the edge of the roof.
He fell.

She threw herself over the edge, reaching for him. He couldn’t die, she couldn’t watch another man die in front of her-

When she was close enough to grab him, Batman swooped in and grabbed her. She gave a screech as she flailed, reaching for the silent one.

He slammed down against the unforgiving ground underneath them. Against her, Batman tensed. Unease, sorrow, and resentment rolled off him in waves and she shuddered as the grappling hook lowered them steadily to the ground.

The silent one sat up, startling her. A giant black splatter surrounded him and stained his clothing. He straightened out his bright yellow tank-top and smiled at her.

She stared. He should have died. That was a 20 story drop, easily. He should be dead.

“’I’m Dick,” the silent one introduced. “You tried to save me. Thank you.”

And for the first time since she’d began watching him, she could see a flicker of genuine gratitude in his features. She slumped in Batman’s hold.

Suddenly it made sense.

He was trained to be silent, just as she’d been. Only their silence was different.

His was dangerous.

He was on the rooftop again. He had cinnamon rolls. He offered one to her and she took it warily, picking it apart into small pieces.
“A,” he began as she popped another small piece of the cinnamon roll into her mouth, “as in apple.” The pastry was delicious. She liked it a lot. “B as in boy.”

He was silent, despite the noise his mouth made. He was a coiled spring, ready to attack. His gaze watched her like a mother predator would watch its young. He was dangerous.

He was like those she was raised to be beside.

“C as in cat.”

She let him drone on, settling back as she took another cinnamon roll.

Hours later, she realized he was repeating the same sentences. Over and over again.

By the time she left, she was mouthing ‘A as in apple’ to herself.

Dick’s parting smile had her yearning to come back again.

The fiery one, Barbara as she introduced, was gentle and patient, and her body broadcasted that whole-heartedly. She did not let her disability stop her, her soul still fierce and her smile still kind. She’d made Dick take her to meet the fiery one in her clocktower.

Barbara watched her before turning back to her computer. She sat still, eyes following Dick as he danced around the room. He liked to move a lot, even if there was no meaning behind it. It was just movement.

“Cassandra Cain.”
Cassandra snapped her head up to Barbara, who smiled. “That’s your name, isn’t it?” Cassandra nodded slowly. “Awesome. Dick get whining about not being able to call you anything but Pup.”

Pup? What, like the tiny dogs?

“It means baby bat,” Dick spoke. He was always able to read her, know what she was thinking. Cassandra didn't like that much. “You’re my Pup.”

Baby Bat. Cassandra found she didn't mind.

“T-Tim.”

The Cave was eerily silent as she spoke. She’d been introduced to the BatCave after she’d saved Dick from being shot. She’d been carried back to be patched up and never left afterwards.

It was the pattern of the family, Stephanie had joked.

Tim’s face lit up like a light-bulb, glowing proudly. Cass felt warmth blossom in her chest at his delighted expression. She licked her lips.

“B-B-Broosh?” Her face scrunched up. That didn’t sound right but the man himself didn't seem to care. He looked absolutely ecstatic. Beside him, Martian Manhunter looked pleased.

“It will take time but have patience with her while she learns,” J’onn explained as the siblings crowded Cass. “It was a challenge to compartimentalize her assassination training into her motor cortex but it worked. Her brain and body will now think of her ability to predict opponent's movements as a motor skill. That way it won’t hinder in her speech and writing therapy.”

“Thank you.” Bruce had his cowl down so the alien could see how sincere he was. “I truly am in debt to you.”
“No need, my friend. I find that them being able to conquer the darkness in your heart is enough.” J’onn wavered. “Though, I must offer. The one you don’t like to share—” Bruce stiffened—“I can fix what’s been broken in his mind. If you’d like me too.”

“No,” Bruce gritted out, glaring at the floor. “I...he goes against my code. I hate it. I feel guilty, like I’m letting him down, but...he’s still doing good. He may kill, but...look at the family he’s given me.” Bruce stared at his children. “They’re just as much his children as they are mine.”

J’onn nodded in agreement.

“The offer will still stand, if the two of you ever decide you want it done.” Bruce nodded tersely and turned his attention back to his children.

“Talon,” Cass spoke smoothly, head tilted to the side as Dick smiled at her. He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Dick. Talon Dick.”

“That’s right Pup.”

Cass had gotten easier to read Dick. She’d found out, after spending a few more times with him, that he wasn’t exactly silent. He was just quiet. Oh so quiet. He’d been muffled, hushed, taught to not make a noise. But he still did. You just had to listen close enough.

He radiated pride, love, and warmth that overpowered the rest of her new siblings. His was deep, bottomless, and it enveloped her in comfort. He didn’t carry an anger for himself, no. He carried it for others. He loved for others, got angry for others, and overall lived for others. He was empty for himself but that was fine.

Cass would love him enough to hopefully fill that void.

Chapter End Notes

Bab’s chapter is next. I’ve decided to just post the extra shots in both stories so you can read them with the rest of the story and stand-alone. LOL
“You must be strong.”

“I know,” he whispered under his breath as he walked on the balls of his feet, making as little noise as possible. Each step was slow, calculated. He listened to the sounds of rustling fabric, taught that the smallest noise could indicate a foe.

“You must hold no emotions.”

“I know,” he repeated as he crouched low, peeking around a corner of the maze. Always go low - people expected an enemy at eye level. Seeing no one, he tuck and rolled, springing into a lunge at the last second. A brush against his ankle told them he'd done good.

“You must be the best, little one.”

“I know.” He paused finally. The gentle brushes along his body finally registered and he looked up and around. No one. Who had he been talking to? The labyrinth was silent, the Owls conglomerating for a greetings to the Judge, who’d returned. Cobb should be by the Grandmaster’s side, leaving him to practice his stealth alone.

So who’d he been talking to? Turning forward again, he came face to face with towering shadows, squirming and withering. Burning orbs of red stared back at them and a clawed hand reached out from the shadows.

“You must be perfect, little one. For me.”

“I know,” he whispered and close his eyes as Cobb’s knife sunk into his chest from behind.]
“Why are you wearing that?!”

Wally paused in pushing Barbara through the doorway, eyes widening as Dick all but tumbled down the stairs to the main entrance. In a bright lavender turtleneck and neon yellow sweatpants. He was wearing rainbow socks with the toe-covers.

Barbara wheezed. It was worse than usual. Wally just stood there stupidly in the doorway, him and Barbara having to physically brace themselves from the disaster that was Dick.

Dick came to a slipping halt, arms flailing as gravity nearly careened him into Barbara. Wally, fast as usual, caught him. Holding him by his upper arm, he tensed as Dick’s eyes almost went wide in wonderment.

“Hi?” Wally asked softly, jolting with Dick’s hands moved up to his hair. “Um.”

“It’s so pretty,” Dick whispered out, gaze moving down his face slowly as if seeing it for the first time. His eyes instantly shot back up to his hair. “Really pretty.”

Wally’s face flushed as darkly as his hair and Dick gave a soft gasp, marveling in the cherry hue. It made Wally’s freckles stand out against his soft peach skin. But his hair.

His hair.

“Ahem.” Barbara coughed. “Stop ogling your very uncomfortable friend, bird brain. Come say hi.” She settled back in her wheelchair with a smile though, her eyes glistening. Dick tore his eyes away from Wally’s hair and stared.

Hard.

“Oh.” He looked almost dazed as he detached himself from Wally and knelt down in front of
Barbara. His hands cupped her face, feeling the warmth against her sun-kissed warm beige skin. Her cheeks were a cherry red as he continued to look at her. Her eyes were a sparkling aqua-meridian, reflecting light like the sun underwater against the crystal clear waters.

Her hair was like fire, rippling over her shoulder in thick curls that made big ringlets. The color was like a smoldering flame, intense despite the rich color.


It was a different shade than Wally’s own bright red hair, like the setting sun. His hair was that glowing hue of when orange and red bled together against the horizon, while Barbara’s was more of lava cooling after tearing everything up in its path. Dark, but still so beautiful.

He ran his hand through her hair. From the shade of grey he’d always seen it as, he thought it was something like brown or blonde. Not red. Never red.

“And now,” Wally mumbled to the family as they clustered around to watch Dick gawk at Barbara’s hair, “it begins.”

“Uuuuh what begins?” Tim asked cautiously as Barbara let out a watery laugh and hugged Dick tightly.

“His extremely bizarre fascination for redheads.” He got blanks stares in response. “Dick has a thing for redheads. I don’t know why. He just does.” Wally tugged on his hair. “In my last life, he flirted with me and Roy and dated both Starfire and Barbara. He just. Has a thing for redheads.”

The siblings stared between the two redheads in the house. Okay, yeah, they could see that with how Dick acted when he studied Wally.

“Are you serious?” Duke’s nose crinkled. “He’s got a redhead kink?”

“Duke!” Bruce chided sternly as Alfred’s hawk-like gaze zeroed in on him.

“Sorry Dad, Grandpa,” the teen called cheekily. Alfred looked slightly flattered at the title.
“So, um, dude, what’s with the-” Wally gestured to all of Dick. Dick looked over and his eyes moved back up to his hair. Yeah, the family noted, he seemed weirdly fascinated.

“I thought the colors looked pretty,” he stated simply as he stood up, holding Barbara’s hand. The family groaned. First, he was a fashion disaster because he was color blind and now because he dressed based on the colors looking nice.

Oddly, it was endearing.

“Okay,” Wally responded with a blink. “So, is your vision back to normal now?” Dick shook his head, moving to stand by Bruce.

“Nope. I still see far away and better in the dark. Everything is just a little...intense.” He squinted. “But my contacts help.”

“...contacts?” Wally frowned in confusion. “You wear contacts?” Dick blinked and nodded.

“Yeah. So I wouldn’t blind myself constantly because of the intense light. My eyes are like an owl - sunlight and light are more vivid for me.” Dick shrugged. “I can eat now!”

“No shit!? Really?” Wally looked more excited than Dick. “SWEET! Pizza nights are a go!”

“Uh,” Jason piped in, “pizza nights are not a go. Not unless you invite us all.” He looked smug. Wally squinted at him, judgmental.

“Stop being a Jealous Jan,” Tim said to Jason, frowning. Jason rolled his eyes.

“Pizza sounds good,” Cass spoke up, looking pleadingly over to Alfred. Alfred straightened and puffed his chest out.

“Well, if Mistress Barbara and Master West are staying for lunch, I shall prepare some pizza,” Alfred announced.
“FUCK YES!” Stephanie, Tim, and Jason whooped out. Alfred coughed and they winced, rummaging through their pockets for money. He accepted their dollars and left to prep the food.

“I’ll come help, Alfie!” Dick called and chased after the man after waving cheekily to his family. Jason sized Wally up.

"So," he began, "did your Dick ever date any redheads?" Because Jason took it upon himself to question Wally about his memories like they were a goldmine of dirt and embarrassing secrets of Dick.

“Oh grow up,” he snapped out. Bruce chuckled as he and Duke helped Barbara up the stairs. "He just likes the shade, I don't know. You guys are gremlins."

“We are,” Jason snapped back, grinning wolfishly. “Don’t act so special, West. You aren’t the only one in his life." Wally rolled his eyes - Bruce had warned him the siblings were extremely territorial with Dick. Social seclusion did that, he supposed.

"You guys have to learn the importance of healthy friendships and maintaining boundaries," he replied simply. Cass and Barbara burst out laughing.

The cafe was open. Dick spent an entire hour just hugging his espresso machine, pressing kisses to it. Jessica, Morgan, and Ketti were all called into work and elbowed him out of the way when he didn't move.

“MOVE BOSS!” Ketti snapped out, nudging him out of the way. “Go stand there and, I don’t know, make sure Joker doesn’t poison the free water dispenser.” Joker, holding a clear bottle over said dispenser, froze. “Yeah I see you, clown!”

“Joker,” Dick began in that parental tone he used for all his Owlets and Pups. “That better be lemon juice.”
“Next time,” Joker grumbled, shooting Ketti an ‘I’m watching you’ glare. She returned it, holding up the milk pitcher threateningly. Dick watched their interaction, proud of his staff. They were just strong women.

“How’s your shoulder, Boss?” Morgan asked as she passed him, holding a tray of cinnamon crumb muffins.

“Did you hurt your shoulder?” Jessica, ever the sweet one, asked with an expression of full worry. “Are you okay?”

“He got shot!” Morgan gossiped as she held up a cup. “Riddler!” The man came up quickly and Morgan held the cup back. “What can’t be burned in a fire or drowned in water?”

Edward rolled his eyes. “Ice. Try to make it easier for me next time, darling.” Morgan smirked at him and handed him his coffee. He tipped them four dollars and left with a nod to Dick.

“Shot?!” Jessica looked green. “Oh my goodness! Are you okay, Boss?”

“I’m fine, Jess.” He squinted at her. “Has your hair always been that color?” Jessica tugged on her blue locks, biting her bottom lip.

“No. I dyed it during the break.” She looked worried. “Am I going to be fired?”

“Oh no!” Dick’s eyes went wide. “It’s just...very pretty.” He smiled and Ketti nearly smacked Morgan with an empty tray.

“Whoa. Being away from him for a month totally ruined our immunity,” she whispered to Morgan, who nodded as she just continued to stare. “Don’t drool, love.”

“Bite me,” Morgan teased, earning a wink. Dick huffed.

It was good to be back.
“DICKIE-POO!” Harley threw herself at the man, hugging him. “Hi sugar! Pammy and I got married!”

“What.” Dick was momentarily caught off guard by her white face makeup. So it hadn’t been his eyesight - her face was actually white.

“I’m a married girl now!” Harley all but punched him in the face to show off her wedding band. “So no more flirting with me!”

“I don’t think you have to worry about that, hun,” Ivy spoke with a smile as she helped Harley settle back onto the opposite side of the counter. “Glad to see you up and running again. We would have invited you all to the wedding but we had no way of contacting you.”

“You could have held my college hostage,” Morgan piped up. Dick shot her a warning look. “Just kidding. Maybe cause an explosion - kidding! Jeez.”

“Congratulations,” Dick said sincerely, smile wide. “Drinks and food on me today, okay?” Harley squealed and hugged him again, leaving a black kiss-mark on his cheek. Ivy rolled her eyes at her wife.

“Oh yay!” Harley gasped. “You’ll have to meet Lucy! She’s getting to stay with us next weekend! Oh you’ll love her! And she’ll love you. She’s currently into ninjas wearing fairy wings because it adds to their stealth and-”

“He’ll meet her next weekend, sweetie. Let’s go find a table.” Ivy tugged Harley away and smiled again at Dick.

Two-Face came up next, holding a manilla envelope. He gave the envelope to Dick, who raised an eyebrow.

“Open it,” Two-Face instructed and Dick did so. He stared at the papers.

“Dent,” Dick began slowly, “I’m sorry that my cafe was closed for almost two months.” He looked at the man. “But please do not ask me to sue Batman or that man for causing a disturbance. You
don’t even practice law anymore.”

“I can make it work,” Two-Face spoke ominously. Dick stared blankly.

“Dent, no .”

Dick stretched out, steam coiling off his skin. He always showered to the hottest temperature, soaking in the warmth the water provided. It made him feel human for a few seconds, until the air leeched it away and left him feeling like ice.

Towel draped over his tangled hair, he checked himself in the mirror. His eyes were yellow, like the moon at its fullest. His hair was black and limp, tangled as it trailed down to his collar-bone. His skin was pale, almost a sickly grey, with his veins prominent.

He looked so ugly.

He studied the white, faint scars that littered his body. His autopsy scar the Court had caused during his full transformation. The scars wrapped around his neck like a collar.

He was so ugly.

Compared to the illusion, compared to Wally’s memories he’d seen - he was so ugly. When the world was devoid of color, he hadn’t paid much attention to himself. He’d been faded and drab along with the scenery - blending in. But now that he could see colors, he noticed just how hideous he was.

He stood out like a sore thumb, a blemish upon the image he’d had in his head.

He turned away from the mirror and exited the bathroom.
A knife sunk through his throat, another stabbing him through the eye. Black liquid splattered out of his pale skin as his knees buckled. The knife in his head stayed while the other was ripped out. A vial of something clear and cold was shoved past his lips and down his throat.

Darkness flickered, focus distorting. A glint of gold - and he knew what it was now - and black covered feet entered his vision. His body shut down as the vial of whatever spread through his body.


His body arched up with a gasp even though he could not breathe. The lights were blinding, hovering overhead. His arms and legs were bound down.

No. No. No no no no no.

“Welcome home Gray Son,” that voice greeted. Dick’s eyes snapped over to the Judge and Grandmaster. Everything fell around him. He barely understood the next words the Judge spoke. No no no no no. No. Please no. No. “Now, let's fix what's been ruined.”

Help.

Chapter End Notes

So....nice weather we're having, huh?

Anyways, like I said, y'all gonna hate me. One, for that cliffhanger, and two - because like I said, after the 30th, I won't update a lot. The next update probably won't be until the next week or so. For the last 4 months I haven't had a life outside of work and finally I'll be getting back into some sort of a routine of actually socializing outside of the internet on Wednesday so yeah.

Oof. Great parting gift until next time, huh? But the next update should be by the next week or so. It'll be longer too, I promise. Just wanted to post this up before Wednesday.
Welp. Sorry this chapter is so short. My husband being back from deployment and Kingdom Hearts 3 really stole away my time! Oof lol But I wanted to get this chapter out.

Again, sorry it's so short.

Chapter warnings/potential triggers: mind manipulation, emotional manipulation, mind-fuckery, talk of suicide, implied suicide attempt, child death

Also, everything you know about Barbatos? From the comics? Yeah forget about that. Throw that out the window because I'm basically just kinda using his character without using his, uh, character. Like he's gonna be EXTREMELY out of character and stuff. Just. Yeah. Go with it.

edit: as of 10/07/2019 all mentions of Birdflash have been removed

[They were quiet. They slipped inside, soundlessly, their feet barely grazing the carpet under them. There was faint chatter from down the hall, light illuminating from the opening in the wall. They looked to Cobb, who nodded.

They slunk further down the hall. A man and a woman’s voice. The man was laughing, trying to explain a story. The woman giggled as she listened, piping in to inquire further details. They seemed happy.

Nice.

Unsuspecting.

They were children traffickers, from what the Court explained. Took wealthy children from wealthy families and sold them off to other countries. The Court and Batman hadn’t found the children yet.

But the Court knew who to blame.

Cobb pulled out their knife and nodded. Talon followed suit and waited. Cobb’s knife twitched and
Talon threw themselves into the room, blood splattering as their knife buried into the woman’s chest. The man yelled, stumbling backwards. He fell, Cobb making quick work to slice his throat.

“Good,” Cobb praised as Talon stood over the woman’s corpse. “A bit slow. You need to be faster.” Talon nodded and the two left into the night.

Dick wasn’t answering his calls. This wasn’t an uncommon thing - sometimes he left his phone on silent or in his apartment, not realizing it until a sibling dropped in on him to complain.

Damian frowned, tugging his hood down further. The stars were clear, the sky void of clouds for once. He looked at the sparkling little dots for a moment before dropping down onto the fire escape in front of his brother’s window.

He hated that he’d moved back to his apartment but Dick had insisted. Bruce couldn’t very well force him to stay - Dick would just roll his eyes and then proceed to sneak out. Alfred may even lower the security measures for him while sipping tea. Alfred didn’t hide his favoritism.

Shaking his head, the bird slunk into the bedroom, pausing as his foot made a clear creak on the floorboard. The apartment lights were on. The bathroom door was open, the shower curtains were drawn back and still wet.

Dick wasn't home.

Black stained the floorboards and title between the doorway of the bathroom and the bedroom.

Damian fell to his knees in front of the puddled stain, vision tunneling. That was his blood. That was Dick’s blood. Why- where was he? He snapped his head up, looking for any signs of a fight. Nothing. Maybe he hurt himself on accident?

His stomach sunk. That had to be it. He just probably cut himself on his razor or something. Did he shave? Damian couldn’t remember. But that had to be the answer. That - that had to be the answer.
His heart pounded almost painfully in his chest.

He scrambled, kicking the front door down. The wood splintered as it bounced against the adjacent brick wall and he clambered down the stairs. No droplets of black. No scuffs on the recently paved stone steps.

No signs of fighting.

The cafe went silent as Robin all but barreled through the door. He leaned against the hand-rail as he seemed to look around almost feverishly.

“Uh, Robin?” Jessica asked slowly, cautiously. She watched as the child-vigilante trembled.

“He’s not there.” It came out as a very sound whisper and it soundly so painfully *childishly* that even the Joker fell silent from making a quip, “*He’s not there.*”

*The other possibility-*

“Hey, hey, hey,” Catwoman spoke as she stood from her table, discarding her dominos, “breathe, kid. Come here, sit down.” She guided Robin down. “Do you guys have the Bats on speed dial?” She looked at Jessica, Ketti, and Morgan. They all nodded and were quick to whip out their phones.

“Who’s gone, sweetie?” Ivy was gentle as she knelt down next to Catwoman, resting a hand soothingly on Robin’s padded knee. “Batman?”

“He’s gone!” Robin’s voice raised an octave. “We promised he wouldn’t go back but there was blood and he was gone -”
“Blood?!” Ketti shrieked out, phone pressed to her ear. “Whose blood?!” The color drained from her cheeks. “Oh my god, do you mean Boss?”

Harley’s eyes went wide while Deathstroke set his coffee down. The cafe went frigid.

“We promised him.” Robin curled into a tight ball on the chair, wrapping his cape around him and drawing his hood up. “We promised him.”

“...I’ve been wanting to say this for a while,” Morgan piped up, “but Boss is a metahuman, isn’t he?”

The patrons looked at her, Robin’s head snapping up to glare. “I mean, even for a Gothamite, he’s kinda...out there. You can’t be totally human to keep a business open this long, no matter how delicious the coffee and food is.” Morgan scratched at her cheek. “I also saw him slice his hand open in the kitchen once. It healed instantly.”

“Ooooh, same,” Jessica whispered out. Ketti nodded, phone still pressed to her ear. “So is some sort of metahuman group after Boss?”

“What is happening?” Black Bat asked as they entered the cafe, Red Hood and Nightingale stumbling behind her. She turned her head to Robin, eyeing his deflated form. “Robin, report.”

“He’s gone.” He sounded closed to tears. "Blood on floor, door was unlocked. Window lock wasn’t hindered, meaning an easy in and out. No signs of confrontation - probably got him right after a shower.” Robin’s voice shook. “Shower curtain was wet. His earring was on the counter.”

“FUCK!” Red Hood kicked a booth. “FUCK!”

Nightingale pressed a hand to his ear comm, whispering furiously. “Batman is looking at the city’s traffic feeds as we speak, to see if they caught anything. We’re calling the League in.” He bounced from foot to foot, hands twitching. Black Bat's shoulders hunched up before she released a breath.

“No time to talk. Let’s go.” Black Bat held a hand out for Robin while Nightingale continued to talk. “Oracle said she got a ping on a possible route they took.” Robin was at her side in an instant. Red Hood looked at the cafe occupants.

“Stay here. We’re fearing the worst.” He nodded to them and left.

“...Sooooo who wants to take the roofs and who wants to take the streets?” Harley asked innocently while twirling one of her pig-tails.

“I’ll go to the sewers,” Killer Croc grunted. Joker got up with a dark chuckle, checking his weapons.

“My men will take to the streets,” Two-Face spoke, nestled comfortably. “I’ll stay here with his workers.” Deathstroke checked his knives, katanas, and guns.

“Let’s go.”

The cafe cleared out and Morgan just shook her head.

“Boss is probably gonna try to make it up in vacation pay,” she stated and Jessica laughed despite the tension. "Alright Dent, what do you know about laws on kidnappings and traumatic compensation?"

Two-Face smirked.

It was black.

He felt the shadows brush against his skin, soft like silk ribbons. They hugged his torso and throat,
guiding down his sides and between and around his legs. He couldn’t move, his body unresponsive.

His mind was sluggish, lethargic and dragging. His name escaped him, much less who or what he was or where he was. Everything was in a weird dazed, heavy state of being, the black warm like a nest of blankets. His eyelids fluttered, ready to slip closed, when he saw them.

Two bulging red orbs stared out as him from the endless black. They got closer, swaying slightly. Closer and closer they crept, the bright hue emitting a faint glow that stretched out across their exposed flesh. What the shadows weren’t cocooning was bathed in the warm light.

“Welcome back, little one.”

The shadows seemed to shake with each word spoken. They vibrated as if they were his voice box, humming against the noise disrupting the serene null of volume. He stared, unable to go anything else.

“You’ve tasted freedom. Consider it a gift.” A clawed hand reached out and touched his cheek. “I am kind to my belongings.”

“I’m not an object.” The words felt heavy on his tongue - like sand in bags weighed down by water. His mind was sluggish. Who was this in front of him? Where was he? Was he an object? This being’s belonging? What even was it, touching him? The shadows, his mind registered, but the clawed hand? Did it belong to a human? A beast?

A demon?

“You are my Talon,” the red eyes corrected. Talon? That sounded...familiar. Vague and bitter on his tongue, but familiar. Bitter like bile, like the stench of dried blood on clothing and poison. The title, the name, brought up flashes of red. Endless red, red, red.

Was he Talon?

It sounded like it was supposed to fit but at the same time...not. Like a puzzle piece that fit in the wrong puzzle. The image wasn’t connecting, despite how it seemed to snugly set itself into place.
Talon. He was Talon?

“My vessel. The perfect body.” The claws dragged down to his chest, leaking black in their wake. “I can’t fathom why I’ve only now attempted to try this.”

“I...don’t understand.” Words were foreign concepts, sentences far-away lands only believed in myths and stories to his mind as he tried to fight against the shadows and the claws and the red burning into him.

“In all the universes I’ve come across, conquered, devoured, there was never one where I embodied a human and wreaked havoc that way. Batman was my creator, you know.” The shadows seemed to lift him, his body going weightless. He let himself be maneuvered like a ragdoll, those red eyes gleaming as they watched. “But that’s a story for another time.”


Batman was Home? Home? What was Home?

Home brought up flashes of cold marble, of pink liquid spilling from an owl statue, of dizzying walls that extended forever. Blinding white. Bloody hand prints.

Flashes of nests of blankets, of large beds unused but piled high of pillows and sheets, of bodies piled and tangled, snoring away while tanned hands carded through their hair.

His Owlets! His-

The claws were around him, crushing him, cradling him, and his mind was dizzy as the black seemed to soften just a smidge. His thoughts disconnected and vertigo hit hard, knocking away any semblance of sense he had gained in his few moments.

“I’ve seen worlds. I’ve seen countless of lives cease to exist, go on a path that spans thousands of attempts designed by fate.” The dizziness increased and he closed his eyes, trying to remember how to breathe.
But he didn't need to breathe. He didn't know how he knew but he did. He was dead. He was dead, on a table, cut open, heart still. Dead, dead, dead. The shadows wound around him protectively at the thought, as if hearing and wanting to bring reassurance.

“I’ve seen your life play out more times than the universe has wished. I’ve seen Batman’s life play out - I’ve counted the bullets as they bury his parents into the earth. I’ve watched gravity steal the breath away from your family time and time again. I’ve seen your fate shape and form and dismantle like grains of sand along the beach - small and insignificant on their own but important and grounding mounted along together.”

Batman again. Batman was Home. Family? What was Family?

Figures falling, reaching for him, not quite touching. On the ground like a broken glass, their blood the shards that scattered along the Ring. Glistening. Deadly.

A clawed hand through his hair, a knife through his chest. Strong arms that carried him around the endless maze. Whispered words of soothing nothings to calm his fears.

Gentle hands and warm bodies pressed against him. Loud voices, loud laughter, clinging hands and wide, impressionable gazes. Coffee in the late hours, cookies on the holidays. Blankets and bodies wrapped together, kisses pressed to feverish foreheads during sick nights off patrol or raspberries blown to heated flesh during arguments over nothing.

Family. Family was-

And those claws were ripping away his thoughts before he had a proper hold on them and he was left groping air.

“I’ve seen the potential you hold, you’ve held. I’ve seen how Batman had shaped you, broken you, murdered you. I’ve seen how you pass him, you all pass him. I’ve plucked you up, you tiny little speck amongst the millions of you, and have chosen you to be my vessel.”

“Vessel.” The word felt cold, spreading across his chest like ice. It made his stomach twist and something crawl up his throat in an attempt to release in a scream at the idea of being someone’s, or something’s, vessel. He was not an object. He was-
He was-

And like a scream in the night, like a sob as he heard the echoing CRUNCH of his parents bodies crumple against the dirt Ring like sacks of clay, it burst forth.

He was Dick Grayson, owner of his coffee shop and former Talon.

And in front of him, sinking his disgustingly tender hands into his soul, was Barbatos.

The Demon Bat God the Court worshipped. The same Bat who’d followed Dick in the shadows back when he was in the labyrinth, kept company only by his own thoughts and his blood stains.

He wiggled, trying to shove at the shadows and claws holding him snug.

“Ah, ah, ah,” the Bat God tutted. “There is no use struggling, little one. You’ve already lost.”

“As if!” Dick snarled out, struggling more. “I’m still able to fight so I haven’t lost yet!”

“And when you can no longer fight?” Barbatos inquired curiously. “What then? Will you give up, like you were planning on doing when you were fixed?”

Dick stopped struggling immediately. His body sagged, the life leaving his limbs as the words sapped him of his will to fight.

“How-?”

“Do I know? We’re in your mind, little one. You don’t think I wouldn’t know that you were planning to kill yourself after having the electrum serum reversed?” Barbatos’ eyes narrowed. “You are foolish. The moment you’d died, the Court would have swooped in to take back your corpse. I only need your body.”
“I deserve to die!” Dick shouted back. His voice sounded horribly loud. “I’ve killed so many people!”

“That did not stop you when you were Talon,” Barbatos spoke softly.

“Because Talon wasn’t alive!” Dick squeezed his eyes shut. “Talon was some heartless puppet with no concept of remorse or guilt! But...if I become human again…” He let his head hang. “I’ll feel it. The regret. I...I know I’ve still killed but I’ve been telling myself that-”

“-because you are undead, you do not feel. You have no emotions, therefore you cannot understand the concept of remorse.” Barbatos reached a claw out and tilted his chin up. “Oh little one. If you want to suffer for their deaths, just say so.”

“Wha-”

A hand shot out of the darkness and grabbed his ankle. Another hand joined. A third hand. More and more hands clung onto his nude form, ripping him away from the shadows. He was powerless to stop them, his body stiffening like ice was filling his veins.

“I’ll let you relive their last moments, then.”

_Talon looked over to the figure standing beside them. Cobb looked down at Gotham, feeling the cold night air against their suits. He nodded and Talon fell forward._

_Down they went, falling hundreds of feet as the sky scraper’s rooftop got farther and farther away. The wind whistled in their ears, the street lights and cars blurring together as the ground got closer and closer to them._

_Talon slapped against the pavement with a sickeningly wet SPLAT, Cobb landing on the hood of a car not far from them. The surrounding people, one of which was their target, screamed in alarm._

_Talon jerkily got their way up from the ground, blood sluggishly dripping from their fast healing wounds._
Tony Zucco swallowed his vomit and his green complexion paled to a sickly grey. Talon charged, flipping over the man. They landed in a crouch behind the man, knives slicing through his tendons.

Stop.

Zucco fell forward with a cry of pain. Talon jumped onto his shoulders, legs locking tightly around his throat. Zucco choked, a pocket knife stabbing repeatedly into their thigh to release the increasing pressure.

Talon was quick to slice his neck and flipped off the falling corpse. They landed gracefully beside Cobb, who’d cleared the alleyway quickly.

Cobb nodded in approval and raised a hand, patting Talon on the cowled head once in praise.

Stop.

Talon turned-

Zucco’s hands were around their throat, gripping tightly. “You fucking piece of shit,” the mobster spat out, face a livid purple. “You fucking think you can just kill me.”

Panic gripped them. He was supposed to be dead and why did this hurt it shouldn’t hurt-

—and they was in a nursery, a wailing baby flailing in her crib. The mother and grandmother were both on the ground, dead. Cobb had the father pinned to the wall, carving his stomach full of twisted, jagged holes.

“You left my baby without a mother,” the woman’s corpse forced out. “My baby died from starvation because of you.”

“Murderer,” the grandmother’s glossy eyes burned judgingly at them. “You heartless murderer.”
Cobb spoke something and Talon was with the Grandmaster, standing at his side while their Grandmaster spoke lowly to the Owls. A man was dragged into the center of the gathering, kicking and screaming. Grandmaster gave a slight twist in his wrist and-

-Talon’s knife was quick in silencing the crying child. The child fell, eyes soulless, onto their parents corpses. Cobb hummed in satisfaction-

“Why did you kill me?” The child clung to them, bloody hands leaving tiny finger prints along their black bodysuit. “I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Child killer,” the woman hissed as she sunk her fists into their chest.

“Your parents are so ashamed that they gave birth to a murderer like you,” the father’s corpse grimly stated.

Please stop!

-while the woman sobbed, scooting backwards. “Please, please, please, I’m sorry! I’m sorry Talon! Don’t-”

Her cries were cut short as they sunk their claws into her throat, blood splattering along their googled eyes and cowl. A traitorous Owl was always preyed upon the more powerful of the Nest.

“But you know I wasn’t a real traitor,” the woman’s bloody throat dripped red. How could she speak with her neck shredded open into pieces? “Grandmaster was merely trying to test your loyalty. If you were a good lap dog to him. You killed an innocent person for that perverse man.”

STOP STOP STOP!
Dick screamed, curling into himself. He clawed at his face, shaking his head back and forth as Barbatos finally broke the illusion. The shadows surged forward and restrained him, his claw marks stitching themselves back up together to leave a unblemished face.

“You cannot deal with the blood on your talons,” Barbatos whispered as he moved closer, reaching for the curled form. “You should abandon your humanity. Like you did before.”

“No!” Dick recoiled from the reaching claws. “I’m human! I’m alive! I’m-

“A murderer,” Barbatos interrupted and was in Dick’s face, fangs intimidatingly sharp. “Do you truly think that once you’ve regained humanity, your precious -” he spat the word out like bile- “Family won’t immediately abandon you? The only reason Batman hasn’t locked you away yet is because he’s afraid of you. He knows that Arkham or Blackgate won’t and can’t contain you.”

Dick shrunk back, eyes wide. “That’s - that’s not true-”

“But you know it is. Your little Owlets and Pups only pretend to love you. The moment you can breathe again, your precious little Jason is going to bury a bullet through your heart.” He winced. “Your little Wally only likes you because you remind him of his former best friend.”

Barbatos floated around Dick, claws sinking into the tightly hunched body. “Face it. No one loves you. How could they? You’re a murderer. You’re a soulless corpse pretending to be human.” He got closer to Dick’s ear, breathing hot puffs of air across his cheek. “Because you knew what you were doing when you were taken to the Court. You had a choice. You always had a choice.”

“I-” He floundered for words. Nothing came. It was all true. His deepest fears, his greatest secrets - all laid out for him to hear and unable to deny. Black leaked down his cheeks.

“Cast away your humanity and those pesky memories. Batman thought he could ruin you. Brainwash you into thinking you needed to be fixed.” The claws sunk deeper. “You were led astray by hopes and dreams of the living. You forgot.”

He squeezed tight and Dick exploded into specks of light, disappearing into Barbatos’s chest.
“You’ve always been dead.”

Calvin ducked away from the bullet.

“LIKE I SAID!” He screamed over the rain of bullets trying to poke holes through him. “I’M A FRIEND OF DICK’S!”

“As if we’d believe you!” Robin hissed out. “He’s been kidnapped by the Court and a Talon just conveniently pops up to help?! Bullshit!”

“Ex-Talon!” Calvin finally huffed and let the bullets dig through his chest. He was tired of evading. “Listen. Dick gave me his business card.” He held it up. The bullets stopped.

“...Oracle says we should listen to him,” Nightingale gritted out. He didn't lower his bo staff though. “So, where is he?”

“The Court took him back. They’re using his body as a gateway for Barbatos to get to our universe,” Calvin spoke without hesitance. “I can tell you where to go. I’m....I’m not going back to the Court, but I’ll tell you how to get there.”

“Well birdie,” the Joker’s voice sounded and the Bats and Talon jolted into fighting poses, “we’re all ears.” Harley swung her mallet up onto her shoulder, smirk vicious as vines and plants slithered out of the shadows, Ivy’s grin poisonous. The Joker straightened his suit, Deathstroke giving a terse nod to the Bats as he holstered his guns.

“We’re gonna go get our barista,” Harley spoke matter-of-factly. “And then we’re gonna make sure everyone understands the meaning of Off. Limits.” Her expression darkened. “So start talkin’ before I bust this ‘ere mallet through ya skull.”

“Oooh,” Calvin deadpanned, “so scared. Go through the sewers.”
“...Sewers?” Ivy’s expression twisted. “Yuck. Guess we owe Croc a beer if he gets there first.”

“Oh my god,” Nightingale whispered. “Is this happening?”

“Batman said he’s on his way.” Red Hood shook his head. “And to try not to kill each other.” He looked from Calvin to the group of Villains. “Truce?”

“Truce,” they agreed with determined nods. “Until we get our Dickie baby boy back.”

“Please don’t ever call Dick that again, okay?” Signal whispered, falling behind Black Bat with Spoiler behind him.

“Congrats on the marriage!” Spoiler called with a wave. “Alright, Bats called in the League so this should call go smoothly.”

“You guys are crazy,” Calvin spoke in mild disbelief.

“You must not be a Gothamite,” Signal stated seriously.

“I have seen many worlds,” Barbatos spoke out into the darkness. Dick was curled up in the shadows, letting the tendrils weave around him like a net. His golden eyes were dull and empty, any consciousness dissolved. “I have seen worlds in which Batman is not a bat but an Owl, where you are Talon but you’ve kept your humanity.”

The shadows continued to weave around him.

“I have seen worlds where you take to the sky in black and blue, or red in a few of them, and fight the bumps in the night. I’ve seen worlds when your family lives and you continue on in your universe.”
Dick curled tighter into a ball, trying to block out his voice.

“I have seen worlds in which you’ve murdered, in which you’ve killed your own Owlets and Pups. In which you’ve hated them. Casted them away, aside. I’ve seen worlds in which you’ve gained and controlled the trust of others, had the entire Hero community on their knees to please you. I’ve seen many worlds in which you are the very center of their universe, the light to their darkness.”

“You’re wrong,” Dick whispered out, closing his eyes. It took everything to must those two words.

“You are love itself,” Barbatos argued. The demon god sighed before disappearing.

Talon’s eyes snapped open. They moved to sit up mechanically, body stiff and motions awkward like a robot’s rusty joints moving with chipped gears.

“Gray Son?”

Talon’s narrowed golden eyes burned into the smooth white masks of the Judge and Grandmaster.

“Yes Judge, Grandmaster,” Talon greeted out, sliding off the metal table.

They felt nothing. They did not bat an eyelash as the puddles of black under them. They did not bat an eyelash at the black, white, and grey scenery that greeted them. They did not bat an eyelash at the empty, hollow feeling in their stomach.

They did not feel. They did not breathe. This empty vessel was perfect for the Great Bat God.
“Welcome back,” the Judge finally spoke. Talon bowed their head at the words. In their shadow, Barbatos’s eyes squinted in anticipation. In their mind, Dick curled up even tighter and let the shadows swallow him whole.

Chapter End Notes

:^D

This chapter was mainly a Dick-centric chapter. Next chapter will deal with everyone's reactions to Dick's kidnap and stuff. REMINDER: THIS STORY IS NOT ENDING. I STILL HAVE A LOT OF STUFF PLANNED. I'M JUST GETTING THIS OUT OF THE WAY LOL.

Idk when I'll update next. I'm not done with Kingdom Hearts 3 yet and personal life is back so. Yeah. Oof.

DISCORD LINK:

https://discord.gg/ZvMAP5a
It started with an emergency phone call from one of Dick’s baristas, Ketti. He’d given the girls his emergency number in case of, well, emergencies.

His heart nearly stopped when he saw Ketti calling him. He answered quickly.

“Um, Batman? It’s Ketti, from the cafe? Um-” she was whispering softly, as if afraid to speak louder. Distantly, he wondered if there was a mugger but then remembered just where she was- “Robin came in frantic. Said Boss was gone - taken.”

Batman stopped listening. He was pulling up the traffic cameras immediately, trying to find the angles that’d point directly at the cafe and, more importantly, the rooftop to Dick’s apartment and the next door building. He hung up on the girl, focusing on the cameras.

The quality was low, grainy. Chopp...
“I’m looking up the footage from the surrounding area,” he stated without preamble. He heard Red Hood in the background, swearing loudly, followed by a clatter. “I’m contacting Oracle now.”

He cut off the link and didn't even have time to call Oracle - she called him.

“I have a possible route marked on the map. From what Dick’s explained about their patterns of stealth, it seemed most reasonable. I’ve got Wally on the other line.”

“Patch him through, please.” Despite the palpitations almost painfully slamming into his ribcage, he had to remember to keep a level head. This wasn’t time for Daddy!Bats, as his children dubbed his overprotective self, but The Batman. Panic and worry did nothing but act as distractions - he had to distance himself to be as rational and sound of mind as possible.

“What’s going on?” Wally’s voice was deadly and low, the wind whistling in the background. So he was on his way then. “Oracle just called and then switched me over to you. What-”

“Dick’s been taken. The Court got us when we had our guard down.”

It was quiet for a beat. Two. Finally-

“Why was he alone?”

Batman closed his eyes behind his cowl. An excellent question. One Batman and Bruce tried to argue with Dick about. Dick had wanted to move back, despite the danger he knew he was in, because he wanted the independence. He didn't want to feel trapped, like he was being kept in the Manor against his will. He’d found a new Nest in his Cafe and apartment and hadn’t wanted to abandon it, no matter the cost.

“It’s complicated. How long-”

Batman didn't even finish his sentence before the Batcomputer was alerting him to Wally’s entrance. Wally skidded to a stop, expression down-right furious behind his mask.

“Explain it to me cause it didn't sound complicated. Dick stays here and is protected. Dick goes
back to his apartment and he’s a sitting duck.” Wally raised and dropped his hands as if weighing invisible objects. “Not seeing where it’s complicated.”

“I don’t need your sass, boy,” Batman snarled out and Wally didn't even flinch. “It was Dick’s choice in the end. He chose to go back to his apartment and I couldn’t - I wouldn’t keep him locked up here. Again.”

“Again.” Wally’s voice echoed off the Cave walls. “Well, let’s go.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Do you have any idea of where he is?”

“We’ve got a hit,” Barbara’s voice sounded from the speakers. “An ex-Talon, Calvin Rose, gave the Court’s whereabouts. He’s apparently Dick’s new roommate?”

“Rom-what?!” Wally looked from Bruce to the computer, which flashed purple. “Who!? An ex - who?!?”

“No time, Speedster. I’m sending the coordinates now. We’ve already lost almost 8 hours due to our negligence. I don’t know about you but I feel like that’s 8 hours too long for Dick to be with those creeps.”

“Thanks Oracle,” Batman sighed. “Send out that we’ll meet them there.” He turned to the computer, pressing a few keys. Wally stood back, vibrating in place.

He didn't know where to go. He didn't know what to do. He felt helpless. It reminded him of old memories, of Dick being hurt or stranded without any back-up. It reminded him of old memories, of missions gone wrong. It reminded him of how fragile his best friend was, despite the very obvious differences in this universe.

“This is a private channel,” Barbara’s voice sounded in his ear. Wally jumped, startled by the sudden noise. “I’ll tell you how to get there. Bat’s gonna be a few more minutes to get the League ready to go.”

Wally felt his heart nearly stutter from relief. At least someone understood the urgency in this situation.

“Okay, while you do you, I’m just gonna - yeah.” Wally didn't wait, speeding out of the Cave. He
listened to Oracle give him directions, no doubt tracking him through the city traffic feed.

“*He’ll be okay,*” Babs soothed softly. “*He’s strong.*”

“You have no idea,” Wally spoke out as he jumped over a city bus. “You only know him as this immortal trained assassin. He’s strong, immortality and crazy owls or not.”

“...Are you ever going to stop comparing him to that other Dick?” Wally ran up the side of a building, deciding that it was faster than weaving through traffic and people.

“I have. I’m just saying-”

“*Take a right.*” He skidded right.

“-that I know Dick is strong. I *know.*” Wally fell silent, tightening his clenched fists. “Just. Why Dick?”

“I wish I had an answer for that. In three blocks, there will be a sewer hole. Go down it. Do you have an air filter mask?”

If he could, Wally would have looked at her incredulously. It was almost rule number 3 of being a Hero - carry a breathing mask in case of emergencies.

“*Okay, yeah, stupid question. Go down the hole, find the main stream, and follow it. After about three miles, take a left and then a right. There will be a small gap in the walls - that’s one of their many entrances. After that - well. You can either wait or go off on your own.*”

“Thanks Babs,” Wally spoke sincerely, finding the grate she’d been speaking of. “Stay on the line?”

“*Duh.*”

Wally braced himself and vibrated through the metal.
He wasn't losing his best friend again. He was not making that same mistake.

The wall exploded. Bricks and marble flew across the air as Joker stepped over rubble, straightening out his jacket. He idly spun his crow-bar around in his hand.

Red Hood kept a very reasonable amount of space between them.


They all paused to take in the maze.

“Wow. Is this~”

“The labyrinth? I think so.” Red Hood craned his neck back, trying to see where the walls stopped. They seemed to stretch on forever. The flooring was pristine, looking untouched. The walls were decorated with hanging portraits of Owl-masked people. Their black eyes almost seemed to follow you, which added to the eerie feel. “Jesus. No wonder he wanted to stay in the Cave. Compared to here, it’s Disneyland.”

“This place gives me the heebie-jeebies,” Harley complained, giving a dramatic shudder as she pressed against Ivy. “Yeesh. We really gotta send out a memo about evil lairs.”

“Next meeting,” Ivy hushed as Catwoman dropped down, Black Bat and Batgirl behind her.

“Killer Croc, Deathstroke, and Signal went a different route,” Batgirl stated when Nightingale looked to her. “Oracle says that Flash is on his way here too. Batman’s taking a bit more time to organize the League’s involvement.”
“Roger,” the Bats all spoke at once. The Rogues couldn’t help but stare - it was always so creepy how in sync they all were.

“Now-”

“Welcome, our uninvited guests,” a voice boomed from all around them. Catwoman startled, the others looking just as alert by the sudden sound. “Though we weren’t expecting you, we can be hospitable. Allow us to properly greet you.”

Shadows rained down on them. Bodies slapped against the marble before pulling themselves up like marionettes having their strings tugged. The bodies were clad in black body-suits, gold accents glinting off the fluorescent lights. Their bandoliers were laden with sharp-looking knives, the hilts looking specially carved. Their masks, googles shaped like an Owl’s bare skull, stared back at the gathered group.

“Uh.” Harley shifted her footing, tightening her grip on her mallet. “What are they?”

“Talons,” Nightingale hissed out between clenched teeth. He withdrew his bo staff, eyes narrowed behind his mask.

“Aaaaand what are those?” Harley inched backwards into Ivy, who planted a hand on her shoulder.

“Zombies, basically,” Red Hood gruffed as he clicked the safety off his guns. “They’re undead but if you decapitate them and keep the head away-”

He didn’t even finish before Joker slammed his crow-bar into one of the Talon’s temple. Harley came up behind him, swinging her mallet wide. The Talon’s head cracked, flying off their body in a spray of blood, snapped nerves, bones, and tendons. The head sailed right into the awaiting mouth of Ivy’s gigantic Venus Fly Trap.

“...that works too.” Red Hood looked at Robin and Nightingale, both of who just shrugged their shoulders. “Okay. Let’s go rescue our damsel in distress!”
Wally skidded to a halt. He stared. Rows upon rows of coffins lined the marble flooring, the vivid red standing out almost sickeningly against the white.

“Looks like this is where they’re put to sleep when not being used,” Babs commented. Wally wasn’t even going to try to figure out how she could even see the room - she probably had probes in their eyes or something.

“Jesus.” Dick had a coffin. He’d mentioned it in passing once, when explaining why he didn’t like the cold or ice cream or anything that involved a temperature below lukewarm. Dick had a coffin. He’d stayed in one of these boxes, in a suspended state of consciousness. Dick had explained how they couldn’t sleep, so they were aware and alert of everything that happened while in their coffins.

“Jesus.” He couldn’t think of anything else to say. Just imagining it made his skin crawl. He’d tried not to get to emotional over when Dick talked about the Court - after all, it had been a thing of the past. Nothing to worry about.

But now that he was seeing the evidence, seeing what actually was a reality for his best friend...

His mind blanked.

Dick wasn’t okay. He tried to pretend he was but seeing this, Wally knew he wasn’t. Who could be okay after having to stay, conscious, in a coffin? He knew Jason was already pretty messed up from it himself so how could Dick be any better?

Dick wasn’t okay. Wally tried to minimize his trauma, tried to imagine it wasn’t as bad as it was, because Dick never acted like he was suffering.

Did Dick even realize how bad his life was? Locked in coffins, trapped in mazes, raised to be an assassin who couldn’t die…

An explosion sounded distantly and he jolted into awareness. He sped through the graveyard, and that’s what it was - could only be described as such - and came to chaos.

Harley seemed to be playing Whack-A-Talon with her mallet, using it like a baseball bat to pitch severed heads to Ivy’s monstrosity of a plant. Ivy was using thorny vines to immobilize the Talons, layering them over and over when the puppets tried to fight back.

“Flash! Over here!”

Batgirl had her back against Catwoman’s, the two surrounded by five Talons. Robin and Nightingale were covering Red Hood as he played FPS, shooting knee-caps and heads without pause.

Black Bat was sailing through the air like she was weightless, cutting down the Talons with a grace as if she were merely dancing.

Flash quickly bulldozed through the Talons surrounding the two women and nearly crashed into Black Bat as she landed beside Catwoman.

“What’s the current situation?” Wally asked as he tripped a lunging Talon.

“Be distractions until the League gets here?” Spoiler guessed as she used one of her escrima sticks to knock a Talon back.

“Fair enough,” Wally acknowledged and rushed around the enclosed area, knocking down the remaining Talons. “Do we have any ideas where Dick is?”

“From what I can see, looks like there’s a figure in the middle of this crazy maze. I’ll guide you guys. Get a move on it.” Wally gestured to the group, trying very hard not to find the situation weird as Joker helped Nightingale up from the ground, laughing at the blood streaming from the teen’s wounded cheek.

The group were quick on their feet as Oracle led them through the left, right, left, straight, right of the maze.

The pathway opened up to a wide space, the area circular and branching off to other paths. In the center of the circular space was a fountain, carved from marble and leaking pink water.
Robin gave a pained whine, taking a step forward. Black Bat snagged him by his hood, her hand shaking as she stared ahead. Red Hood’s hand fell to his side, gun almost limp in his hold. Nightingale gave a low hiss while Spoiler gasped loudly. The Rogues looked between them and the figure perched on the marble Owl.

The figure, small and thin, was sitting elegantly on top of the carved fountain decoration. One leg was tucked up to their chest, the other dangling over the spout releasing the water. Their deathly pale cheek was resting against their bent knee, the black and navy blue veins prominent as they stretched across their face.

Their eyes were closed, expression looking serene as they just stayed motionless.

Shadows wound around the figure, tendrils crawling up their dangled leg and winding around their shoulders like a hug.

Their eyelids fluttered and slid open painstakingly slow. Red eyes stared down at the group, gaze piercing and immobilizing. The shadows rose, quivering and flaring out like sharp slaps of winter air. They were graceful as they jumped down from the fountain, landing in a crouch.

“Gray Son, be sure to give them a warm welcome.”

Talon stood up from their crouch, knives gripped loosely as they stared blankly at the intruders. Soulless eyes burned into masked wide eyes and the assassin tilted their head to the side.

There was no recognition. There was no warmth. Just a blank slate.

Jason felt the world tilt with vertigo as he stared at those empty, soulless eyes. It was like he was nine again, seeing those eyes open again for the first time after thinking he’d killed the creature trying to save Batman. It was like he was nine again, leaning over the bound Talon and seeing nothing but a void where fear or agitation should be.

It was like he was nine again, threatened to keep his distance from the killing machine because he wasn’t human, would never be fully human, and Batman feared the worst until he could figure out how to override the Court’s mind control.
“Yes Grandmaster,” Talon spoke. “Intruders, the Court of Owls has sentenced you to die.”

“Aw shit,” Red Hood choked out. His hands shook as he pressed them to the hilts of his gun. He couldn’t draw them - black, white skull fragments, he wasn’t moving - not at Dick. Not again.

“Gray Son?” Harley’s voice sounded faint. Sick. She was gawking at Talon. “Wait, don’t tell me-”

“Dick,” Nightingale spoke slowly, ignoring Joker’s confused hum, “it’s us. It’s your Owlets. Remember us?” He gestured to his siblings, his hands shaking. His shoulders were hunched, body tensing by the second. This was the worst case scenario - a completely regressed Dick.

“Dick Grayson is dead.”

Jason closed his eyes behind his helmet and mask. He bit his lip, breathing in steadily through his nose despite the sudden burn that flushed his eyes and the bridge of his nose. He mouthed along silently with the words he’d had burned into his memory from how often he’d heard it.

“Only Talon remains.”

“Dick,” Wally wheezed out, looking like he was about to kneel over. “Dick. Dude. You don’t - it’s us. Your friends!” His voice cracked. Talon’s head tilted further.

In a blink, they were in front of Wally, raised on their tiptoes to get in the Speedster’s face. No one moved.

“Oh, you’re that Speedster.” The voice that came from Talon’s mouth was not human - it was more of a growl, a guttural thing that barely sounded coherent to their mortal ears. “I dislike when others have knowledge of other universes. Maybe I’ll take those memories away.” A clawed hand raised-

-and Wally was in the back of the group, eyes wide as Talon dropped their arm.

“You’re not Dick.” Wally’s heart was pounding in his chest, trying to shatter through his ribcage. “What - who are you?”

The ceiling caved.

“What’s wrong sweetie?” Mary asked, frown set low on her face. Dick shrugged his shoulders, rubbing at his sore neck.

“I don’t know mom. I just...Feel weird. Maybe I’m getting sick?” He smiled breezily at his mother, moving to press a kiss to her cheek. “Take my temperature?”

“Aren’t you too old for that?” She teased, swatting him away. “You’re 26, for heaven’s sake! I can’t baby-” she burst out laughing “-oh who am I kidding? Come here, my little Robin. Let me see.” She reached out, cupping his cheeks in her hands.

“Hm. You don’t feel warm. Are you off work tomorrow? Take the day to rest and catch up on sleep.” Mary dropped her hands and Dick pressed another kiss to her cheek.

“I am! Morgan, Ketti, and Jessica are covering my shift.” Dick plopped down opposite her at the kitchen table. “Mind if I crash here tonight?”

“Oh course,” John called as he strutted into the kitchen, holding a box. “I just got a new model airplane! Help me put it together.” He set the box down, smile blinding. “Sweetie, can you make some mititei and sarma for dinner tonight?”

“Only if you two help,” Mary challenged with a raised eyebrow. Dick and John traded a look before grinning at her.

“Sarma’s your favorite after all, right Robin?” Mary asked as she stood from the table, taking her teacup with her. Dick paused, for a split-second, before he nodded.
“You know it! I love it when you make it!” He laughed. “Here, let me help you get the stuff out.” He got up from the table, following behind his mother. He tried to ignore the nagging in the back of his head that he had no remembrance of what sarma was or tasted like.

“Such a good boy,” Mary cooed as she patted his cheek. Dick pulled a plate out of the cabinet, ready to help her prep the cabbage rolls. “My beautiful baby. My perfect little one.”

The plate in his hand shattered as it slipped from his lax fingers. He stared blankly at the counter, the world crumbling around him.

“So perfect,” John agreed, his voice morphing. It cracked before he gurgled. Dick didn't want to turn around. “Our perfect little Talon.”

“The Court was so pleased with you, our little murderer.” His mother’s hand on his arm was wet. He tried not to think about how most of her fingers weren’t touching his skin. “Too bad we aren’t.”

“How disgusting, that our child became this.”

They were in the Big Tent. He was hunched over their crumpled forms, his mother’s crooked arm latched onto him. His father’s fingers, bones tearing through the flesh of his knuckles, dug into his legs.

“How could you?” His mother’s neck was twisted, her glossy eyes glaring at him despite her stomach pressed against the pool of red. Her spine was curved and protruding from her unitard, the sequin infested clothing torn and stained from the crimson liquid. “You filthy monster.”

She crawled up his arms. Her bent, crooked fingers wrapped around his throat. Her touch was cold, her fingers like knives as they sunk through his skin. Her breath fanned his face, feeling and smelling like nothing.

He couldn’t breathe. Of course he couldn’t breathe. He was dead. Just as dead at his parents. He died that night with them, when he was taken away by Cobb. He died when their bodies hit the ground.
He should be with them in the sea of red, nothing more than a mangled corpse with his blood splattered around him like a set of wings.

Dick felt like a weightless puppet, falling backwards into the red.

He sunk down, crashing through the surface of the ocean of red. He continued to drop, air bubbles escaping his parted lips. *That’s funny*, he distantly thought. Air bubbles from lungs that didn't even hold oxygen. He let himself sink, let himself drop steadily towards the endless abyss of red and black.

Hands clung on, keeping up his momentum. Hundred of them, pale white against the red and black, were his anchor, weighing him down.

He didn't feel anything. This was the moment he was supposed to feel terror, wasn’t it? Times like this, this was when he was supposed to struggle, to fight against the hands and the sea of red, and try to breach the top.

But he didn't feel that. He didn't feel ice in his veins, didn't feel the world fall into a crisp image of vividness at all his sins and regrets. Didn't feel a daunting tower of panic stand tall over him.

He didn't feel anything.

He closed his eyes, letting himself drift downwards.

This was his sea of red, formed from drops of blood he’d spilt, not tears he’d cried.

“What’s wrong sweetie?” Mary asked, frown set low on her face. Dick shrugged his shoulders, rubbing at his sore neck. The kitchen felt stuffy. His vision momentarily swam as his surroundings settled in his mind. He was in the kitchen. He was in the kitchen?

“I don’t know mom. I just...Feel weird. Maybe I’m getting sick?” He smiled breezily at his mother, moving to press a kiss to her cheek. “Take my temperature?”

The shadows quivered.
“Shit!” Signal shrieked as Croc shielded him from the crumbling ceiling. “What is that man’s issue with ceilings?! Batman’s going to kill me one day.”

“You and me both, kid,” Croc grunted as he shook the debris off his scaled arm. “He does this often? He usually ain’t too keen about destroying the sewer lines.”

“As often as he can,” Signal grumbled. “Uh. Where did Deathstroke go?”

“While you two were braiding each other’s hair,” Slade called as he dropped a Talon’s body, keeping hold of the head, “I was actually doing something.”

“Is that a head?!” Signal made a weird choked noise. “Oh my god I’m going to be sick.” The two adults eyed him incredulously.


“I’m more and more certain that Dick drugs the espresso shots,” Slade commented dryly as he stepped over another body. “It seems we picked the wrong route. It looks like we’re missing all the fun.”

“Beheading Talons is considered fun?” Signal asked as he skipped ahead. “When I tell you not to attack a Talon, don’t, okay?” He didn't want Dick to be accidentally decapitated if they came upon him.

“Dick’s one of these...creatures, isn’t he?” Slade nudged a corpse with his boot. “I...came into contact with him once. He looked different.”

“He is. He’s...uh - it’s complicated.” Signal ducked and threw a kick at a Talon. “Just. He’s not like these guys, okay? He’s different.”
“Whatever,” Croc called as he bit off a Talon’s head. “As long as I keep getting my mocha lattes, I don’t care if he has 15 eyes.”

“What’s wrong sweetie?” Mary asked, frown set low on her face. Dick shrugged his shoulders, rubbing at his sore neck. After a moment, he shook his head and smiled.

“Nothing! I’m going to go meet up with Wally.” He hugged her and left quickly. His body felt weird, like he was half asleep. His entire body felt like it was made out of the black and white static of a TV, a wrong channel without the proper service.

Despite the insistent buzz underneath his skin, he shook it off to focus on meeting Wally. Wally and him barely had time to hang out anymore, now that he was dating some woman named Linda. Dick walked down the driveway to his car, a small little Volkswagen Beetle. Climbing in, he rested his head against the steering wheel.

He may be a bit lonely without his best friend, but he couldn’t complain.

It was fine.

His heart ached.

He started up the car, reversed out of the driveway, and was off.

“Dick!” Wally greeted with a wave. They’d decided to meet out on a foyer of an outdoor cafe. “Hey! Over here!” As if Dick couldn’t spot Wally’s vibrant red hair a mile away. It was one of his favorite things about the man he liked - personality and humor aside.

“I see you, I see you,” Dick laughed, meeting Wally in a hug. “How are you? Haven’t seen you since you left movie night to see Linda.” Wally winced, looking guilty.
“Yeah, sorry dude. But, when the bae calls, you go.” His head ached. “Soooo when are you gonna get a girlfriend?”

Never. “No idea. Haven’t met the right person.” Dick shrugged. “You wanna go try that new bar?”

“The Red Hood?” Something in the name made his chest twinge. “Sure! I heard they have a dark ale that’s specially brewed with coffee beans. I think you’ll like it.”

Dick didn't drink. Couldn’t. “Oh, sounds good!” Wally slung an arm around his shoulder.

“Let’s go. First round is on me.” They began to walk down the street, Dick basking under the warmth Wally provided. Or should have provided. Wally didn't feel like anything.

“And in other news, Bruce Wayne releases a press conference over the death of his adopted son.”

Dick stopped in his tracks, turning to the giant TV screen embedded into one of the towering buildings of the city. The news anchor continued but Dick’s eyes were trained on the smiling face of Jason Todd.

“Dick?” Wally tugged at him. “What’s wrong?”

“That’s my-”

Owlet.

“What’s wrong sweetie?” Mary asked, frown set low on her face. The kitchen was silent. The faint sound of the hanging clock’s hands ticking away echoed loudly.

Tears streamed down his cheeks. His heart was imploding in on itself.

He didn't know why.
“I don’t know.” His words were glass on his tongue, cutting up his gums and shredding his throat. “I don’t know.” He wiped at his face, gasping for breathe.

He didn't know why.

Talon skipped backwards as Superman dropped into the center of the maze, Batman begrudgingly in his arms. Wonder Woman followed, Martian Manhunter, Green Arrow, and Green Lantern not far behind. The Bat wiggled out of the stronghold and straighten his cape out, trying to save some face.

He tensed, eyes zeroing in on Talon.

“Batman!” Talon swept their arms out wide. “Oh, what a joyous moment! The creator meets the creation.” The shadows wiggled and flared and Talon tilted their head to the side. “Sort of.”

“You’re Barbatos,” Batman stated. Superman and Wonder Woman looked wary, eying the gathered Villains and the obviously possessed Talon. “The Bat-God that the Court worships.”

“Sort of,” Barbatos spoke with a tilt of their head. “But first, let me thank you.”

“For?” Batman’s hands clenched into fists before relaxing. Robin brushed Spoiler’s hand and she took a step to the left. Black Bat followed.

“For creating me.”

Silence.

“Well, not you, but a Batman did. Went back in time, got a tribe to worship him. It’s a long story.” Barbatos waved a hand. “Robin, if you try to inject my vessel with that liquid nitrogen I will rip your throat out and make Dick conscious to witness it.”
Robin and Spoiler froze.

“This is my perfect vessel,” They spoke as they dug a claw into their chest. Black oozed from their gold tips. “I cannot give it up so easily. Besides, my Little One doesn’t even want to gain back consciousness.”

The white marble rippled. The gathered group huddled together while the League stood ready to fight any oncoming attack.

Harley dropped like a rock, crashing to the ground without any sudden warning.

“HARLEY!” Ivy screamed, rushing to her wife. Joker fell in front of the two protectively as vines shot up, circling the three as a shield. “Harley, sweetie, wake up.” She checked Harley’s pulse. Steady. Her breathing was deep, as if she were sleeping. When she peeled her eyelid open, her eyes were glazed.

“What’s wrong with her?” Shazam asked worriedly, looking between Barbatos to the downed woman.

“Careful where you focus your attention,” Barbatos warned, Talons falling behind them. “Worry about yourselves before anyone else.”

“What’s wrong sweetie?” Mary asked, frown set low on her face. She turned when he didn’t respond. He stood in the kitchen, staring at the set of knives in the wooden block. “Dick?” He felt eyes on him, intense and studying him. He closed his own for a moment, trying to stop the room from slipping through his fingers.

“I don’t think I saw you.”

Mary’s forehead creased. John came in with his box, only to pause at the tension.

“I screamed for you, you know. Cried and begged and screamed for you. To help me. To save me. But you were already dead.” Dick reached out, taking one of the serrated knives from the block.
He ran his index finger down the ridged grooves. Red bubbled up and streamed down his hand. It didn't hurt.

He remembered the hands grabbing him, shoving clawed fingers into his mouth to silence his wails. He remembered gentle shushes as he sobbed out loudly, trapped in the endless walls of white with the occasional splash of red. He remembered how he could barely remember his mother’s touch - how he’d taken a knife to his own throat at the realization he was slowly forgetting them - forgetting a lot of things.

“Sweetie?” Mary sounded worried. Maybe. He couldn’t tell what emotions were anymore. Everything was going distant. Dull. The color was leaking out of the kitchen. Static was replacing background noises of the hum of the fan or the microwave going.

“I don’t think I saw you.” Dick fiddled with the knife, letting it sink into his hands. “It was weird. Everything just sort of faded. Slowly. It was so slow. Then it was quiet. But not even a peaceful sort of quiet - just. Just quiet.” He looked up at the people who were supposed to be his parents. Their faces were blurred out. “But I didn't see you.”

He’d been strapped to a table, mind already slowly numbing to the hands in his chest and the knives and liquids replacing his red blood with black goop. He’d registered the black creeping in, how his body had slowly began to fade away into nothing. How the sounds had muted and the lights had dulled and that black crawled across his vision, replacing the white masks and red splotches.

But the emptiness was vivid. The nothingness was burned into his mind. People said dying was like eternal slumber. Dick could say with certainty that death was nothing like sleeping - at least in dreams you weren’t alone.

“Why would you?” They were in the Big Top. The knife was gone and he was waist deep in the sea of red, his parents mangled corpses scaling him like a lifeline. “I’m a murderer.” More corpses joined in dragging him down. He was chest deep. “A monster.” Neck deep. “An abomination.”

Drowning. He was drowning. Dragged under by the hundreds of hands pulling him towards his end. Was it Hell? Maybe.

He’d have probably seen in when he’d died. But instead - nothing.
“Why are you fighting?” Barbatos inquired softly, claws drawing black liquid against his face.
“I’m trying to give you the happiness you desire.”

“This isn’t happiness.” Dick’s eyes were empty. Gone was his spark of life, gone was the soul he’d stubbornly forged from the broken pieces of memories the Court hadn’t been able to steal away. “This is torture.”

“How? I gave you your family. I fabricated memories for you too. You still have Wally in your life, despite your own doubts on your relationship.”

“Is that what you think entitles happiness? Strangers playing house and a one-sided love?” Dick let the shadows weave around him. “It’s fake.”

“It’s better than your reality.” Barbatos drew away. “If you do not want the happiness I give you, then suffer in the reality.”

He dropped like a rock in water, splashing through the red.

“They’re already dead!” Red Hood yelled out at the judgemental look Batman shot him the moment a bullet has sunk through a Talon’s skull. “You know that they’d want death more than continuing being mindless slaves!”

Sometime during the ensuing chaos of Talons continuing to swarm the center of the maze, Signal, Croc, and Deathstroke had found them. Signal and Robin had flanked Batman without orders, working in tandem to cover their mentor.

Batgirl shrieked as a Talon lunged at her, only for them to be knocked out of the air by another Talon. The Talon was quick to kill the attacking Talon and fall in front of Spoiler like a shield.

“Uh. Okay.” Batgirl looked to Black Bat, who eyed the Talon up and down.
“Ally,” Black Bat established and the Talon nodded before grabbing Batgirl, twirling her out of the way of incoming knives. “Help. Ours now.”

“Are we Dick’s replacements?!” Batgirl cried out. Just what they needed - another sibling. The Talon shielded her again. “What did we do to make them change?!”

“Moved,” Black Bat deduced and the Talon nodded again. Making quick work, they used splattered blood to write out a childish scribble of “Strix :)”. Strix pointed at Batgirl and Black Bat before pointing to herself before giving a thumbs up. Black Bat responded with a thumbs up of her own.

“Oh my god, is Dick’s adoption powers rubbing off on us?” Batgirl grumbled as she used Strix’s shoulder as an anchor to land a swinging kick to another Talon. Strix stuck close.

Wally slammed full-force into a group of Talons, sending them right into Superman’s heat vision. He felt sick to his stomach. Dick had emotions. Dick was a human, despite his biological changes. Weren’t these Talons the same?

“Most of these Talons are brain dead,” J’onn spoke up as he floated behind Wally, throwing a few Talons through the air with his telekinesis. “They are older. The revival process from their encasement destroyed any remaining individuality in them. There are a handful who still have a spark-” he looked to Strix “-but other than that, they’re completely mindless puppets.”

“That...doesn’t really make me feel better,” Wally admitted quietly. J’onn nodded solemnly.

“Understandable,” he conceded and blocked knives thrown at them. “Don’t worry. Dick will be rescued.”

“I know that,” he grouched and spun into a tornado, knocking away Talons left and right.

“Murderer.”
He flinched at the venom that dropped off the tongue that uttered that single word.

“Monster.”

Barb wire laced his heart, slicing it into ribbons.

“Freak.”

Soulless eyes taunted him with an ending he couldn’t have.

“Child murderer.”

Blood splatters, cold steel, white towering walls.

“Disappointment.”

White masks, blank of any emotions, staring at him with the weight of the world.

“How could you?”

Bodies looking like bloody octopuses on the dirt floor, screams drowning out in the wake of their trailing liquids.

“How could you kill me?”

Dick curled up tighter into himself, hands clamped over his ears. He was surrounded by corpses, their states varying.

“How can we call you our son?” Mary’s bloody mouth moved. Her neck was at an angle, spine protruding from the side of her flesh, giving a notable bulge. Blood leaked down her front, where her ribs were jutting out. Her legs were curled around, looking like curls bows than bones.
“You should have died instead,” John gurgled out. Blood spilled past his lips like a faucet. His left arm was bent inwards, his right femur bone jutting out through flesh. His skull was caved in, fragments and brain poking through.

“Why did you kill me?” A little girl sobbed out. “I didn't do anything wrong.” Her throat was slit open, showing the tendons in her neck vibrating as she cried. Her nightgown was soaked in blood, caking against her bare feet.

“Murderer!” An elderly man snarled. His heart was ripped out of his chest, leaving a cavity of dark blood and broken chest bone.

Dick hunched further, whimpering. He shook his head, trying to block out the noise.

“You should be the one dead!” Another corpse screamed. Half their head was missing. “You don’t deserve a second chance!”

“I know,” Dick whispered, eyes screwed shut. “I know. I know. I know.” He didn't want to live. He didn't want to continue spending his days when he'd stolen so many already. It wasn’t fair. He didn't deserve happiness. He didn't deserve anything but the final darkness.

“You let me die.” Jason spat, younger and completely mangled and burned to a crisp. “You killed me just as much as the Joker did. I thought you were supposed to protect me.” Dick mewled softly, eyes going wide. He’d spent the night with Tim, entrusting Batman to keep his first Owlet safe on their patrol. Getting the call. Seeing the body. Seeing his burnt, bloody corpse and barely able to distinguish it as Jason.

If he hadn’t been so selfish, wanting to experience the stars and moon on a cloudless night with Tim and his telescope.

“We don’t really care about you, you know.” Tim glared down at Dick. “The moment you have a beating heart, we’re going to lock you away.” It was pity they had for him. Poor Dick Grayson, murdered and turned into a mindless puppet. They couldn’t very well lock him away in Arkham or Blackgate. He’d be able to escape so easily. But if he was human. If he was alive.

He’d be trapped.
“How could anyone befriend?” Wally sneered. “You’re just a replacement for me until I can find real happiness.” Because Wally had an entire life that Dick couldn’t even begin to understand or want to know. He was selfish. He was happy with Wally. He didn’t want to be reminded that Wally looked for Nightwing in him or his mannerisms. He didn’t want to be reminded that at the drop of a hat, Wally could decide he wasn’t worth the trouble of befriending.

“I know,” Dick whispered. He choked out a sob, black running down his pale cheeks. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry doesn’t bring the dead back.” Mary spat. “I’m sorry I gave birth to you.” *I’m sorry you gave birth to me.*

“I’m sorry you were my son,” John chimed in. “How wonderful the world would have been if you hadn’t existed.” *I’m sorry I’m alive.*

“Is this what you want?” Barbatos asked, the shadows sending the corpses away. Dick crumpled at his feet, burying his head against the God’s feet.

“No, no, no, I’m sorry, please.” Dick choked on his words, sobs wracking his chest. “I don’t want this anymore. Please, please, please.” He was *grovelling*, begging not to have to listen to them. To his demons, to the ghosts who haunted him. He knew this was no illusion but a living nightmare - a reality he could have suffered if he’d ever slept.

Barbatos knelt down, lifting up Dick’s chin. “Good boy. You’ll go back to the happiness?”

It wasn’t happiness but it was better than his reality. He nodded, unable to form anymore words. The shadows swarmed him.

“What’s wrong sweetie?” Mary asked, frown set low on her face. Dick rushed at her, hugging her tight.

“Nothing. Nothing at all. I’m just - I’m happy I’m here. With you.” His voice cracked. He wanted to be sick. He wanted to slice her throat open and tear his father’s heart out. He wanted to set this kitchen on fire than spend another single minute having to replay this illusion, have to live this fantasy.
“What’s wrong, son?” John asked as he came in, looking at his startled wife to his crying son. “Everything alright?”

Before he could answer a black and red blur crashed through the wide kitchen window, shattering glass everywhere.

“‘Cuse me, par-done me! Comin’ through Chuckles!” Harley swung her mallet, smashing it face-first into Mary. The sickening sound of bone marrow crunching under the force echoed in the deadly silent kitchen before the illusion burst into smoke. Harley grabbed a kitchen knife and viciously stabbed at John before he could move, his blood splattering across her white painted skin.

“H-Harley?!” Dick reeled back as his father disappeared into a puff of smoke. Harley turned to him, resting her mallet on her shoulder. A faint glow of green outlined her.

“Hiya Dickie-Poo,” she grinned with all her teeth. “Well aren’t you just adorable lookin’.” She admired his eyes and the veins. Dick jolted. He wasn’t in his illusionary form but his real appearance. “Let’s have some tea.”

Harley felt herself being pulled out of her body. She found herself facing Martian Manhunter in darkness.

“Hiya Martian. What’s with the sudden-?” She gestured to around them.

“I need you to go into Dick’s mind and free him from Barbatos’s control.”

A beat.

“Um. Say that again?” Harley made a show of cleaning her ear out. “You want me to what now?”

“Free Dick from Barbatos’s control.” Martian Manhunter frowned at her. “Out of everyone, you
are the most qualified, besides myself.”

“Uuuh why not one of the Bats?” Harley looked confused. “Or even Flash, his best friend?”

“Dick will assume they’re fragments of his imagination or more illusions made by the God.” But not her? “Besides, you cannot fool me. You’re still able to help him. You have the credentials.”

“I don’t practice anymore,” she argued with a frown. “I don’t even have my psychology license anymore. Not exactly sound in the head after all.” She knocked on her temple. “I’m probably the worst person to help him.”

“You can still help. He trusts you. More than you know.” Martian Manhunter waved a hand over her. She glowed green. “This will protect you from being discovered by Barbatos. Hurry.” He shoved her.

Harley found herself suspended in a weird limbo of weightlessness and heaviness. She hovered in front of a kitchen window. Inside were two strangers she’d never seen before and Dick.

The words were supposed to be muffled but they sounded perfect clear to her. She observed, silent, studying the two parents.

She could see where Dick got his smile - his mother’s was very much the same. Her appearance was off, though. She saw it in the way the woman’s hair color shifted, or how the shape of her eyes narrowed and widened. She saw it in the way the woman’s personality changed every so slightly, as if molding to a memory that was vague at best.

Dick’s father was the same. His hair color changed from a black to a dark brown, at one point blonde. It was like the illusion couldn’t grasp their true appearance and was just going on a roulette wheel, picking whatever the arrow landed on.

She listened to their spoken words. She watched their body language.

She observed.
And when the window faded away to a sea of red and she heard the nasty, haunting swears spat at her favorite barista, it all made sense.

And then she was back in that window and she thought hard. She thought hard and imagined her mallet and then she burst through the window.

“How did you get here?” Dick looked at her mallet to her. “Are - are you real?”

“You see,” Harley began with a roll of her eyes, “when a mommy and a daddy love each other very much-”

“You know what I meant!” Dick scurried away from her, face muscles twitching. She snorted boorishly. “How are you here? Barbatos wouldn’t allow you in here.” He drew back. “You’re a fake too.”

“I’m not glowing green for a fashion statement,” she deadpanned and smacked him on the arm. “As much as I love Pammy, green is not my color.” He froze.

“I felt that.” He stared at her as if she were an alien. “I-I felt that.” Because no matter what, nothing felt real. It was as if his fingertips and nerve endings were just shot - everything felt numb to the touch. Sensations like smell and taste were non-existent.

But he felt that. He felt her.

“You’re really here.” Harley stiffened as Dick threw himself at her, hugging her tight. He was back in his illusionary form the sudden shift took her a moment. She patted him awkwardly, mentally forcing herself not to grope his behind. It wasn’t everyday someone got close to the elusive barista.

Of course, this excluded the Bats. They were the Bats after all.

“So,” Harley started when he finally pulled away, “you have a lot going on in here.” Harley rapped
her knuckles against his forehead. “Let’s start with your parents.”

“What?” Dick drew away from her. He met her gaze and went rigid. There was a glint in her eyes. Standing in front of him wasn’t Harley Quinn Isley. No, across from him was Dr. Harleen Quinzel.

“So from what I observed-” she took a step towards him “-you have some sort of misconception of what you believe your parents feel towards you.”

“I-I don’t understand.” Harley guided Dick over to the kitchen table. They sat opposite each other. “What do you mean?”

“How do you think your parents feel about you?” Harley shot back without blinking.

Dick sat silent for a moment, eyebrows furrowing. The owl-like eyes made his expressions stilted. It was intriguing to watch.

“They’d probably hate me,” he finally whispered. He kept his gaze on the table. “They’d probably want me dead.”

“Why?” Harley asked, no judgment in her tone. She sounded genuinely curious. As if she were merely asking him about a dream he had. His shoulders relaxed, just slightly.

“I mean, I’ve killed people. I’ve killed so many people.” As if reflecting his thoughts, his clawed hands dripped red, completely drenched. He made a whine while Harley just raised a single eyebrow.

“How old were you when you were taken to the Court?” Harley asked, acting as his hands weren’t staining the table in small hand-prints.

“What?” Dick looked up from his hands and the kitchen flickered. They were in the maze, the walls stretching endlessly up to the heavens. “I was 6.” He hunched his shoulders up. He looked young, like he was in his early teens. Red Hood had said the Talons were zombies - was he undead too? Had he been murdered? Her grip tightened further.
“6,” Harley echoed. She barely even remembered being that age - only brief flashes of her
gymnastic routines and playing in the snow. She knew he probably remembered that age very
vividly. “How did you come to the Court?”

“Why?” Dick looked confused. The maze crumbled to the Big Top, the two in between his parents
splattered forms. “Cobbs took me.”

“He took you?” Harley stressed the word. “You weren’t asked if you wanted to go with him?”

“I-” he looked down at the table. “No. Cobb said I had to go. I didn’t want to.” His eyebrows
scrunched up. “I-I think I tried to stay with them.”

“But he took you anyways?” Harley inquired. Dick nodded. “So you were kidnapped.”

“What?” His eyes were wide. “No I wasn’t. That’s - I wasn’t kidnapped.”

Harley mentally frowned. He was, what, in his late twenties and he didn’t think he was kidnapped?
Had no one sat down with him to discuss his childhood? Then again, denial was a very powerful
thing. Look at her.

“You were taken against your will. That’s kidnapping.” Harley leaned forward, lacing her hands
together. “How do you think your parents would have felt with you being kidnapped?”

“Probably...not good? Batman is always in a foul mood when one of my Owlets or Pups gets
“Kidnapping is bad. But I wasn’t kidnapped. I had a choice.”

“You weren’t taken willingly,” Dick’s face fell blank. It was eerie. “You said you tried to argue.
Where does that say you gave your consent to go?”

“...consent to go?” His tone sounded dazed. “I-what?”

“I don’t know about your parents, but I’d be beyond livid if someone tried to touch my daughter,”
Harley spoke seriously, her eyes smoldering. “If your parents loved you, and I have no doubt they
did, they’d be devastated that you were taken.”

“Why? I’m a murderer.”

He seemed stuck on that. Remorse? But it seemed fixated to the point of how his parents, his dead parents, would perceive him. Was he subconsciously channeling expectations from his childhood onto himself? Ideals from being around Batman, who made his Code known? The illusions spoke at much - he felt like he was expendable. Conditioned from the Court?

His illusions reeked of guilt and self-deprecation. They reflected his feeling of loss, of hopelessness in his situation. He was secretly worried he was only being associated with due to pity or obligation.

Harley hummed.

“Did you want to kill?”

Dick’s face stayed blank. It was unsettling for how emotive he was earlier. Shutting down or simply unable to properly broadcast his emotions?

“I killed Tony Zucco. He killed my parents. He deserved to die.”

Deflection from the question.

“That’s not what I asked.” Harley reached across the table. They were back in the kitchen. “Did you want to kill?”

Dick wavered. He opened and closed his mouth. He didn't answer.

“You said you were 6, right? When you were taken to the Court. Did you know the most impressionable ages for children are the ages from 6 to 14?” Harley tapped her finger against the back of Dick’s hand. “It’s the most important time for mental and personable development. People are always growing but these are the ages when it’s crucial to their sense of identity.”
“I don’t-”

“Do you know what conditioning is?” Harley cut him off. Dick scrunched up his nose.

“It’s where you train a pet to learn obedience, right?” Oh, he was just so adorable.

“It’s the process of training a person, or an animal, to behave a certain way and to accept certain circumstances.” She tightened her hold on his hand.

“Okay. So, let’s say we have a girl named Suzie. Suzie’s 6 years old.” Harley looked pointedly at him when he opened his mouth. “Suzie had to move in with her uncle. Now her uncle was very strict. He liked things a very certain way. Lunch was at 12 sharp, dinner at 6 sharp, and bedtime was at 9. Now Suzie? She liked lunch around 1, maybe 2. Dinner? More like a midnight snack. And bedtime? Whenever she wanted to go to bed. Her parents were all about free-spiritedness.”

“Harley-”

“Shush. Now Suzie’s Uncle made it clear on his rules. She had to have lunch, dinner, and go to bed at his times. If she didn't, she’d get a spanking.” Harley frowned. “Well Suzie couldn’t just get used to the new schedule so she got spankings. A lot of spankings. Suzie didn't like the spankings - they made her cry.”

“Harley-”

“Zip it. So, after about the 20th spanking, Suzie finally started getting on the schedule. She didn't get spankings anymore. But then her Uncle made a new rule of story time at 7. Suzie didn't like reading - she’d rather play ninjas or cops and robbers.” Dick looked down at their joint hands. “So, she got spankings against for the story time. Suzie didn't like reading, so it took longer for her to stop getting spankings. She got so many spankings that soon, the stings didn't even hurt.”

“Harley-” it was a whisper.

“Shush, sugar. So, Suzie picked up a book and began to read it. She didn't want any more spankings. It wasn’t fun and she was scared of getting them. So, every night, she read at 7 and then
“Well then, Suzie moved back in with her parents. She had lunch at 12 sharp, dinner at 6 sharp, story time at 7 sharp, and then bedtime at 9 sharp. Even though Suzie didn't live with her Uncle anymore, she’d been conditioned to follow the schedule or else be punished with spankings.”

“I wasn’t conditioned with spankings,” Dick forced out.

“No you weren’t, were you?” Harley mused softly. “You were punished far worse than spankings. But it worked, didn't it? You were trained a certain way by this Court because of it.” Dick didn't meet her eye.

“You didn't want to kill, did you?” Dick screwed his eyes shut. His hands trembled.

“No.” It was a soft whisper. “I didn't want to. I - I just wanted my mom and dad.”

The illusion trembled. Harley tightened her grip on his hands again.

“Okay sweetie, that’s completely fine.” The table flickered out of existence. The shadows reached for them. “Have you ever heard of unconditional love?” Dick looked up at her, eyes watery. Oh this precious child. “You know, love without limitations?”

“I...think I’ve read about it.” Harley bit back her squawk. _He’d read about it_. Who’d been in charge of his education? “Why?”

“It’s often associated with child-parent relationships. It’s an accepted concept that parents will love their children unconditionally.” Harley stared at him dead in the eye. “I love my daughter. I would love her no matter what. I would love her no matter her sexuality or her gender identity, or if she ever decided to kill a man.” Dick winced. “I don’t know your parents but from what I’ve seen, most parents will deny to the grave that they could ever hate their child.”

She stood as the shadows lashed out for her. Looks like she’d been noticed. “If your parents hated anyone, it’d be themselves for leaving you. What happened to you was out of your control-” she flipped over her chair and swung her mallet, smacking away tendrils of shadows “-so you can’t think they blame you for that.”
The shadows rose and she began to flicker. “Dickie-Poo, none of this is your fault. Sure, you’ve killed people, but I don’t think you really had any other choice.”

She disappeared just as the shadows tore through the illusion. They swarmed Dick, wrapping around him until he couldn't even see his own hands in front of his face.

Harley lurched up with a gasp, flipping out of the way just as a Talon tried to stab at her. She crashed into Joker, who looked at her in surprise.

“You owe me, Big Green Giant!” Harley called out to J’onn as she swung her mallet. “That was the worst acid trip I’ve ever had!”

“Thank you for your help,” J’onn called back.

Barbatos looked at them in barely concealed amusement. It looked wrong on Dick’s face.

“So you were the pest who got in the way,” they spoke out. “He’d finally just conceded to the happiness, too.”

“If you’re talking about that Stepford hell, then you’re out of your mind if you think that’s happiness! You’re twisting his conception of remorse and acceptance!” Harley pointed at him. “You aren’t giving him happiness, you’re ruining him!”

“A doll doesn’t need feelings to still play with it,” Barbatos responded. Harley glared. During her time unconscious, the maze walls had been utterly demolished, turning the entire area into a battle zone of marble chunks and corpses.

More of the League had joined, along with other Supers. Harley spotted some of those Tiny Titans or whatever they were called.
She felt so left out, she was insulted.

Raven floated down by Nightingale, her expression belying her uncertainty.

“Barbatos is a demon,” she explained against softly as Nightingale slammed the end of his bo staff into a Talon’s neck. “If there is one thing I know about demons, it’s that they do have weaknesses. No matter what they try to say otherwise.”

“You or your father wouldn’t happen to know what this particular demon’s weakness is, would you?” Nightingale asked as Raven wrapped them in a barrier of black. She glimpsed over to Deathstroke.

“I do. Nth or Tenth metal.” Nightingale raised an eyebrow under his cowl.

“I know nth metal. But not Tenth.” Raven wrapped her cloak around her. “Deathstroke’s katana is made out of nth metal.” He sounded and looked thoughtful.

“He does,” Raven confirmed. She waited for the gears to turn. When they did, she felt the flood of disgust.

“...are you suggesting-” he sounded horrified.

“That you stab your brother’s body to expel Barbatos? Yes.” Raven kept the barrier up. “It’ll leave him weak. I can have Zatanna help me after we’ve gotten him out of your brother’s body.” Nightingale stared. “Tim, please.”

Nightingale paled. “But - it’s Dick. It’s Dick.” Raven didn't know the man, not really, but his soul was pure and Tim looked at him like he hung the moon and the stars. She could feel the turmoil radiating off him, could feel the anger and the exhaustion. Could feel the doubt and the pain.

“Then someone else will do it.” She dropped the barrier and flew herself over to Deathstroke.
“Slade, give me your special katana.”

Deathstroke paused. Slowly turned to her. “What did you just say?”

“Your katana. The nth metal one.” Raven stilled. Her eyes widened. “You’re disgusting.”

“I’ve had Terra thirsting after me. You don’t think I’m cautious now?” The man shifted his footing, shooting his gun off without even looking. “Why?” Beside him, Terra shot him a scathing glare.

“Going to stab Dick and exorcise the demon in him,” she stated simply as if it were just another day. Considering her heritage, it may have been for all he knew. Slade sighed.

“Don’t lose it. It’s my favorite.” He unsheathed it, handing it off to her. Raven nodded before teleporting back over to Nightingale.

“I have the blade.” It disappeared from her hands. “I don’t have the blade.”

They turned to Barbatos, who studied the katana.

“This is nth metal,” they commented in surprise. “I’m impressed. I guess you have some knowledge after all, halfling.” They let their gaze slide to Raven, who glared at them. “Do you really think it can hurt me?”

The katana slid through their chest, right through their heart. The fighting stopped.

“Oh Little One,” Barbatos seethed as his shadows flared up, the left arm of his vessel trembling as it pushed the blade deeper through their chest. “You should have just stayed asleep.”

Black dribbled out. The shadows rose up before expanding away, tearing Barbatos out of Dick with them.

“Zatanna!” Raven called, throwing her hands out. They glowed in black energy. Zatanna, hovering
“Nomad siht partne!” Zatanna chanted out. The katana tore itself out of Dick’s chest, morphing into chain links. The links wrapped around Barbatos, Raven’s own magic layering over each individual link to strength the binds.

“Dick!” Wally cried out, rushing to his side. Dick shifting his footing, the stab wound in his chest completely gone by the time the Speedster got to him. “Dick?”

“Wally.” Dick’s voice was completely dead. His expression was blank, voice of any of the warmth or recognition that Wally was hoping for. He took an uncertain step back. Batman swooped in, cape open to wrap around Dick’s slender shoulders. “Grandmaster.”

“Batman, Dick.” His tone was terse. “Just call me Batman when I’m wearing the cowl.” Dick’s eyes slid away from the man, meeting Barbatos’s red glare.

“You can’t win,” he snarled low. He seemed to be struggling with the binds. “I’m a God. I cannot be outdone by two pathetically weak wenches.” Zatanna and Raven exchanged raised eyebrows. The demon couldn’t even free himself. The stab wound must have weakened him exponentially.

“Is that what you think?” Dick asked, Romani rolling off his tongue as he shifted to face towards the God. Barbatos, outside of Dick, looked like a decrypted Bat demon, all tattered cloak, ragged wings, and sharp teeth. Batman kept a tight grip on his shoulders, the cloak more of a halting barrier than a protective covering.

“This is your fate,” Barbatos hissed out. “You can’t escape it. You can’t escape me.” The shadows under his wings wiggled, trying to get free. The links didn't budge.

“I escaped the Court,” Dick pointed out. “They were my fate too. I can escape you just as easily.” There was no fear in his voice. There was no determination or acceptance. Just emptiness. Like his newly ruined body. Just empty.

“Enough with this chit chat,” Raven gritted out. “Zatanna, help me.” The magi nodded, a trickle of sweat sliding down her cheek as she allowed her magic to coil off her body in rolls.

“Mrof elbarenluv a ot mih nekaew yawa srewop sih laes!”
There was a blinding flash of light, Barbatos’s shriek echoing across the destroyed maze. When the light died down, a small black mass laid on the cracked marble flooring, steam coiling off it.

A small, basketball-shaped and sized bat perked up, tiny wings fluttering in agitation. “What have you done?!”

The gathered Heroes and Villains gawked.

“That was not what I had in mind,” Zatanna explained while Raven pinched the bridge of her nose. Barbatos tried to wiggle away, only to roll onto his side. His tiny wings flailed.

“You cannot win! Once I am to my true strength, I will open up the doorway to the Dark Multiverse-”

Batman slipped away from Dick, reaching a hand out for Hawkgirl’s mace. Hawkgirl looked at him weirdly for a moment before handing her weapon over. Batman stalked towards the weakened God, mace raised to strike.

“Aaaaaw! He’s kinda cute!” Zatanna cooed, shoving past Batman. “Oh, look at him, he’s so round.” There were practically hearts in her eyes.

“I WILL DEVOUR YOUR SOUL AND MAKE YOU LIVE YOUR WORST NIGHTMARE!”


“NO-!” Batman swung down the mace. Barbatos exploded like a water balloon, black liquid splattering across the closest people.

“Ew,” Batgirl whispered as she wiped at her cheek. “Well that was anticlimactic.” The black liquid shuddered before pulling itself back together. Black Bat grabbed Batgirl when she shrieked, Strix grabbing her other arm.
The black liquid clumped together, forming a tinier, rounder Barbatos. He was as small as a tennis ball.

“What have you done to me?!”

Raven face-palmed. Zatanna looked confused.

“He's soul bonded to him,” the half demon gritted out as she gestured to Dick. “Must have been an unforeseen side effect from the possession.”

Silence.

“What does that mean?” Robin asked with a frown, inching towards Dick. Dick looked over at his movement and tried to awkwardly haul Damian into his arms. They ended up looking ridiculous, the smaller of the two nearly bending Dick's spine from his koala hold. Dick nuzzled into his neck, purring. Killer Croc looked at them oddly.

“Barbatos won't be able to die unless Dick dies.” Raven looked ready to leave. “So unless you are ready to behead-”

Red Hood threw himself at Dick and Damian, gathering the two to his chest. He pointed a gun at Raven. Batgirl and Black Bat smooshed themselves on either side and Nightingale and Signal stood protective in front of them. Batman growled at her suggestion and Wally shifted to stand in front of them, ready to fight.

“But obviously that isn't happening,” she continued with a roll of her eyes. She held a hand out, eyes flashing. For a brief moment, four red eyes overtook her shadowed face.

A black bracelet formed in her hand.

“Here. You'll be in control of Barbatos’s powers now. Once you put it on, it'll fuse with your flesh.” None of them moved. “Oh for Trigon's sake - take this.”

Wally shot over and grabbed it. It felt heavy and cold. He was in front of Dick in a second, handing
“You cannot contain me! I am the Dragon! I am the True Father of Batman! I am-”

Dick put the bracelet on and it seared into his flesh, melting into a tattoo. Barbatos fell silent.

“Well,” Superman began awkwardly, “let’s begin to round up those people in the masks.”

Dick’s eyes slid over to the gathered people. He tightened his hold on Damian.

“You came for me?” It was whispered.

“Of course!” Wally exploded. “You’re my best friend! My dude-bro! Why wouldn’t I?” He looked like he wanted to join the group hug. Dick shied away. He was so ugly right now - in more ways than just his appearance.


“We could barely last a month without you. Never having your coffee again?” Joker shuddered. “Not funny to think about.”

“I’m not human,” he tried to argue with a frown. Killer Croc snorted and pointed to himself. Ivy raised an elegant eyebrow while Catwoman just shook her head with a put-upon sigh.

“Congrats, you’re a metahuman. Not the first one in Gotham,” Deathstroke announced with jazz hands. Terra punched him in the arm.

“I-” he didn't know what to say. He looked away, still clinging to his youngest Owlet. His eyes trailed to the child’s grey, dark grey, and grey uniform. His eyebrows pinched up. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry.” He closed his eyes, hugging back. She was so warm. Despite the faint scent of sweat that clung to her, she smelled so sweet. She was warm, sweet, and her hammering heart was like music to his ear.

“We’ll help you gather those jerks,” Harley called, coughing. She saddled up to Dick, resting her mallet on her shoulder. “We’ve got to talk, alright? After we get you out of here.” Her face brightened. “Hey, can you make me a spiced chai?”

“Oh, I want a mocha latte,” Killer Croc called, “with raspberry syrup!” Joker kicked a Talon’s head away.

“I want a coffee!” Deathstroke shot his fists in the air, no doubt silently screeching in victory at the reward of a hot beverage.

“Okay, okay,” Dick gave a weak laugh. It was so empty. He turned to the tiny Demon. “But first-”

He reached down, claws digging into the bat. Barbatos gave a screech as Dick’s claws sunk into his flesh. “You will never hurt my Owlets or Pups or my Batman or anyone I deem my family or friend. If you hurt anyone, I’ll end you.”

“You’ll have to die too,” Barbatos pointed out as his tiny little claws scratched at Dick’s palm. It barely left a mark.

“And?” Dick smiled, empty and non-threateningly. “You know that the idea of death isn’t one I’m opposed to.” Barbatos stiffened while Red Hood and Batman traded looks.

“...I will find a way out of this,” the Demon swore. “You will all pay.”

“Sure.” Dick tilted his head to the side. “No powers.” The Demon squawked as his body glowed.

“DAMN YOU!” Dick nodded to himself and placed the tiny Barbatos on his shoulder. The Demon begrudgingly sunk his little feet into Dick’s shoulder to keep steady.
“Can we go now?” Catwoman asked with a cock of her hip. “This place is just eerie.” Dick looked at the gathered people before pausing on the Talon hovering by Batgirl and Black Bat.

“She’s a friend,” Black Bat spoke up, touching Strix’s hand. “Ours.” Dick tilted his head to the side with a faint hum. He walked up and reached out, gently peeling off Strix’s mask. Strix, herself, raised her clawed hands to brush against Dick’s cheek. He nodded.

“You’ll like my bed. It has a lot of blankets for a nest,” he spoke up and Strix tilted her own head before she nodded.

Around them, Talon bodies were being cleaned up and Owls were being dragged out of their hiding places, bound and gagged. Masks were removed, showing their terrified expressions.

“Gray Son!” One of the Owls cried out. “You failure! You were supposed to be our-”

They hadn’t seen him move. One moment he was cooing over Strix, the moment he was bent over a corpse with one of her knives in hand. He stared blankly at the Owl’s dead body before turning predatory eyes to the cowering Owls.

“DICK!” Batman roared, alarmed. The Villains and Heroes alike were shocked into stillness, completely caught off guard by his sudden kill.

“Am I perfect?” He asked as he took a step forward. “Am I your perfect Talon?”

“Please!” A woman sobbed. He recognized her - the Owl who’d encountered him at his cafe. “Please don’t kill me!”

“Funny,” Dick whispered as he crouched down in front of her, “I said the exact same thing.” He sunk the knife through her chest and stood as she slumped over with faint sobs. “Where’s your Grandmaster and the Judge?”

“They escaped,” a man blubbered. “They abandoned us.” Dick studied him, disinterested, before swooping down with his knife. Batman grabbed him around the waist, hauling him back before he could impale the man.
“Stop! They’re going to get justice! You don’t need to kill them!” Batman tightened his grip. Barbatos watched the scene with intrigue while Dick went limp in his hold. He’d never purposely hurt Batman. Not anymore.

“They deserve to die though.” Just like me.

Batman’s lips tugged downwards. “Not this way, Dick. Not this way. Come on. Go with everyone else. We’ll meet you at the cafe, okay?” He could tell just by looking at him that all their progress had been erased. He didn't look at Wally’s hair in amazement or rubbed his stomach. He didn't try to emote. His expression was more blank than not.

He’d completely regressed.

Batman set him down and brushed his bangs out of his face. His hair had been cut short too. Another thing the Court ruined about him.

Dick stared at Batman, waiting. Batman’s lips thinned out.

He’d completely regressed.

“Go to the cafe,” he Ordered. “We’ll be there after we finish cleaning up here.” Dick’s shoulders slumped. He couldn’t leave - not unless Ordered. At least he still listened to Batman. If he hadn’t-

“Come on Dick,” Signal called softly, tugging on his hand, “let’s get you back home.”

Home.

It seemed like a foreign concept.

Chapter End Notes

oof I just. Hate this chapter.
Please don't '@' me about Harley being the one to go into his mind. It makes sense to me. She's probably one of the only ones who can emotionally detach herself from the situation to handle it properly. Any of the Batfam or Wally would probably just make it worse with their own emotions.

Aight. I'll delve into the emotions and thoughts and POVs of other characters next chapter. I'm going on a 9 day vacation tomorrow. I'll update in, like, 2 weeks.

Peace out

Discord Link where I post snippets of upcoming chapters and make fic-polls: https://discord.gg/ZvMAP5a
The first time Dick met Damian, the child had literally wandered into the cafe. He’d gotten lost, not uncommon with how dizzying the streets of Gotham were. He’d been chasing after a low-rank thug he’d recognized from his mother’s personal files and had ended up taking a wrong corner.

Dick looked up from the cash register, eyebrows lifting at the small child that stood at the entrance.

“Uh.” The 24 year old blinked. “Hi?” He watched the child’s eyes bounce around the cafe, looking for all possible exits and inspecting it for dangers or faults. “Where’s your parents, little man?” The child didn't answer, moving piercing eyes to Dick’s form.

The furrowed skin between his eyebrows was familiar. So was the scowl, the small dimples that deepened with each passing second, and the widow’s peak. The child’s rounded face was a ghost of a child’s in one of the many photographs Dick had studied during days left unattended.

“I need to use your phone, if you even have one.” His accent was thick and harsh. Middle Eastern, from the sound of it. He was dressed in a black turtleneck and black pants, dark green combat boots standing out on his feet. He looked uncomfortable, his form constantly shifting in restlessness.

Oh, he definitely looked familiar.
“Okie dokie,” Dick chirped out, moving his hand slowly to get his cell phone. The child’s eyes watched his every move and inwardly, Talon purred. “Get lost?” He put the cell phone on the counter, stepping backwards to let the child near. “Are you thirsty? I can make you a drink.”

The child sniffed and took a wary step closer. He had hidden knives on him, Dick noted. Of course he did. How he held himself was deceptively innocent. He made no noise when he walked, however, and his eyes were constantly cataloging everything in view. His steps were calculated and precise, his movements graceful. He held himself with an air of confidence, of arrogance. Of danger, of promise on how to use his hidden weapons.

He had the making of a Talon, Dick thought as the child picked up his cell phone.

“I do not want your charity,” the boy snapped out, glare almost scary if directed at a normal civilian. “Nor do I want to give you the chance to poison me.”

“Oh no, poison is ineffective,” Dick purred out, leaning back against the counter of the espresso bar. The child stiffened. “I was never taught the art of poisoning. No, I think I’ll just take one of your hidden knives and carve your heart out.”

It was spoken so brazenly, so flippantly that the child looked confused.

“...is that...a...joke?” The child squinted at Dick. “Is that one of those...teases?”

Dear lord the child didn't understand humor. He truly was a perfect candidate for a Talon. Then again Dick had no room to talk, since his sense of humor was skewed and twisted and only developed three years after being taken by Bruce.

“Yes,” Dick explained and then motioned towards his phone. “Make your call, kid. You can watch me make your drink if you’d like?” He turned to stand sideways, letting the child have a clear view of his hands at all times. The boy narrowed his gaze.

“You are awfully accommodating to me,” he stated simply. “And you noticed my knives.” Dick shrugged.

“It’s Gotham, little one. You aren’t the first child to walk around laden with weapons deadly enough to kill.” Dick began to make a vanilla hot chocolate, keeping his motions deliberately slow.
to ease the child’s tense shoulders a bit.

The boy studied him for a moment before opening his phone. He paused, looking reluctant, before he punched in a phone number and dialed.

Judging by his thumb movements, he’d just dialed the Manor’s landline. Dick purred softly as he dispensed a heap of whipped cream onto the drink. He placed it down gently on the counter in front of the child.

The boy ignored it.

“Pennyworth?” Dick turned his attention to the steam-wand, wiping it clean as the child spoke lowly into the device. “I require assistance. I appear to be in an unknown location- you know where I am already?”

Dick stifled his smile. Alfred saw the caller ID and probably answered thinking it was him.

“Well then, please send a car for me. Father-” Dick nearly slammed his hand into his espresso machine “-cannot hear of this. It’s only my first day in Gotham, such mistakes should be kept away from his ears.”

Father. Father? Bruce? Child? Another one?

“I…I’m borrowing a man’s phone. He let me use-” The boy frowned and looked at Dick. He handed the phone to him. “My father’s servant wishes to speak with you.” Dick took the cell, pressing it to his ear. He mentally raised an eyebrow. Servant? He’ll have to teach the child the importance of Alfred’s very existence.

“Howdy,” he greeted Alfred.

“Master Dick. Master Timothy is beside himself with worry over Master Damian’s disappearance.” So his name was Damian. How cute. “He caught wind of a drug-lord in Gotham that his mother had been keeping tabs on and slipped the security. Master Jason is on his way to pick him up as we speak.”
“That’s fine,” Dick commented. “It was no trouble at all.” Alfred made a hum. “He’s lucky he found his way here and nowhere else.”

“Indeed.” Alfred sighed softly. “Master Bruce is...emotionally unavailable at the moment. Mistress Cassandra and Mistress Stephanie are trying to cheer him up. He’s in shock over meeting his blood-son.” Dick’s eyebrow raised in surprise. “Yes, it’s a bit overwhelming. From what his mother, Talia Al Ghul, said to Master Bruce - the child was raised by the League of Shadows and he is under a vegan diet.”

Dick snatched the hot chocolate up just as Damian was inching towards it. Damian froze, eyes wide at the movement he couldn’t track. Dick gave him a pointed look and dumped the beverage, pulling out soy milk from the milk fridge. Damian’s eyes went even wider.

“Alright Mr. Pennyworth, I’ll keep him here until - Jason you said - gets here,” Dick spoke and started to remake the drink. The call ended and Dick frowned at Damian.

“You could have warned me you were vegan,” he grumbled out. “I don’t want you drinking something you don’t like or can’t tolerate.” Damian sniffed at the air.

“I’m not going to drink it,” he stated and looked around at the cafe. The walls were bleak, the only decorations being the scattered black and white photographs canvasing the brick. They were few, however, so they scattered distastefully across the walls. “My body is in perfect human condition - I can tolerate anything.”

“Not if you don’t agree with what you’re consuming,” Dick shot back as he set down the new drink. “Soy milk and a soy based whipped cream. No dairy or animal products. Vegan friendly. Want sprinkles?” He shook the small bottle. Damian stared at him.

“What are you?” He eyed the man up and down, hand moving to one of his knives. “You don’t seem like a normal bartender, even for Gotham’s standards. My current…living arrangements associates couldn’t even spot my hidden knives - besides my father and the silent woman.”

Bruce and Cassandra were the only ones who could count out his knives? He’d have to change that.

Dick just shrugged. The bell rung and Jason came in, holding a spare motorcycle helmet. He nodded to his brother.
“Hi Dickie.” He pointed down at Damian. “Listen here you little shit - you don’t ever run out without letting us know where you’re going and if you ever point a knife at anyone in the Manor again, I’ll-”

“What did he do?”

Jason tensed and Damian looked around to Dick. He innocently tapped his hands along the counter, smile deceiving.

“Nothing.” It was spoken hastily. Terse. “No one was hurt.”

“Owet,” Dick began in that tone that made his Owlets and Pups cave, “you can’t lie to me.”

“Tim just got a scratch -” he winced, knowing his fuck-up.

“Tim was stabbed?” Dick’s eyes slid to Damian, whose face scrunched up adorably in confusion. “Oh tiny one, don’t ever do that again.” He leaned forward, volume dropping. “Or I’ll make sure you regret it.”

Jason ushered Damian out quickly before he could say anything else and he purred loudly at his encounter.

A Talon indeed.

Damian showed up the next day, arms crossed and scowl tight on his face. Beside him, Tim tugged at his Superboy shirt. Jason ruffled his hair, sunglasses hiding his eyes.

“Hiya Dick,” Tim greeted as he shoved Damian off in the direction of a booth. He had a bandage wrapped around his lower arm. “Can I get my usual?”
Dick’s eyes flickered down to the wrapping before he nodded. He’d kept to himself the day before, deciding that when Bruce was ready to introduce Damian properly to him, he would.

“What brings you three here?” Dick asked as he began to make the two drinks.

“Little demon kept hinting about coming here,” Jason grumbled, shooting a glare at Damian, who glared right back. “Said he was positive you poisoned his drink.”

“Why?” Dick looked over a the child in concern. “Did he get sick?”

“You used some sort of poison, didn't you?” Damian glared daggers. “No one has ever made me a drink that was immediately acceptable to my superior pallet.”

“Tastes good?” Dick frowned, translating the thinly veiled compliment. Even a child raised by assassins should still know simple enjoyments as delicious food and drinks. “Nope, just some vanilla syrup.” The child didn't look convinced.

“Little hellion,” Tim gritted out. Damian frowned and Dick grabbed Tim by the cheeks, pulling them. “Ow-ow-ow!”

“Apologize to your brother. You and Jason are not allowed to be so mean to him like that.” Dick let go and Tim fled to Jason’s side, rubbing at his smarting face. Damian was eyeing him weirdy.

“He’s not our brother, Dick,” Jason complained as he backed away from Dick’s raising hands. “He’s just some kid-”

“Who’s the birth child of Bruce Wayne,” Damian spat. “While you’re a street rat and the other’s a neighborhood charity case.”

Dick was up and over the counter in seconds, grabbing the child by the face. He squished the child’s cheeks together in one hand, the other pinning both his wrists to the table. He used his left leg to trap the child’s shins into place.
He was effectively trapped in the booth.

“You don’t ever insult their upbringing or how they came to live with B,” Dick spoke softly, eyes flashing yellow. Damian’s own eyes widened. “You may have his blood but you did not grow up with him. They are his children just as much as you are and if you continue to hurt them, you will face me.” Dick lowered himself until he was eye level. “The League is child’s play for me, Owlet. Check yourself.”

He let go of Damian, internally whining at how aggressive he’d been. But he knew Jason didn't like having to explain how he’d been picked up by Batman for stealing tires. Or have Tim relive his parents death to get a permanent room in the Manor. Damian didn't know this or understand this but he still spoke so brazenly.

It was not alright.

“Okay, okay,” Jason got between the two, back to Damian, “it’s fine D. We’re all good. Calm down. Your eyes are a bit bright.”

Dick huffed and turned on his heel. He tossed one of Damian’s knives in the air, catching it absently. The child started, checking his hidden blades. He was missing three of them. He gulped. He hadn’t even realized.

Inwardly, a sliver of glee twisted his stomach. He’d never been challenged like this before. The man was playing with him - testing him.

He coughed, setting one of Dick’s own knives down on the table. Dick smirked.

Two could play at that game.

Jason and Tim just shared a look, feeling like they’d witnessed something sacred.
“Your cafe is a pathetic wreck,” Talia Al Ghul spoke as she leaned against his kitchen sink. Dick didn’t even blink at her unexpected drop in. He continued to chop strawberries. “I don’t understand why my Beloved continues to allow my child to come here.”

“If you don’t like it, get out,” Dick finally spoke, eyes trained on the sliced fruit. “My food is vegan-friendly and fresh. It’s better than a lot of places he could be going.”

Talia scowled.

“Is this the part where you threaten me? Stab a knife in my chest and let your child find me dead, cementing his mentality that he shouldn’t associate with commoners?” Dick set the knife down, flattening his palm over the handle. “Miss Al Ghul, I want you to understand that now that your child is with Bruce Wayne, you are never getting him back.”

“My Beloved won’t keep my child from me,” Talia spoke, miffed. “If I ask for him back, he will come back to my side. He is my child. I am his mother. He knows better than to ignore me.”

“Who? Bruce or Damian?” He tilted his head to the side. “You’ve lost your child the moment he stepped foot into Gotham.”

Talia was expecting to scare an innocent civilian. Talia was expecting to torture her child further by murdering the one thing he was beginning to enjoy in Gotham. Talia was expecting to have control over the situation.

Talia hadn’t been expecting Dick.

“Why’s that?” Talian shifted, sliding towards his back door. Dick smiled, wide and fake.

“Because I’ve met him. He’s mine now. He may be with Bruce, but he’s under my protection.” His steps were silent as he advanced. Talia’s shoulders tensed as she shot a look down at his feet before meeting his eyes. “And I’m very protective with my Nest.”

She lashed out at him. He ducked and kicked her. She went flying across the kitchen, slamming back into the exit door. He strutted towards her, like a beast on the prowl, a knife in hand. Talia threw open the door and rushed out. She cried out as Dick grabbed her by the hair.
She threw a leg out, trying to kick him. He batted it away with a flick of his wrist. He drew blood with a swipe of his knife across her cheek. She stumbled back, finding her back press against the alley wall.

She extremely underestimated this barista.

“Damian is my Owlet now. You don’t mess with my Owlets, got it? That goes for the rest of Bruce’s children.” Dick towered over Talia, eyes flickering yellow. “Get out of my face.”

She didn't need to be told twice.

Or maybe she did.

Damian had been in his cafe, as was becoming a norm for the child assassin. He was unabashed in watching Dick do his work. Thankfully the cafe had been empty when assassins from the League had burst in to kidnap the child.

A assassin had sunk a knife through his throat and Dick had slumped back just as they swarmed the child to grab him.

Three of the assassins went down in a blink. Damian found himself pressed against Dick’s chest as another assassin’s throat crushed under his grip.

Dick frowned disapprovingly at the gathered adults.

“I just mopped,” he sighed. He flexed his fingers.

Damian couldn’t describe the massacre that transpired even if he wanted to.
“So he is...another one of your false children?” Damian sat on the metal table in the med bay of the Batcave, watching Dick wrap his cut arm.

“Yes,” Bruce sighed out as he pinched the bridge of his nose. “This is Dick. He’s my oldest, though I had Jason before him.” Dick flickered his gaze up to the bruise forming along Damian’s temple. The assassins were relentless in grabbing the child.

Too bad for them they’d had to deal with Dick.

“Sorry you got hurt, Owlet,” Dick murmured and smoothed out the child’s sweat-slicked bangs. The child flinched at the ice cold touch. “But I won’t let anyone take you if you don’t want them too.”

Damian’s expression pinched.

“While you’re here,” Bruce held a hand out, “let me check your earring.” Dick glimpsed at Damian for a moment before taking out the device.

Damian jolted back as the man in front of him shrunk. “What?” The man turned into a child, only a few inches taller than himself. He didn't have the muscles Damian had - no, his body was more wiry and lithe. He held himself like a deadly trigger though, just a breath away from unleashing pure hell.

There was something otherworldly about him, Damian decided. Like how his Grandfather carried an air like a veil separating him from everyone else on their plane of existence, Dick did too.

“You were raised by the League,” Dick spoke as avian yellow eyes narrowed on Damian, “and I was raised by the Court. You were raised to be a living weapon.” He dragged a clawed finger down his forearm, showing his fast healing wound. “I’m the perfect weapon.”

Damian’s heart hammered in his chest. Oh. Oooh.
His Grandfather found a way to flirt with Death but never truly appreciate them.

Dick had whole-heartedly bathed in Death’s presence and got to share the aftermath.

He was everything Ra’s desired to be. Immortal. Invincible. No wonder he so quickly gained Damian’s favor- he was practically everything Damian had been raised to imitate.

His heart hammered in his chest. So, so badly he wanted to -

“Can we fight?”

Dick smiled, ever so faintly.

“What’s this?” Dick blinked at the canvas.

“A portrait. To hang up on your walls. The photographs Drake took are commendable but not tasteful enough for your establishment,” Damian spoke haughtily as he looked away. Tim squinted at him over his bowl of oatmeal.

“I can’t tell if he insulted me or complimented me,” the teen grumbled. Jason was leaned back in his chair, shoving fistfuls of jammed toast down his throat. Stephanie and Cass cheered him on.

“Thanks Owlet,” Dick beamed and held the black and white canvas out to admire, “it’s a wonderful photo!”

Damian snorted, face flattening. “As if I’d resort to photography. I drew that.”

Dick stared. “You drew this?” His eyes went wide and he gently set the canvas down. Tim and Bruce leaned across the table to peer at the sketched sunset of Gotham. “OWLET!”
Damian flushed, smiling softly into Dick’s arms. Dick purred loudly, swaying them back and forth while Jason not-so-subtly snapped a picture of the child’s drawing.

“So amazing my little Owlet,” Dick purred out as he released the child. “So amazing.” Damian flushed further.

Dick’s compliments were different from his mother’s. While his mother’s compliments were scarce, they always filled him with a hot bubble in his chest. Dick’s compliments made his very blood in his veins heat up, spreading the warmth from his head to his toes. It lingered longer, like his touch, making him feel light for days.

The feeling never went away because Dick always complimented him or found an excuse to hug or ruffle his hair.

Damian didn't really mind.

Chapter End Notes

sorry his chapter was so short oof
He was still in an illusion. This was fake. In a moment, he’d be dragged back down to that sea of red, forced to listen to the gurgled truth spilt from ruby lips.

He was still in an illusion. There was no other explanation for how he was able to leave the Court again. The Parliament. There was no other explanation for why Jason and Tim were on either side of him, entrapping him in their tense arms. There was no other explanation for Damian being latched onto him like a backpack, awkward in that he was almost the same size as Dick’s true form. There was no other explanation for Wally hovering behind him, looking begrudgingly understanding to the Owlets and Pups encircling his focus of attention.

He was still in an illusion.

He waited for the world to morph, to slowly dye red. He waited for the corpses to crawl out from the cracks, for the shadows to choke him of his hope. He waited for the warm bodies around him to turn cold, to spit poison at his skin and melt him to his brittle bones.

He was still in an illusion.

Barbatos shifted, tiny wings smacking against his cheek. “You’re thinking too loudly. Shut it. This is reality.”

Was it? He felt like his body was made of static, tiny fuzzy little particles that buzzed along his veins and bones and made up his entirety. His mind felt stuffed with cotton, heavy and thick and muffled. Was this reality?

Raven encased the gathered group up in her Soul-Form, the black bird engulfing everyone.
Gone was the Parliament's walls. Gone were the white masks and the white walls and the pink water. Gone were the red coffins and the portraits and the echoed screams.

They found themselves in the cafe. Ketti stood over a spilt coffee. Morgan had a mop brandished at them like a sword as Jessica held a serving tray up like a frisbee.

Two-Face lowered his gun and Black Mask settled back into his seat, waving his henchmen down as well. They continued their game of Catchphrase.

Ivy tugged Joker and Harley over to a booth, plopping down. Catwoman forced Zatanna and Raven down to their table, throwing a pack of Uno cards down in front of Joker. He pulled the cards out and began to shuffle in an eccentric manner.

Killer Croc huffed and moved to his corner table.

“Black coffee,” Deathstroke all but pleaded the frozen baristas as he dragged himself to a table. Terra followed like a lost puppy. The remaining Titans situated themselves at a table, looking different states of confused or exhausted. Roy, who’d stuck close to Starfire the entire time during their invasion, looked to Jason for a moment before sitting with the Princess.

“Jesus you guys scared us!” Morgan griped as she lowered the mop.

“Hold the handle higher next time,” Nightingale mumbled, pressing his hand against Damian’s back as he stuck close to the two shorter members, “and put more weight on your back leg.”

“... Thanks?” Morgan’s nose crinkled. “Why are you guys-” her eyes zeroed in on Dick. She dropped the mop. “Boss?”

Every pair of eyes focused on him and he tightened his hold on Damian’s thighs, ducking his head.

“What is that fat thing on your shoulder?”

Barbatos gave a hiss. “You dare insult me, you mortal wretch? I AM BARBATOS, DESTROYER OF WORLDS! I-”
“He’s a Bat God who possessed Dick,” Wally cut off as he planted a hand on Dick’s head, running his fingers through the short locks. “He wanted to open up a gateway to a dark multiverse or something? Kinda touch and go with the details, honestly. But he’s soul-bound to Dick now.”

The Bats nodded along with the explanation in agreement, finding no flaws in the story. Ketti glimpsed at Dick for confirmation, hastily looking away when avian eyes met hers.

“... So. You’re a metahuman,” Jessia awkwardly brought up. “Well, is this how you really look?”

“I knew his butt was too perfect,” Morgan grumbled lowly under her breath.

“This is me,” Dick confirmed without any inflection in his tone. The girls startled at the blank voice. “I’m going to go shower.” He wiggled and Damian reluctantly slid off him, scowling.

He turned on his heel. He paused, seeing his Owlets and Pups keeping him in their tight circle of bodies. Ignoring the spike of something at the surrounding people, he kept still. “What?”

Red Hood reached out and grabbed him around the waist, hauling him over his shoulder.

“You aren’t going alone,” Nightingale sounded exhausted, “after you were just kidnapped while in the shower.” He shook his head, rubbing at his covered eyes.

“Yeah!” Batgirl nodded along. “We’ll guard your room while you get all squeaky clean.” She gripped Dick’s hanging arm. Her hand trembled.

“Show Strix around,” Black bat chimed in, arm linked with the Talon’s. “Oracle will like her.”

“I need to stretch anyways,” Signal commented offhandedly as he gave a dramatic raise of his arms.

Dick hung limply along Red Hood’s back. He closed his eyes.
This was reality.

This wasn’t an illusion.

“Fine.” He opened his eyes. “Flash, are you going to come up too?” Wally looked between the siblings before shaking his head. They looked like they were on their last nerves, bodies tense and coiled for any attack. Vicious. Protective. Ready to spill more blood than they had.

“Nah.” His chest tightened at the idea of leaving him. “But I’ll stop by later. Go shower.” Spoiler and Nightingale sent him appreciative smiles. Barbatos leapt off Red Hood’s helmet, bouncing onto the Speedster’s own head.

“I will stay here and plot my revenge.”

Ketti squealed loudly at the God.

The Bats bustled upstairs. The moment they were in his apartment, Jason tossed his helmet off and all but threw Dick onto the oversized bed. Dick blinked up at his ceiling as bodies pressed into him, Damian on his chest while his Owlets and Pups curled around him.

They were all shaking.

“Strix, take a shower. Turn the nozzle all the way to the left for hot water,” Dick called to the newest addition to their awkward family. Strix nodded and went into the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

“You can’t see color anymore, can you?” Tim asked, face buried into his hair. Dick closed his eyes.

“No,” he responded. Stephanie tried to muffle a sob against his pillow.

“That’s okay,” she sniffled, “B has his serum. We can just start over again.” The others nodded in agreement. Cass pressed chaste pecks along his forehead and nose, her own breath hitched as she tried to steady her emotions.
Jason kept running his hand through Dick’s hair.

It felt so short. They’d chopped off his long locks, giving him a uneven short style that made him feel cold along the back of his neck. He shivered.

“It’s okay,” Duke breathed from somewhere in their pile of bodies - he couldn’t tell who was who anymore. “It’s okay. We got you back.”

For all his gripping and embarrassment, Duke truly loved his crazy, mismatched family. Dick was the glue that brought them all together and their living hell was not having him in their lives.

“We got you back,” Stephanie agreed. She peeled herself away from Dick’s side, eyes wet. She pressed a kiss to Dick’s cheek. “We got you back.”

Tim pressed a kiss to his temple, Cass a kiss to his cheek, Duke gave an quick squeeze to his shoulder. Damian just snuggled closer to him, breath fanning his neck, and Jason pressed his lips to Dick’s forehead, holding there. His face was pinched up, bottom lip trembling against Dick’s icy flesh as he tried not to cry.

“I’m sorry,” Jason choked out. Dick blinked.

“Why?” Dick sat up, the bodies moving with him. He ran a clawed, bloody hand through Damian’s hair. They’ll all probably need to wash up. Damian had dried blood soaking his uniform. He absently ran a thumb along the child’s temple. “Don’t apologize.”

“We were supposed to keep you safe,” Tim babbled, wiping at his face. “We were supposed to protect you from them.”

“I’m already dead,” Dick pointed out, earning a loud sob from Stephanie. “The worst they could do is retire me but they wouldn’t.”

“That’s not the point, dumbass,” Duke snapped as he kicked at Dick’s thigh. “We didn't want you being taken. You were taken. It was our negligence that made you-” he cut himself off, looking away from Dick.
“I’m fine,” Dick spoke. His dead eyes and dead tone and dead self spoke differently. “I’m fine.”

Strix chose that moment to come out, steam coiling off her paler flesh as she stood there, dripping wet.

“CLOTHES!” Duke shrieked, high-pitched and alarmed as he flailed his arms. “PUT ON CLOTHES!” Stephanie and Cass scrambled off the bed, ushering the Talon back into the bathroom. Tim hurried and threw some of Dick’s oversized clothes after them and slammed the door shut.

Silence.

“Please tell me she won’t stay here,” Jason spoke as he hugged Damian and Dick to his chest, Damian still silent as he clung to Dick. He hadn’t spoken a word. Dick nuzzled his face against Damian’s hair, purring.

“Maybe. Unless someone else wants to house her,” he spoke with a murmur. He pressed soft kisses against the crown of his youngest Owlet’s head, purrs quieting. “Why are you so silent?”

“You’re not fine,” was the wet, muffled words the child bit out. Jason and Tim paused while Duke looked just as uncomfortable as Damian seemed to be. These two hadn’t ever experienced a relapse. They never experienced Dick at his worst, still chained down on conditioning by the Court. By the time they’d met him, he’d already been 10-11 years into the healing process, his emotional responses perfected to a degree.

“I am,” Dick tried to argue. He gently pulled back, cupping Damian’s cheeks. “I’m just going to need a while to adjust again.” His words trailed off and he tightened his hold on Damian’s face, feeling the warmth emit from those chubby cheeks. He leaned close, pressing their foreheads together as he caught scent of Damian’s natural smell of spices and cinnamon. He could feel. He could smell.

It was reality.

It was not an illusion.
“Can you hug me again?” Dick whispered, so very quietly that he almost wondered if he’d thought it, before four pairs of arms wrapped around him. He squeezed Damian back tight, body shaking. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.” Damian’s voice cracked and wet, hot tears burned into Dick’s collarbone. “Stop.”

“I don’t know what’s real right now,” Dick admitted as his vision blurred. “I don’t know if you’re real right now.”

His body felt cold and empty. But there was a gaping hole in his chest, sucking up any traces of happiness. Just icy, heavy darkness. Like a black hole, it vacuumed his stable thoughts and sent him in a form of panic. He was waiting for the punch-line, the corpses to spit in his face. He was waiting to fall back into that sea of red, to startle back into the kitchen with the woman who was supposed to be his mother-

“You’re safe,” Tim whispered and with a start, Dick realized he was whining. “You’re safe.”

“They cut my hair,” Dick wheezed out, black leaking down his cheeks. “They cut my hair.” The only thing he’d had control over when he was a Talon, stripped away from him with a snip of metal. What gave him individuality was stolen, leaving him as nothing more than another mindless puppet.

“We know,” Jason soothed. “We know, Dickie, jesus we know.” He pressed his lips to Dick’s temple again. “We know.”

And it exploded. Shattered like his coherency, his resolve slipped under like his body in the red. It started as tiny little gasps, mockery of air intakes, before choking off into strangled little whines. The whines escalated until he was full blown sobbing, chest heaving as black leaked out steadily. The Owlets tightened their grip on him, cradling him in their arms as he wailed.

He hadn’t wanted to go back. He hadn’t wanted to lose his color, his life, his soul to those monsters but he did it - was gone, he was ruined-

He kept repeating “I’m sorry” over and over again, the two words slurring together into wet gibberish that had no meaning anymore. He didn't know what he was even apologizing for anymore. For leaving them? For not being strong enough to fight off the Talons? For letting
himself become weak enough to stay in the illusions that Barbatos created?

Or maybe he was apologizing, hoping that if he said it enough, he’d feel better. That everything would be magically fixed. Apologies were only necessary when a situation was wrong and apologies fixed the situation. Would saying it enough heal him? Make him a Real Boy?

He buried his face into Damian’s shoulder, claws tearing through kevlar as he tried to let himself be swallowed in their comforting warmth.

He was sorry he was born. He was sorry he’d caved so easily. Sorry he trailed a track of corpses behind him in his shadow, the meaning of death nothing but a job description. He was sorry he didn't fight - couldn’t fight.

He was sorry he made his Owlets and Pups suffer, knowing the terror they felt had to be all-consuming.

More arms encircled him and Stephanie was squishing herself between Jason and Duke, tears making her face look swollen. Cass pressed herself against Damian, kissing his head as she tried to blink away her own tears.

He was Dick Grayson. He could feel. He could alive. He was loved, could love.

He’d been broken.

Strix seemed to get a kick out of watching Dick’s form shift when he put his earring on. The showers themselves had been extremely awkward to the point of Duke not even wanting to mention it ever due to how uncomfortable it was.

Jason had perched in, as in actually inside the sink, not on the sink, not beside the sink, but in the goddamn sink while Dick showered. He sung an impressive rendition of All Star while kicking the back of his boots against the cabinet doors. Tim had taken to sitting on the floor in front of the doorway, running a finger over the line separating the bathroom tile to the hardwood flooring of the apartment.
Damian had taken the toilet seat, offering wash clothes to Dick through the pink pineapple shower curtain while yelling at Jason to shut up.

Duke sat on the bed with his sisters, head in hands as he questioned just how deep their separation anxiety ran if they couldn’t even let the man shower alone.

Paranoid, who?

After he’d gotten out of the shower and decently covered with a towel, Strix had spent roughly 20 minutes just taking his earring on and off, watching his form shrink and grow like a flip of a light switch. She kept clapping when he’d gain his illusionary appearance, as if pleased with it.

Dick hung his towel to dry and the Bats and Pups followed him down his stairwell to the cafe.

It was mayhem.

“There was this woman,” Wally spoke as he pointed at an image on a tablet. “And this guy. I think this guy was there. Those kids were definitely there. That woman. That old woman-” Two-Face just nodded as he scribbled the names down to go with faces. His eyes promised pain.

“And- BAM - their heads went flying right into Venny’s mouth!” Harley rubbed her mallet fondly as Black Mask just gawked at her. “So yeah, what’s you been up to tonight?”

“I clearly had a bigger headcount than you,” Deathstroke snarled low to Joker, who rolled his eyes dramatically, with a long dragged out groan and all. “Tell him Terra.”

“I hate you,” Terra hissed.

“So does Grant, Rose, and Joey. Join the club,” Deathstroke deadpanned. Terra seethed.

“What is going on in here?” Dick demanded, voice sharp. The cafe fell silent, everyone turning to him.
It was weird to see Dick’s face but with Talon’s expression - or lack thereof. Dick stepped further into the cafe.

“Your...you again,” Ketti pointed out with a blank. Dick nodded.

“Two-Face is going to walk me through the legal system,” Wally called with a wave of his hand.

Morgan, feeding Barbatos an entire crescent, just innocently whistled.

“Little One Vessel,” Barbatos called, wings flapping, “I demand the recipe for this drink!” Dick glimpsed at it - a spiced chai.

“Don’t call me that,” Dick shot back. “And no one can know that recipe. It's a secret.”

“You add paprika and boil whole vanilla beans in the milk to make it,” his employees all chanted out with triumphant smirks. He stared.

“It's still my special recipe,” he grumbled and walked towards the counter. He turned to Wally. “I'm making myself a coffee then going back upstairs for movie binge with the Owlets and Pups.”

Wally was gone in a blink, thumping sounding upstairs. Harley whistled, expression impressed.

“Here-ya go, Dickie. My personal number. Text me when you have free time,” Harley spoke as she pushed a heavily doodled notebook paper across her table. Dick took it and pocketed it.

“We're staying the night,” Jason growled out, leaving no room to argue.

“Flash gets the bed to himself. He isn't used to cuddling with you all,” Dick absently stated. Even as he spoke, he went through the motions of making his Owlets and Pups drinks. “Strix, try this.”

Strix perked up and slid forward, silent. She picked up the iced coffee offered to her and took a
hesitant sip, making sure the straw slipped through her mask's opening.

She went rigid.

“You like that. Good. I'll start you slow before introducing you to darker roasts then.” Dick handed his siblings their drinks. “Good night everyone else.”

Everyone in the cafe looked mildly unsettled with how distant and detached Dick was, going through the motions as if on replay. He had no life in him. No joy at the beverages being consumed.

The Girls looked uncomfortable, backing out of his way as he exited the bar.

The Bats looked between themselves before filing into a booth.

“We're going to wait for B,” Duke explained at Dick's glance, “and then head over to Oracle's to introduce Strix.”

Dick wavered, pausing long enough for Barbatos’ chubby body to plop down onto his shoulder with heaving gasps of air, his wings limp from overuse. Stephanie tried not to wheeze out a laugh.

“So we're going to wait for B,” Dick left and the cafe fell silent.

“So how bad is it?” Black Mask asked finally. “The kid looks completely dead.”

Damian had to be held back from lunging.

“Bad,” Cass spoke and didn't elaborate further.

“... So is the Justice League coming?” Ketti asked hesitantly, eyes wide with hope.
Dick was barely a foot in the door before he was assaulted by warm arms around his waist and shoulders. He let Wally hold him tight, the older man's face buried into his neck as he trembled.

“I was terrified,” Wally whispered, voice a croak. “You were supposed to be safe and then you weren’t. My heart literally stopped when Batman called me.” He squeezed Dick tighter. “You can’t leave me. I can’t lose my best friend again.”

Wally’s mind was a whirlwind of alarm. Adrenaline had kept him semi-focused throughout the entire rescue but now that he had his arms around his precious person, he was coming apart at the seams.

Because Dick wasn’t okay. He’d never been okay. And any progress that’d been made at attempting to heal him had been ripped away like a kite in the wind. He wasn’t hugging Wally back. He wasn’t trying to calm him down. He just stood there, letting himself be manhandled.

“I saw your coffin.”

It was burned into his retinas. When he closed his eyes, the scarlet red of that sleek casket top greeted him. Dick had to stay in there, either as punishment or like a doll on a shelf. He’d been conscious? During his time inside? Did that mean the other Talons Wally passed had been aware of his presence in that graveyard? Had they felt anything, stuck in those ice cages without any help to be free?

Had Dick felt like that?

“Oh,” was all that was said in response. Dick pulled away. “My coffin. I haven’t been in that thing in years.” He looked away, dazed. “Grandmaster and Cobb kept me out of it more than in it. I wasn’t in it for long, if I was placed inside.”

A wave of nausea hit Wally’s stomach. He couldn’t imagine it. He couldn’t - and Dick was talking as if it weren’t a big deal. As if it were just another part of life, being locked in a coffin, no matter for how short a period it was.

“That’s not okay,” Wally forced out between gritted teeth. “Dick, what you’ve been
through...it’s...it’s not okay.”

“I know.”

And with those two words, he felt thousands of miles apart from his best friend. Wally stared into muted blue and felt like he was meeting a stranger all over again. Dick looked away again, closing his eyes.

“I know. I’ll be okay though, Wally.” Dick seemed to shrink into himself. “I’ll just need time.” He turned away, moving to the couch. "The Owlets and Pups will be awhile. Want to browse Youtube with me?"

Wally sat on the end of the couch, stretched out so his feet tucked under Dick's thighs. "Take all the time you need," Wally decided to say.

Because if he knew anything about Dick Grayson, no matter which universe they came from, it was that he always bounced back.

Dick felt empty.

That was okay.

It was a familiar emptiness. Almost homely. His stomach didn't twinge anymore. His world had bled back to grey and white and black.

That was okay.

Barbatos' shadow was like a second layer of skin, constantly making him doubt everything. Was anything real? Or was he going to blink and have his mother in his face, asking him if everything was alright?
But what was his reality anymore?

The Court was going to be dismantled. He should be excited about that. But he didn't feel anything. The Grandmaster and Judge were still alive, having escaped in the chaos.

He was free from them. He was out of the labyrinth, which had been utterly demolished. He was no longer their prized Gray Son.

He didn't feel free. He felt like he was still in the Labyrinth, waiting for the next stealth attack. He felt like he was back at his Grandmaster's side, concentrating on those miniscule hand gestures for a Order. He felt like he was back in that sea of red, dragged down by phantoms of his past.

Harley said he'd been conditioned. That what had happened couldn't be wholly blamed on him. That, despite him taking lives, it wasn't his fault.

But it didn't matter if he'd been conditioned or brainwashed or raised to believe in what he was taught. It didn't change the fact that he had taken lives, continued to take lives.

Death was his constant, an always in his equation of life. He knew death. Death meant a job well done. Death meant more time to roam the white walls and less time in his coffin. Death meant a hand through his hair and a whispered compliment.

Death meant sobs and broken pleas. Death meant the looping THUMP CRUNCH SPLAT of his parents hitting the ground. Death meant emptiness and ghost hands gripping him as they dragged him down the sea of red.

Death meant his family crying and feeling like they were to blame for his undead state. Death meant a bland world of washed out colors and nothing in the place of living.

Death meant loneliness.

“Do you remember dying?” Dick whispered, his voice barely registering in the silence of the apartment. They'd turned the TV off hours ago, unable to pay attention to the screen. Jason and the others weren't back yet and Dick was adamant about waiting for them before they watched movies.
“Yes,” his friend whispered, head leaning on the couch cushions as he kept his eyes closed. “It wasn't anything I was expecting.”

“Did you see people? When you died?” Hands clawed at his skins, the gurgled words sounding like knives against steel as red raised above his waist.

“Yeah.” Wally didn't elaborate. “Did you?”

The red raised over his head and he felt the hands let go, content to watch him drown himself down into the endless depths.

“No.”

That was okay.

Wally had to leave. He'd been reluctant, only to get the hint that it was an emergency when Barry had called him to ask him where he was. Apparently all of the Keystone Villains were banning together to cause chaos.

Dick laid in his bed by himself, curled up into a loose ball. He had settled with the knowledge that his Nestlings weren't coming any time soon.

The window opened, closed, and a weight disrupted the mattress.

“Do you hate me?”

Barbatos looked over at the new guest before turning his attention back to one of Dick's Basic Emotions for Dummies books.

“Why would you ask that?” Batman was almost cautious in taking his cowl off, letting a deep sigh
slump his shoulders. “Why would you think that?”

“I killed those Owls,” Dick explained softly. “I know you hate when I kill.”

“I can't cross that line.” Bruce spoke, his cowl heavy in his bloody hands. He was drenched in Talon blood, black and thick. It made the man sick. Because while it was the blood of mindless Talons, it could have very easily been his son's. “I don't want any of you too, either. Because it's so easy to take a life. But the guilt…”

“Out of all of us, I think you, Duke, Tim, and Barbara are the only ones who haven't taken a life.” Dick sat up, facing his father figure. “I've killed so many people, Bruce.”

“I know.” Bruce looked older then and there more than he ever had. “I still love you. You're still my son.”

“You don't mean that.”

Barbatos peeked over, intrigued.

“You'll lock me up the moment I'm fixed.” Something bubbled up his chest. He didn't have a name for it.

“What?” Wide blue eyes (and he knew what they were supposed to he and not that inky grey) stared at him in silent shock. “Dick, I would never-”

“You are all about justice. Shouldn't I be punished just as much as the Owls? Just as much as any other murderer? Criminal?” that something bubbling was thick and hot and his words were coming out faster. “I deserve to be punished. I don't deserve to live.”

The room suddenly felt so many degrees colder. It was almost frigid.

“Don't ever say that.” Instead of bursting forth like in volcanic anger, the words were uttered almost in a defeated sigh. “Please don't ever say that. You deserve to live, Dick. Yes, justice is always the answer but you were a victim, not an accomplice.”
“I've killed children.” Bruce flinched. “I've killed families. All for the Court. For myself. For my Owlets. How am I a victim?”

“Because you were brainwashed-”

“I could say the same with my time with you.” The words were like bullets, cutting through Bruce's chest and silencing him. “You Ordered me not to ever harm you. You Ordered me not to ever betray you. You and Jason. Alfred. You Ordered me just like the Court.”

“Dick-”

“If you try to fix me again, do you think I'll magically heal?” Dick didn't want to listen. He wanted to talk. He'd spent too long listening. “That everything I've suffered from the Court will just magically disappear?”

“I'd like to hope that it'll help you realize that you have a second chance without the fear of it being ruined or stolen from you.”

Dick's hands trembled as he hunched forward. “The deaths haunt me, you know? The more I regained my humanity, the more I thought about those I took. But I still felt that desire to kill. To sink my claws into a chest or my knives through a throat. Is that weird? Am I a hyper-crate?”

“I can't answer that,” Bruce answered solemnly. He sat there in silence for a moment. “The captured Owls are going to be prosecuted. Children endangerment, kidnapping, abuse, murder, drug use- they won't ever see the light of day again.”

“I want to kill them all,” Dick confessed and looked up, his eyes swimming with black tears. “I want them to feel what I felt, when I died. They killed me. Again.”

“I know, chum.” Bruce opened his arms out and Dick pressed against his kevlar covered chest. “I know.”

“I can't see your eyes anymore.” He sniffled. “Or Damian's. Or Wally's hair. My stomach feels empty.”
“I know chum.” Bruce opened and closed his mouth. “I collected all the files the Parliament had concerning the chemicals and experiments they did. I may be able to produce a faster, more effective serum.”

“I miss the color of your eyes,” Dick whispered, the words muffled. “But I don't know…”

“It's up to you.” A hand cupped the back of his neck. “Whatever brings you happiness.”

Dick flinched and curled into himself.

“What is happiness?” He asked. Barbatos had turned away again, bored of their sappiness.

“It's different for everyone. What do you think it is?”

“I thought maybe it was my parents being alive.” Broken bones, bloody hands leaving bruising imprints against his throat. “But now? I don't know. I feel...like I'm missing something.”

Bruce hugged his son tighter, eyebrows pinched. He couldn't fathom what the Talon experienced. He didn't know what had happened during the time it took them to rescue him, but it had left a devastating impact on him.

“I feel violated,” was finally forced out. Bruce closed his eyes.

“I'm sorry chum.” He pressed a kiss to the top of his son's head. “I'm so sorry.”

Bruce sat there, cradling his son to his chest, and wondered not for the first time what could have been had he snatched Dick up that night 20 years ago.
His lips twitched up. They pulled until his teeth almost poked through. He held the expression, crinkling his eyes up to make his eyes seem wider. Wrinkles at the corners of his eyes gave an appearance of a wider smile.

His lips pulled down before pursing into a ‘o’ shape.

He gave a laugh. It was so empty.

“What are you doing?” Barbatos asked from his perch on the bathroom sink. He watched his master. “Practicing expressions?”

“Mhmn,” Dick hummed as he let his face fall back into a blank slate. “It's what I used to do when I first started learning about emotions. People are more comfortable around someone who appears approachable.”

“It seems pointless,” Barbatos stated with confusion. “Don't they already know you're dead?”

Dick shrugged. “I still have to appear friendly. Customer service and all that.” He studied Barbatos. “Want to join me for my shift?”

“Yes. I will plot your demise.” He did not come off threatening, as he intended to. Dick nodded and picked up the demon. He was skillful in typing a bandana around his head, covering his hair. Plopping his hair down over it, he straightened it out in the mirror.

It was like looking at a stranger.

“Let’s go.” The walk down his steps was silent. Barbatos looked mildly impressed at the noiseless footfalls, constantly glancing down at his feet.

“You really are perfect aren’t you?” The demon looked up at his master. “A pity.”

“If you say so.” Dick walked into the cafe and stopped, the door closing behind him.
Ketti looked up, eyes wide at his appearance. The cafe was packed to the brim, everyone crowded along the tables, asleep.

“Did anyone leave?” Dick blinked as he made his way over to the bar. Ketti looked down at his feet, alarmed by the silence.

“No. They wanted to see if you’d come in for work,” Ketti responded. Slumped down on the floor draped in their coats was Morgan and Jessica, using each other as pillows. Dick’s lips twitched down at them. “You know, you don’t gotta smile or anything if you don’t want to.”

“Yeah?” Dick’s eyes slid to her and any practiced facial expression dropped off his face like a rock in water. Ketti smiled softly.

“Better. Hey, fatasses, get up.” Ketti nudged Morgan and Jessica with her shoe, laughing quietly when Morgan swiped at her. “Boss is here.”

The two shot up, scrambling to stand. Morgan ended up smacking her forehead against Ketti’s knee while Jessica slumped back against the milk fridge.

“BOSS!” The two cried out, effectively startling a few Villains and Goons awake. “Good morning!”

“It’s 4 in the morning,” Dick corrected and crouched down to be eye-level with the two. “Go upstairs and sleep. Ketti, you too.” He handed off his apartment key to a stunned Morgan. “I’ll make some donuts.”

“Might as well have me stay then,” Ketti said with a stretch. “Man the counter while you’re in the kitchen. Hi Babasty.”

Silence.

“Are you talking to me?” Barbatos flapped his wings. “How DARE YOU-”

“Babatsy, shut up,” Red Hood groaned from his booth table. “Can I get a burrito?”
Dick snorted, softly, and shook his head.

Everything would slowly go back to being normal.

That was okay.

Chapter End Notes

Oof I can't write emotional scenes. Or delve into character's emotions states.

ALRIGHT! Angsty plot is outta the way. Now it's time for healing and the usual crack. I've got big plans for new characters to be introduced and some new pairings to make an appearance ;)

Until next time~! <3
Chapter Notes

A really short chapter. Oof sorry

Introduced a few new characters this chapter! :) Hope you like them!

Edit: as of 10/07/2019 all mention of Birdflash was removed

Dick squinted at Captain Marvel, silent as the Hero watched Damian and Colin play on the Nintendo Switch.

“Jump!” Colin exclaimed, sprawled on a booth and all but hovering over the console. Damian scowled.

“I am! She’s too fast!” He glared at the screen. “I died! Again!” Colin groaned and dropped back against the cushions, reaching for the game console.

“Thank god there’s a Rest Bench right under her fight,” the redhead explained and showed the screen to Damian. “Apparently then she lunges, you gotta hit her from above so she can’t use her needle to stab you.”

Captain Marvel shifted, looking like he desperately wanted to get closer to the two children playing. Dick hummed thoughtfully and slid out from behind the bar. The cafe was pretty empty. Batman and the others had rounded up the Villains and dropped them off at Arkham for the week. Harley and Ivy were away with Harley’s daughter for a vacation, leaving the usual occupants lacking.

It was a slow day. Besides the two children and the Hero, there was no one else there. For a weekend, it was a bit odd.

“Hey,” Dick spoke as he positioned himself in front of the door, subtly blocking the man’s escape, “you want to play with them?”

“Wha-what?” Captain Marvel sputtered as he shrunk back. “N-no! That’s a kiddie game! I’m a man! A grown man!”
“You’re a kid pretending to be a man,” Dick stated bluntly and the two children whipped their heads up from the Switch. “Batman has a file on you, Billy Batson.”

Captain Marvel gawked. “Wha-wha-what?!”

“Grayson! Don’t go telling everyone about Father’s secret files!” Damian stilled. “I mean-”

“Father?! You mean - oh my god, are you Robin?” Captain Marvel looked at the three. “That’s not fair!”

“I’ll lock up,” Dick volunteered. “Go upstairs. You have the port for that?” Dick jerked his head towards the Switch. Damian nodded. “Hook it up to the TV and play Smash Bros or something.”

“Oh my god! I rock at that game! Ness is my main!” Captain Marvel flushed. “Um.”

“Hey cool!” Colin beamed. “You can turn into an adult too!” Concentrating, Abuse took his place, nearly toppling the table over. Captain Marvel jolted back in alarm.

“Oh wow.” Captain Marvel looked at the two kids in wonderment. Dick was quick in locking up the cafe and ushering the three upstairs. Once there, he drew the blinds and gestured for the man to go into the bathroom. The Hero ignored the snoring bat ball on the bed and scrambled inside.

An echoing “SHAZAM!” rung out and Billy shyly slid out, tugging on his hoodie strings. “Hi.”

“Hi! I’m Colin and this is Damian,” Colin introduced with a broad smile. “So you said you main as Ness?”

Dick leaned against the bathroom door frame, watching the three play. He nodded to himself with a smile.

His Owlet needed more friends. Colin could only be with him so much and he knew his youngest was lonely.
Watching the three laugh and shove at each other playfully to ruin their attacks, he decided that Billy probably needed friends closer to his own age in the same field of career too.

Despite the clusterfuck that was Dick’s life, Luthor at least, had his shit together. During the drama of the capture and the rescue, Luthor finalized the construction on the Cat Cafe.

All that was left was hiring workers, contracting vendors, and going to the local shelters to pick up the felines.

Selina, helpful as always when it came to the cafe, all but purred, “I have just the perfect worker for you.”

Her personal choice, as it turned out, came in the form of a lithe, dark haired teenager. His facial structure was distantly familiar, like seeing a friend’s face in a stranger’s mannerisms, and his expressions were similar to Selina’s.

“Call me Aion,” the teenager introduced. His hands were slender and nimble. He held Dick’s hand a little longer than socially necessary when they shook. “My mom’s told me a lot about you.” His piercing feline like eyes gave Dick a once-over. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Your mom…” Dick blinked, the gears slow to turn. It clicked. “Selina’s your mom?!” He grabbed Aion’s cheeks, pulling them as he got in the stranger’s face. Aion whimpered. Actually whimpered.

“You have a son ?!” Dick pulled the teen’s cheeks harder. His skin looked unblemished though he had a small break in his left eyebrow. A faint scar ran down it. It was small, but noticeable when as close as Dick was. Aion didn't seem to mind.

"And a daughter," Selina responded dismissively as she watched her child just make heart eyes at Dick. She should have warned him about the barista's charm. Oh well.

"How does Bruce not know?" He let go of the teen's cheeks, dropping his hands to his apron front. Aion looked dejected at the loss of contact.
Selina shrugged.

"We've had a few messy, lustful night stands-"

"MOM!" Green eyes reluctantly tore away from Dick's biceps, "I DON'T WANNA HEAR ABOUT YOUR SEX LIFE!" He straightened out his T-shirt, some weird anime that Dick knew Stephanie and Tim watched, and flushed. “Sorry. Um. Here’s my resume.”

“Damian has a half brother,” Dick whispered softly to himself as he took the offered folder. Barbatos fluttered on his shoulder. Thankfully Aion hadn’t mentioned the rounded bat demon with him.

“You’ve been living in France?” Dick asked as he flipped through the papers. He hummed thoughtfully. “You’re 18?” His eyes gave Aion a quick once-over. Aion straightened out, trying to appear taller. How adorable.

“Yeah. I’ve been living with my sister Helena.” Aion tugged on his short curls. Dick could see the resemblance to Bruce and Selina now that he knew who his parents were. “She’s still in France, closing out our apartment and finishing last-minute stuff. I’m going to be living with her here.”

“Not with your mom?” Dick eyed the list of establishments the teen had worked at. Cafes, restaurants, museums. He hummed thoughtfully again. “You follow your mom’s footsteps?”

“Want to see me in leather?” Aion had his mother’s purr down. Selina buried her face into her hands, shoulders shaking while Dick looked up from the resume, frown on his face. “I think I can say so with confidence that I have all the right assets for it.”

“Uh, sure? Just be careful if you go out alone at night - any Villains you meet here or next door won’t be so nice outside of these walls.” Dick flipped through his resume again. “You’re on a working visa or becoming a permanent residence of the States?”

“Working visa. It’s good for two years.” Aion slid closer to Dick. The Talon glanced at him. Why was he getting so close? Maybe France had different social limitations? Not that Dick minded - he loved contact of any kind. It made him feel wanted - accepted. “So, how old are you?”
“Biologically 26,” he explained and closed the folder. “But physically 15.”

Aion raised an eyebrow. “Um. You don't- holy shit!”

Dick replaced his earring, smoothing out his aprons. “So I take it you're good with cats?”

“You just- MOM! You didn't tell me he was a metahuman!” Aion rounded on Selina. “I thought Batman didn't like metas in Gotham?”

“Special cases,” Selina shrugged again. “And yes, he is.”

“So does Bruce know about him? Is your daughter…?” Dick squinted. “She's Bruce's too, isn't she?”

“Damian is going to have his heart broken once he realizes he isn't the only child to Bruce,” Selina sighed. “Do you have more interviews scheduled?”

“A few. Nothing too bad.” Dick rolled his shoulders. Aion purred. “I'll get you your paperwork. Come with me?” He gestured to the shared wall with the cafe. “I also own the cafe right beside us.”

“Amazing,” Aion hummed out. “So are you opposed to dating people younger than you?”

“I don't date,” Dick responded immediately.

“Oh.” If Aion had actual cat ears, they’d be flat. “So you own both places?”

“Uh-huh,” Dick explained with a shrug. He paused as he walked through the glass doors connecting the two buildings. He blinked at the group of people perched as a table. “You took up the Batgirl mantle again?” Of course, she had - she'd been wearing it the night he was rescued. He just hadn't...processed it.

“Yeah,” Stephanie called as she ran her fingers through her exposed blonde hair. Aion eyed her
kevlar-covered body appreciatively. “We’re seeing if Strix would like to take up the Spoiler mantle for a bit. Get used to it.”

“She’s nice,” Red Robin agreed, sitting beside her. With them at the table, Superboy waved to Dick.

“Great.” Strix was staying with Barbara for the time being until she grew more comfortable in being free. “Guys, this is Aion, my newest employee.”

“Why is everyone so hot?” Aion asked as he eyed Tim’s chest and Superboy’s arms. “Oh my god.”

Stephanie stood up from her table and walked over. She planted a hand on Aion’s shoulder and nodded seriously.

“I understand completely.”

“So you’re a high school student?” Dick flipped through the papers presented to him. Lounging behind him, using his shoulders as an armrest, Aion winked. The interviewee shifted, cheeks pinkening.

“Um, yeah. On my last year. My sister’s been working her ass - uh - butt off to support us so I thought maybe it was time to get a job?” Cullen Row ran a hand through his hair. “Also, I really like cats.”

“So do I!” Aion’s face lit up, shoving Dick forward into a hunch as he leaned closer. “How old did you say you were?”

“Calm down, Chatton,” Dick spoke as he easily straightened out. His eyes slid over to the faint words carved into the side of the teen’s head before he looked back to the resume. “Can you work from 3 to 9?”

“Of course!” Cullen’s expression brightened. “I live a few blocks away so transportation or tardiness will never be an issue!”
“Hire him, hire him, hire him!” Aion begged, sliding around to plop in Dick’s lap. Dick’s eye twitched while Cullen politely looked away.

“Get off me before this cat gets neutered.”

Aion was up and on the opposite side of the table, innocently twirling a lock of Cullen’s hair as he avoided Dick’s eyes. Cullen was stiff, eyes wide. He hadn’t seen the teen move - much less get beside him.

“I’m Aion. I’m currently single and I really love cats too,” Aion introduced with a wink. “So. You have an older sister you live with too? What a coincidence - me too!”

“I think I made a mistake,” Cullen whispered out. Dick looked at him blankly.

“I think I did too.”

“Aion, Cullen, this is Carrie,” Dick gestured to the bispatical wearing girl, “she’s going to be working with us from now on. Be nice.” He sent the girl a pointed look.

“Ya got it, Bossy!” Carrie saluted and smiled widely to the two boys. “Cute hats. Howdy! I’m Carrie. Carrie Kelley. Nice to meet ya!”

Aion looked smug in his pink baseball cat, uncaring to the cat ears poking out. Cullen, bless his heart, looked ready to dash out of the building and never return.

“I’m Aion, mademoiselle ,” the feline-like teen introduced with a bow, pressing a chaste kiss to the back of her hand. He hummed at the faint brush against the hard calluses along her fingers, mentally cataloging them.

“I’m Cullen,” the shier teen greeted with a half-wave. Carrie waved to him while glancing at Aion.
“Is that a *Sailor Moon* phone case?”

“Yes! I love anime!” Carrie beamed and Cullen’s hunched form straightened slightly. Aion blinked, lost, and looked to Dick.


“Yes,” the other two chimed, eyes bright. “Anyone else we’re hiring?”

“Right now? No,” Dick commented as he studied the three. “Alright. So, first thing first - be aware that shady people and Villains will be frequenting this establishment.”

“Like who?” Carrie looked concerned.

As if on cue, Joker waltz in from the connecting glass door between the cafe and cat cafe. He eyed the three fresh meat before turning a crazed smile to Dick. Cullen cowered behind Aion, who subtly moved his hand to his hidden whip.

“Hiya Dickie! Your tiny blonde worker, Kelly or whatever, just burned her arm on steamed milk—”

Dick grabbed the Joker by the shirt collar and stormed through the glass door. “Stay here! I’ll send Catwoman over in a second!”

The three awkwardly looked at each other.

“So, either of you related to any Mask?” Aion started conversationally. Cullen buried his hands into his hair and groaned. Carrie just rocked back on her heels, humming as she smiled wider. She felt she was going to like working with the two.

“Despite being a cat *cafe*, no drinks will be allowed past the actual cafe,” Dick explained to his
three newest employees. They were lined up with Ketti, Morgan, and Jessica. “There will be cat treats available for people to feed to the felines but no human food or drink is allowed in this building, alright?”

“Got it!” The Girls chimed automatically while the three newest ones just nodded.

“Catwoman is going to be a frequent overseer of this cat cafe, so don’t be alarmed if you see her randomly. This cat cafe won’t be 24/7 like the cafe. It will close at 8:30. Clean up should be done by 9. If you can’t finish my 9, tell me.”

“Okay.” Carrie saluted. Aion purred while Cullen just stared at the kittens coiling in between their legs. They were all avidly avoiding Dick, hissing if they got too close.

“Again, you will be seeing a lot of different types of people coming through. If anyone gives you any issues-” he glimpsed at Cullen, who was too distracted by a tabby scaling his leg to notice “- get me.”

“Got it, Boss!” The Girls called out again. Aion gave them weird looks. Dick nodded at his six employees, smile gentle.

“Alright. You ready for tomorrow?”

“Yes sir!”

Catwoman, silently observing, smiled widely at their enthusiasm and dedication. They were so cute. So loyal.

But maybe she really needed to talk to Aion about how thirsty he was because it was honestly a bit embarrassing.
Espresso Shot 19

Chapter by widdlewed

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.


“So yeah,” Selena repeated awkwardly, “this is Helena and Aion.”

Bruce.exe crashed. Blue screen. Would you like to restart your Batman?

Damian let out a wordless, high-pitched shriek. Alfred braced the nearby vase to keep it steady and not shatter.

Helena had her mother’s cheekbones and bow-lips. She had Bruce’s eye shape and color and his nose and chin. Her dark hair was wavy and long, silky like her grandmother’s on Bruce’s side.

Aion’s green eyes were electric, his lashes long. His dimples were like Bruce’s and his dark hair was curly. He had Thomas Wayne’s bone structure, though his button nose was all Selina.

They were both beautiful children to the Wayne. Both were beautiful and his. He glanced at his youngest child and had to do a double take.

Yike, Damian was having an aneurysm. Silently and murderously, he was having an aneurysm. Dick had to be subtle in keeping an arm around his shoulder to keep him in place, another hand pick-pocketing the child’s knives.

Damian and Aion, standing across from each other, could definitely pass as siblings. Helena too. Despite their paler complexions, they definitely shared resemblances with the Al Ghul child.

Bruce stumbled back and fell heavily into his chair, gawking at the two. Helena twirled her hair through her fingers nervously, avoiding eye contact while Aion unabashedly eyed Cassandra and Tim.
“They’re mine.” Bruce’s words sounded strangled. “They’re mine.”

“I’M THE ONLY HEIR TO THE WAYNE BLOOD!” Damian’s eyes almost looked like they were spinning. “I AM THE TRUE WAYNE!” Dick shushed him gently with a soothing hand through his hair.

“Bitch,” Aion started bluntly, Tim choking on his spit, “I think that’s Helena, actually.”

“Language,” Dick reprimanded while he all but hauled Damian up into his arms. It seemed more to subdue the child than comfort him. Alfred eyed a knife that dropped to the Persian carpet.

“I don’t want to deal with you gremlin and your spitting contest,” Helena stated as she turned her attention to Stephanie, Cass, Barbara, and Strix. “Can you ladies show me to the nearest frozen yogurt place? I need some pronto.”

“Shouldn’t you talk to your father?” Dick frowned, eyes widening. Helena froze and squinted at him.

“Are you single?” She asked as she gave him a once over.

“Don’t,” Aion answered for her with a dramatic sigh. “Don't even try. He's off-limits.” Helena eyed Barbara with disappointment for a moment before huffing.

“Hi dad, nice to finally meet you.” Helena straightened out and her expression was instantly recognizable on Selina’s own face as amusement. “Great to finally meet you after not knowing whether you were real or not for 24 years of my life.”

“Oh my god.” Bruce ran his hands through his hair. First Damian, now Helena and Aion. How many children did he secretly have, with only him being out of the loop of their birth? He was a horrible father. Think of the child support he’s evaded from years of awful ignorance. “Oh my god.”

Selina sent him a pitying look.
“Sorry love. I didn’t think you’d be ready to be a father.” Her eyes slid over the gathered teens and adults. “Until I met Jason and Dick, that is.”

“How did you keep them a secret?”

“How does everyone keep them a secret?” Duke corrected with a cough into his hand. Cass flicked him on the forehead.

“At that point, Aion was already 5 and Helena was 10. I thought it might be too much of a shock.” Selina shrugged. “Let’s go discuss this privately. I know this is a lot to take in.”

“You should have seen him when Talia dropped Damian off,” Jason joked, jolting when Dick gave a feral growl at the woman’s name. “Um.”

“Listen here half-pint,” Aion spoke as Damian was finally set down onto his feet again. “I’m older than you, which makes me vastly superior. So just do as I say and we won’t have any- HE THREW A KNIFE AT ME!” Aion ducked behind Helena.

“Owlet, no!” Dick flailed as he snagged the produced knives out of the child’s hands. “Where are you hiding these?”

“That’s your only concern?!” Duke and Aion cried out at the same time. The two paused and looked at each other. Duke’s face crumpled into one of exhausted relief.

“Oh thank god, someone else who’s sane.”

“Debatable,” Helena grumbled for her brother and smiled innocently when he flashed his middle finger at her.

“Ooooh, I love her already,” Stephanie cooed out.

“I DEMAND A DUEL!” Damian screeched. Dick frowned at him before looking helplessly over
at Jason. Jason just shrugged.

“Can’t fix every single relationship with hugs and threats of bloodshed,” the man explained patiently for Dick, who turned back at Damian and Aion. He hadn’t had to deal with such hostility since Tim and Damian first began living together. But even that was short-lived after Dick got in both their faces and went full ‘Talon-Mode’, as they liked to reminisce it as.

But Aion already seemed dismissive to his ‘Talon-Mode’, if his reaction to his true form was anything to go by. Though, then again, Aion was turning out to be a flirtatious little shit who only had two things on his mind: men and women.

“Okay, you tiny little gremlin, let’s go!” Aion was quick, flipping over the coffee table between them. In a few seconds he was in a crouch behind Damian, his whip wrapped around the child’s throat. Damian had his arms up and over his head, knives pointed in Aion’s face.

“No, no, no, no, no,” Dick all but yelped as he scrambled to grab the two. “No fighting! Siblings don’t fight!”

Damian whirled and slammed his foot into Aion’s abdomen, sending him reeling back. With the whip still wrapped around his throat, he jerked forward. It was a miracle he hadn’t snapped his own neck.

Bruce scrambled as well to intervene.

Cass grabbed Aion’s whip out of his hand and unraveled it from around Damian, Stephanie holding the child up by his underarms. Helena looked disappointed at the ruined fight while Tim and Duke exhaled sighs of relief.

“I’ll slit your throat!” Damian snarled low, English melting away as he began to spit and snarl at the older teen by Arabic. Aion’s mouth parted in shock, his eyes sparkling.

“Oh, he’s adorable! A gremlin for sure, but so adorable!” Aion made a move to get closer.

A knife pressed against his throat and everything in the room stopped. Damian cut himself off mid-snarl to gawk while Cass and Stephanie stiffened. Even Alfred sucked in a breath.
“Never,” Dick whispered lowly into Aion’s ear, his other hand planting the teen in place from behind, “ever raise your hand against your brother again, do I make myself clear?” Yellow eyes flickered up to meet Damian’s green. “That goes for you too, Owlet. You and Chatton will get along.”

Selina eyed the man warily, gaze moving to see how Bruce was reacting. Bruce watched the scene with an intent usually reserved for his most impossible of cases.

“Understood Grayson.” Damian’s words were stiff and terse. “Release me, Fatgirl.” Stephanie huffed and dropped him. Dick nodded and slunk away from Aion, slipping his knife back up his shirt sleeve.

“That was so hot,” Aion blurted out, effectively breaking the tension.

“Oh Jesus christ.” Helena whispered, pinching the bridge of her nose. Barbara broke into hysterical laughter.

“You okay Owlet?” Damian just burrowed further against Dick’s shoulder. He clung onto his oldest brother, wrapped around him like a koala. Dick paced the garden grounds, trying to release pent up energy before making their way to the graveyard.

“I’m the Wayne heir,” the child grumbled sulkily. “If I’m not...what was my entire upbringing worth then?”

Dick paused a step, taking in the words. Ah, yeah, that would be something to discuss, wouldn’t it?

“Well obviously our new siblings have followed in Catwoman’s footsteps,” Dick tried to console. “So they won’t care for the mantle of Batman. Honestly, right now, no one besides you wants to take up the cowl after Bruce retires.”

“But mother always said-”
“The Court always said I was their perfect Talon.” The wind rustled the leaves of a nearby tree. “After I was captured by Batman, I was explained how that was not true and how I was lied to from day 1. Sometimes people lie to make up believe what they want us to think is true.”

“Besides.” Dick tightened his hold on the child’s legs. “Talia probably didn't think Brucie Wayne was a real thing. She probably didn't even think he could be sleeping with other women.”

“Ew.” Damian made a choking noise. “I don’t wish to hear about my mother or father’s sexually active habits.”

“Me too, Owlet.” Dick took a starting job before leaping. Being superhuman gave itself some perks as he landed in front of Damian’s grandparents gravestones in a heartbeat. “Me too. But don’t tell anyone but you are one my favorites, okay? Aion is weird.”

“He is weird.” Damian looked so serious as he slid down the man’s back and plopped down in front of Martha’s gravestone. “Really weird. He was drooling when Cassandra stretched and showed off her six-pack.”

Dick’s eyes squinted.

“Ew.”

The child broke into giggles befit his age. Dick smiled, feeling accomplished.

After their first day of business, in which Cullen broke down crying over a kitten crawling up his jeans, Dick was introduced to the teen’s older sister.

She walked in, crossed her arms, and seemed to glare at the employees as Cullen hurried to change out of his hat and apron.
Dick blinked, tilted his head at her, and hummed.

“You must be Harper,” Dick called from behind the bar. Cullen had warned him that his sister would be picking him up. Apparently he wasn’t allowed to walk home alone anymore. “Hi.”

“Hi.” Harper greeted back just as the door behind her jingled, alerting the staff to a new customer.

Tim stumbled in, looking ready to collapse. Jessica glanced at Dick, who gave a nod. “The usual, Mr. Drake-Wayne?”

“Stop calling me that. It’s not funny anymore,” he grumbled. After the girls had found out he was basically the acting CEO of Wayne Enterprise, they’d taken to teasing him by calling him formal titles. “And yeah. With four extra shots.”


Cullen came back and sputtered, cheeks burning red. “Oh my god you’re Tim Drake.”

“Am I?” Tim blinked sluggishly and slumped further against the check-out counter. “That’s news to me.”

“Friendly,” Dick reminded and handed the drink over. “Sit down.” Tim grumbled under his breath and staggered over to a booth. “Cullen, go become friends with Tim Drake. I’d like to speak to your sister for a moment.”

Cullen looked between the two in worry for a moment before Dick’s suggestion caught up with him. Cheeks burning, he awkwardly slid into the opposite seat from the sleepy teen.

Harper raised an eyebrow as Dick led her into the back kitchen. Once they were alone, she frowned.

“What? Is there a problem?” Her eyes narrowed. “This isn’t about his sexuality, is it? Because if it is, then you might need to call the police for what I’m about to do to you-”
“Bluebird.”

Harper snapped her mouth shut with a click of her teeth.

“You’re Bluebird, right?” Dick stepped closer, circling around her with an almost amused expression. It looked extremely plastic on his face. “It’s always so amusing how you Capes think you can protect your secret identity.”

“Who are you?” Harper, Bluebird, hissed as she stood on-guard. It was no use. Dick could have taken her out several times over already. She was inexperienced. Untrained.

Held so much potential.

“I’m just a barista,” Dick stopped circling her, “and cat cafe owner too, I guess. And you, Ms. Bluebird, are inexperienced. If you want to continue to prowl the streets of Gotham and keep your brother safe, then I suggest you find a suitable teacher.”

“Like who?” Harper snapped out, mind reeling. What even?

“Like me.” Harper jumped and whirled. Batman stood behind her, blocking the exit back into the cafe. At his elbow, Robin was snarling lowly at...some Cat Teen? It wasn’t Catwoman, but a young teen.

“B-Batman.” Harper sunk back. Dick’s hand on her shoulder made her pause. “Um-”

“Dick’s right. You have potential but you are pathetic in a fight. I’ve kept an eye on you but now that you have a direct connection to this cafe and my son-” his cowled eyes glimpsed to Dick “-you must be more prepared.”

“... Your son.” Her eyes moved to Dick. “... That… Actually makes sense. No wonder this cafe is neutral.”
“That’s all Dick’s abilities,” Batman corrected. “Now, meet me on top of WE in two hours. Bring all your gadgets and gear.” He turned to Dick. “May I get three hot chocolates?”

“Of course! How was your first patrol, Bad Luck?” Dick danced over to the two younger Heroes.

“He pushed me off a roof!” Robin tattled. Bad Luck made an offended noise.

“Rude! I yeeted you off the roof!”

Batman looked up at the ceiling and groaned. Harper just stared. Was this real life?

“I don’t even know what that means!” Robin stomped after Bad Luck. “I HATE YOU!”

“Inside voices, Birdie,” Red Hood groaned as he sat up from a booth beside Tim and Cullen. The two looked up from their conversation, startled that they hadn’t noticed the anti-hero.

“... Cullen, what kind of job do you have again?” Harper began cautiously.

“I get to cradle kittens,” Cullen said in a watery voice, looking far too pleased with life for his own good.

“Fortnite? Is it like Cheese Vikings?” Damian looked up from the tablet, eyebrows furrowed. Billy, Colin, and Jon shared looks before staring at the child. Aion, lounging in the booth behind them, snorted at their conversations. It was his off days and since he was still new to Gotham, had chosen to hang out at the only place he was familiar with.

No surprise that his half brother was there too. And it looked like he had friends.

“How do you not know what Fortnite is? Isn’t Bruce Wayne, like, super rich?” Jon Kent asked with a scrunched up nose. “You’re a loser.”
“You’re a loser!” Damian shot back childishly as he raised a fork threateningly.


“It’s a fun game! Want to watch game streamers?” Billy leaned over his milkshake. It never failed to surprise him the variety the cafe offered. “And after we can go check out the kittens next door?”

Damian sniffed. “I’m fine with that.”

“Of course you are,” Jon grumbled with an eyeroll. “How about *Realm Royale*?” His face brightened. “The chickens are so cute!”

“Chickens?” Damian sounded so innocent, eyes wide. “I want to see the chickens.”

“Oh, um,” Jon fumbled, “you gotta kill them.”

Damian looked devastated.

Aion turned away from eavesdropping, checking his phone when it buzzed. He pulled up his Snapchat and saw Helena had snapped him, showing off a picture of her with those women from the manor. Stephanie, Cassandra, Barbara, and Strix, if he remembered correctly. They were all around a circular metal table at some outdoor cafe, posing for the image.

Aion smiled. His sister looked happy. She needed friends her own age, who were in similar professions to her.

“Welcome.” Harley stippled her fingers together. “It’s been awhile since we’ve had a gathering.”
“It has been a long time,” Gorilla Grodd agreed as he leaned back in his chair. The abandoned warehouse lighting was ominous to the gathered Villains, the large crowd taking up a lot of space.

“Could have been longer,” Joker laughed out. He frowned. “That wasn’t funny.”

“You’ve been off your game, clown,” Penguin agreed with a nod of his head. He eyed his henchmen as they mingled with Black Mask’s men. “I thought clowns were supposed to be funny.”

“Oh, I know something that’d be funny,” Joker spoke gingerly as he reached into his suit pocket.

“Before we draw blood,” Deathstroke chimed in, “can we get down to business?”

“TO DEFEAT THE HUNS!” Harley and Red Hood sung out suddenly. A few of the gathered Villains and low-lives eyed the helmet wearing anti-Hero.

“Why do we continue to let him join these meetings?” One of Two-Face’s men called.

“Cause I bring you Dick’s coffee and I’m steadily on my way to being Gotham’s main drug dealer,” Red Hood answered haughtily. “Scarecrow, I saw that. Try to spike those coffee dispensers again and I’ll shoot you.”

Scarecrow flashed his middle finger at the man.

“Ahem!” Harley slammed her hands down on the table. The gathered people focused their attention on her. “Thank you. So, let’s begin. Anyone have any news for this month’s gathering? We’ve got two months worth to catch up on.”

“Fawcett City finally got the memo not to cause trouble in the cafe,” The Riddler stated into the silence.

“Great,” Ivy spoke without any sarcasm.

“The Flash is going to be going overseas for a month for some sort of day-job training,” Gorilla
Grodd coughed. “So we’ll have to make sure Dick isn’t feeling lonely without his best friend.”

The Villains nodded seriously.

Red Hood just eyed the banner hanging up behind Harley.

**DICK GRAYSON BARISTA PROTECTION MEETING IN PROGRESS**

He snapped a picture and send it to the Batfam group chat.

Chapter End Notes

Back into the crack

If y'all want any specific scenes or characters in the fic, don't be afraid to ask! I know I can tend to neglect certain characters with how many I have written in lol
Chapter Notes

I like to call this chapter 'YE BOI'

edit: as of 10/07/2019 all mention of Birdflash has been removed

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*Red_Hood has added [America-Explain.jpeg] to BatFamHOLLA*

*Spoiler_No_Birdies: I*

*Spoiler_No_Birdies: wut*

*Robin: Where are you?*

*Robin: What is that banner?*

*Daddy!Bats: Jason. Stop destroying your trackers*

*Third_Eye: He’s currently in the abandoned fishing dock where Mr. Freeze froze the lack a few months back :)*

*Third_Eye: you better be recording their convos because oh my lord*

*COFFEE: What is this*

*COFFEE: oh hey, I passed my macromolecules exam*
Robin: I could have had my PhD in Geology when I was 7.

COFFEE: did I ask???

Spoiler_No_Birdies: ohhhhh congrats!

Shush_Baby: congrats! Cake to celebrate! :)

Shush_Baby: what do these meetings consist of?

Red_Hood: mostly talking about Dick

Spoiler_No_Birdies: (͡° ͜ʖ ͡°) dick huh

COFFEE: skdjwknjekwqnfj

Robin: I don’t understand that face. Explain.

A_Cup_A_Day has sent an attachment [cutie.jpeg]

A_Cup_A_Day: guys look at Harley’s daughter!! She’s so cute!

Third_Eye: why are you at their apartment???

Third_Eye: omg is she cuddling Barbatos? DICK THAT’S A DEMON

A_Cup_A_Day: he’s mostly harmless
Daddy!Bats: *mostly*

_A_Cup_A_Day_: they needed a babysitter. It was their weekend together but something came up so I’m watching Lucy

_A_Cup_A_Day_: what’s that picture you sent, Jay? Is it about me?

_AND_BATS_SAID_LET_THERE_BE_LIGHT_: *insert longest ‘ye boi’ here*

_AND_BATS_SAID_LET_THERE_BE_LIGHT_: wow I came at the best possible time. Btw The Mad Hatter is causing a scene downtown. Little help?

_Third_Eye has booted everyone besides [A_Cup_A_Day] from BatFamHOLLA_

Dick looked up as his window slid open. Calvin slipped inside, soundless as he planted his feet on the floorboards.

“Howdy,” Calvin Rose greeted as he gave a two-finger salute. A backpack was slung over his chest. “Got room for one?”

“Sure.” Dick blinked as he tilted his head to the side. “Finally comfortable?”

“Eh.” Calvin dropped his backpack, stretching his arms over his head. “So.Cafe, huh? Who’d have thought a Talon could do anything but kill.”

“Crazy, isn’t it?” Dick smiled faintly. Barbatos eyed the two before rolling his eyes, bouncing along the coffee table. “Please, make yourself comfortable. Do you want the bed or couch?”
“We don’t sleep,” Calvin pointed out, bemused. “Buuuut couch. You got more blankets? Gotham City is chillier than the Court.” He made a show of shivering. Dick threw a quilt at him. He was quick to wrap it around himself.

“You want some coffee?” Dick moved to his kitchenette. Calvin wavered, looking wary.

“Can we hold it down?” His eyes slid over the small corner kitchen and frowned. “Is that even possible for us?”

“It is, surprisingly enough. You’ll like it.” Calvin settled down on the couch, watching Dick move. He studied the man’s hands as he worked, the fingers nimble and precise in measuring out the coffee grounds and pouring the hot water into the french press.

Soon the air was wafting with the rich aroma of caffeine. Calvin held his hands out for the offered mug and brought it close, sniffing it.

Dick perched down on the opposite end of the couch, his own mug in hand. He watched Calvin with a gentle smile, patient and anticipating the man’s reaction.

The other Talon sipped at the liquid with reluctance, expecting the immediate rejection. Instead, the bitter tange lingered on his tongue as it slid down his throat, warming him from the inside out. He blinked, eyes widening.

“Oh.” Calvin stared at the move, eyes lifting to Dick. “Oh.”

“Right?” Dick gave a faint chuckle. “It’s nice, isn’t it?”

“Oh, definitely,” Calvin agreed and took a gulp.

Barbatos kept his mouth shut about the guest’s tears.
It was something he noticed as the days passed. At first, he had been too numb from his retrieval from the Court to notice, but now that he’d situated a bit more, it’d become prominent.

Whenever he looked at the Joker, he felt that stir in his chest. That twinge, that fuzzy feeling, that made him want to take his knives and turn the clown into a human jack-o-lantern. Whenever he looked at the man, he saw a target, a head, for him to hunt.

He hadn’t felt like this since that day in the graveyard. He hadn’t felt like this in years, only moments before he’d been Ordered not to kill the Joker.

He’d been reprogrammed, essentially. Reprogrammed with his previous Orders wiped clean. He’d realized this after finding a knife in hand and ready to slit the Joker’s unsuspecting throat. It’d be so easy to. Get behind him, hand him a coffee, and sink the tip into his jugular before he had time to say ‘thanks chum’.

He knew it’d be so easy. He had no emotions for it but - but - but

He couldn’t.

He wanted to. God, did he want to. For his Owlet. For Jason, who felt the world had betrayed him and his existence had been singled down into nothing more than a speck in someone’s memory.

But he couldn’t.

“Owlet!”

“CATS WEARING MITTENS! Dick!” Jason scrambled, trying to cover himself. His hair stuck to his face, water droplets trickling down his scarred flesh. “Yo, don’t just walk in on a man showering!”

“I can kill the Joker!” He barely batted an eyelash as Jason’s naked form, almost mechanical as he
grabbed the younger man’s bed sheets over his ratty mattress. He mentally clicked his tongue. The family needed better safe-houses. He wrapped Jason up in the sheets, herding him towards his bed.

“Dick - wait - what?” Jason plopped down on his bed, huddling closer to try and save himself some decency. Despite their years together (and his reputation), Jason didn't really feel comfortable showing off his nude form to people. The autopsy scars kinda were a turn off to, well, everyone.

“The Joker. I can kill him.” There was something smoldering and dark in his eyes, hidden under the deep blue. He leaned closer to Jason, expression blank. “I can kill him for you.”

“I can kill him too.” Jason reeled back. “Wait, but the Order-”

“Was erased along with all of my progress,” Dick dismissed. “Want me to kill the Joker? For you?” His hands flexed and Jason could only describe his tone as breathless.

“What?” A few years ago and Jason would have leapt at the chance for the clown’s death. A few months ago and the same. A few days, a few minutes. But in that single moment, seeing Dick act almost *drunk* at the prospect of ultimately slaughtering one of his well-known and long-term customers?

It felt weird. Bizarre.

“No.” Jason looked as startled as Dick by his sudden answer. “No. I- I want to be the one to kill him.” Because no one was going to avenge Jason but himself. Like how Dick wanted to slaughter the entire Parliament, Jason wanted to be the one to send Joker to Hell.

“Oh.” Dick’s face shuttered and fell. “Oh. Sorry.” Dick brushed his wet backs back, keeping his palm pressed against Jason’s forehead. “Are you sure, Owlet?”

“Yeah.” No. “I am.” He wanted the clown dead and even if he wanted to pull the trigger, he still couldn’t. He couldn’t explain it but any time he had the chance, something stopped him. “I’m sure.”

*Kill him for me, please.* Jason doesn't vocalize it.
“Okay.” Dick dropped his hand. “Sorry for walking in on you in the shower. I’ll leave you to change.” He moved off the bed. Jason reached a hand out to stop him but let it drop at the last minute. He stayed huddled in the sheets, staring at the flooring.

“Ah fuck, I left the water running!” Jason scrambled out of the sheets.

“So.” Bruce ran a hand through his hair. “When were you gonna tell me that your employee, Carrie Kelley, was running around in a costume and mask at night?”

“When you ran into her,” Dick responded honestly and smiled sheepishly when his father figure leveled him with an amused look. “Sorry.”

“... So. What does she go by?” Bruce leaned back in his chair, looking older than usual. “There are too many masked people now-a-days.”

“I think she said her name was Mocking Bird? Hence the mimicking of Robin’s outfit,” Dick explained and shifted his footing. “Hey Bruce, can I tell you something?”

“What?” The exhaustion ebbed away to curiosity and he shifted to get more comfortable in his recliner. Dick rested his hip against the desk across from the man and fidgeted with his hands.

“I was, for all senses and purposes, rebooted by the Court. The - the Parliament, when I taken back.”

“Yes.” Bruce looked more hesitant than anything, the lines of his face becoming more defined. “We’re going through their files and research to look for a permanent cure to whatever was done to you. It’s just—”

“My Orders were erased.”

Bruce felt the air escape him.
“Your Orders?”

Yellow eyes flashed and Dick looked away.

“I - I can’t really be around the cafe right now. Not with the Joker galavanting around like he owns the world.”

Bruce’s eyes went wide.

“I want to, so badly. I want to kill him. For Jason. For my Owlet. But- but I don’t want to.” The confession was whispered softly. “I - killing is so easy for me. It’s as natural for me as breathing is for a normal person. But - but I don’t want to.”

Dick raised his hands to his face. They were trembling.

“I want to kill him though. So badly. God, so, so badly. I want to tear his throat open and string his intestines about the cafe like light bulbs. I want to smash his skull open and splatter his organs across the air like confetti. I want to shred him to ribbons. I want him to suffer as my Owlet has suffered.” He closed his eyes. “I want to so badly.”

“Don’t kill the Joker, Dick.” Bruce raised to his feet. “Please, don’t.” It wasn’t an Order but Dick’s shoulders slumped as if they were. He exhaled a breath.

“I’m sorry.” Dick bowed his head. Bruce walked around his desk and planted a hand on the back of the man’s neck, drawing him into a loose hug.

“Don’t be. I’m proud.” Bruce held him tenderly.

Outside of the door to the Den, Jason slipped away from the wall as silently as possible.
“Hi Catherine,” Dick greeted as the door to the cafe chimed.

“Hello Mr. Grayson,” a teen greeted as she plopped her heavy backpack down on a booth table. “Did you get a new employee?” She eyed Calvin with sparkling eyes. “He’s pretty.”

“He is, isn’t he?” Dick beamed. Morgan and Ketti stared at him, blank-faced, before snorting at Calvin’s pinking ears.

“How was your final exams?” Dick asked as he began to make a Starfire. Adding strawberry syrup to a cup of ice and carbonated sparkling water, he stirred in half-and-half. Topping it off with whipped cream, he handed the Italian Club Soda over to the girl.

“Good! Oh, I’ve been practicing my magic!” Catherine beamed brightly as she scrambled for her spell book. “I’ve been asking Klarion for pointers. I’ve gotten my summoning spell down!”

“Good for you! Careful though. If Zatanna hears how strong you’re getting, either her or Dr. Fate are going to come knocking.” It was said teasingly but Catherine only laughed nervously in response.

“Hiya Cat!” Harley and Catwoman plopped down on either side of the witch. “How did ya tests go?”

“I passed my exams! I think, anyways.” The girl deflated. “Hey Mr. Grayson, can I practice a summoning spell on you?”

The cafe patrons looked over in curiosity. Nightingale and Red Hood looked up in alarm, dropping their UNO cards.

“Sure!” Dick untied his apron, folding it neatly.

“Uuh Boss, I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Morgan shared a look with Ketti. “Boss, don’t do it.”
“It’s fine. Catherine needs to practice her magic, doesn’t she?” Dick adjusted his uniform hat atop his head. “Go ahead, Catherine.”

Catherine nodded and raised her hands.

“No, no, no, no!” Red Hood scrambled up from the table, rushing towards them. “Stop!”

The teen’s eyes flashed black and in a burst of light, Dick and Red Hood were gone.

Nightingale gasped, long and drawn out. “Oh my god, you killed them.”

Catherine was pale, gawking at the empty space the two had been. “I WAS TRYING TO SUMMON A STUFFED TEDDY BEAR FOR HIM!”

“How is that a teddy bear?!” Harley screamed.

Deathstroke flipped a table with a roar.

“YOU IDIOT!”

Dick blinked. Red Hood was shaking him by the shoulders, helmet almost clocking him in the face. “YOU DON’T JUST SAY YES TO PEOPLE CASTING MAGIC ON YOU!”

“Owlet.” Dick’s eyes swept around their surroundings, his body tensing. “Stop.” Red Hood stopped short and finally seemed to notice that their location had changed.

“What the fuck?” It sounded like Red Hood, looked like Red Hood, and had two guns pointed at them. “Am I the only one seeing this?”
“No you are not.” Black spandex with blue stripes racing from the ring and middle fingers up to shape a thick V across the chest. Black domino mask, escrima sticks strapped to their thighs.

Nightwing studied the two, Robin, a red and black masked vigilante behind him, and Batman not far behind.

“Oh my god.” Jason tightened his grip on Dick’s shoulders. “Oh my god, you bitch.”

“In my defense,” Dick’s hand slid to Jason’s waist, feeling for the man’s hidden guns and knives, “I thought she was summoning something, not the other way around.” He was subtle in stealing the knives, moving them to his body without the slightest bit of movement. Though, judging by Robin's startled expression, the child caught it.

"Hi," Dick greeted, still close to Jason. "I'm Dick."

Nightwing made a wheezing noise.

Chapter End Notes

Catherine is a OC. She'll probs be only ever written one more time and then never again lmao

Sorry if this chapter is kinda all over the place. I'm sleepy and not really too worried atm about it being a smooth chapter =v=

hahahaha ready for the next arc? TOLD YA I HAD A LOT OF STUFF PLANNED
While Dick entertained their unexpected guests (or was it the other way around?), Jason surveyed the area. They were on a rooftop. One of Gotham’s, judging by the glowing WE building a few yards away. They must have dropped in on the family patrolling.

Though, judging by the tense body language between the other Red Hood and the caped birds and bat, it looked like something had been about to go down.

Huh. Jason squinted at his counterpart, eyeing the other masked man’s body. His costume was different. Darker. Edgier.

Wow, why couldn’t Jason have had a costume with a black leather jacket instead of this stupid brown one?

Oh right, cause Dick had picked it and between the one he wore and a neon green one, he’d settled for his current attire.

Speaking of Dick…

Jason’s eyes slid to Nightwing. And it was Nightwing. He looked younger. Slimmer. More flexible. His body was like an acrobat’s. Huh. So this was how he was supposed to look? He was shorter than Jason’s Dick, making the other Red Hood the tallest of the two despite being younger.

His Dick had to have his adult body be mirrored off of what both Jason’s and Bruce’s looked like, because they had no idea how Dick would have been had he been alive. But to see it… To actually see what proper growth in a living, breathing body would do…
Without really thinking about it, he raised his cellphone up and snapped a picture of Nightwing. Thank god his phone still worked, even if it kept flashing ‘no service’.

“What the fuck?” The other Red Hood blurted while Nightwing jumped at the sound of the camera shutter going off. Dick sighed against him.

“Why did you do that?” Dick leaned back, letting his arms drop, trying to appear casual. If Jason hadn’t felt his knives being stolen off his body, he’d have thought the man was innocent. “Apologize.”

“Look at ‘em!” Jason made a vague hand gesture at Nightwing. “Jesus, can that spandex be any tighter?”


“Look at ‘em though!” Jason made more vague hand gestures. “I have to get references for Dad!” Dick paused, pursing his lips. He tilted his head to the side, humming thoughtfully.

“You should have asked permission though.” He wound an arm around Jason’s waist, twirling them out of the way of a thrown shuriken. Jason snorted against his shoulder, fingers loose around the triggers of his guns.

“Robin!” Nightwing chided out sternly. “Stand down!”

“They’re obviously imposters!” Robin’s eyes were narrowed behind his mask. Inwardly, Dick mused over the difference in this Robin’s tone. “That man in the coffee hat-” the child fell silent. “What is that hat?”

“It’s my hat!” Dick beamed as he released Jason. He pointed at it. “Cass and Tim helped me make the logo for my cafe!”

Silence.

“...Y-your cafe?” The one in the red and black cowl asked. It sounded like Tim. Dick’s eyes
pierced him. His chest was decorated with a RR. Wonder what is stood for? “What cafe?”

“My cafe! Big Dick’s Cafe!” Nightwing wheezed again. “Cass helped me pick the name!”

“It was hilarious.” Jason snickered. “Did you ever catch sight of Alf’s face? Priceless.”

“Why a cafe?” The other Tim asked, sounding both parts amused and concerned. “Um. I’m assuming you guys are from another universe? Wouldn’t be the first time this has happened.”

“Red Robin, behave,” Batman growled. Dick’s eyebrows went up. The man’s growl was heartless and controlling, demanding respect and obedience. His Bruce couldn’t even dream of sounding like that on a bad day when the Joker was about to blow up a hospital. He just didn't have it in him to sound so authorize over his children.

Besides, they usually behaved with a well appointed look from Dick, so Alfred and Bruce never felt the need to intervene.

“Damn, someone's got a stick up their-”

“Shush, Owlet.” Dick pushed him away by his helmet and straightened out his black T-shirt. He squinted at Tim. “So you’re called Red Robin?”

“Uh.” Red Robin looked over at Batman for a moment. “Yeah? What - what is your Red Robin called?”

“Nightingale,” Jason responded for Dick, who had turned his attention to Nightwing.

So this was who Wally had been best friends with. He looked at every part. His appearance just screamed life. Screamed freedom. His skin was dark, darker than what Dick wore in his illusionary form. At least, in terms of shades of grey. He wondered what his eyes looked like. Wally always said his shade was brighter. His body was slender, muscles stacked along his arms, chest, and thighs to show where he spent a priority of his time working out. A gymnast's body. An acrobat’s. If Dick hadn’t been murdered, would his body have looked like that?
Short, slender, and vibrating with health and life?

Weight along his shoulder wiggled and he wasn’t surprised when Batman and his ragtag team of bruisers tensed.

“Why do you do the things you do?” Barbatos asked from his shoulder, smacking him with a tiny wing. “Release my powers and I will take you back to your proper universe.”

“Not a chance, Fat-Bat,” Jason spoke as he nudged at the round ball with the muzzle of his gun. “You’ll just try to bring death and destruction down upon us all or some shit.”

“Language,” Dick chided and sighed, batting away Jason’s poking gun. “It’s fine, Barbatos. I trust Catherine to get us back home.”

“Do you really?” Jason sounded flabbergasted. “Dude, she sent us here.”

“She’s training!” Dick tried to defend. “She can make mistakes.”

“She could have killed you!” Jason flailed his arms. “Permanent death, Dick!”

“If only,” Dick sighed wistfully, pretending he didn’t notice the others listening in carefully. Jason made a whine and shoved at him.

“Don’t joke about that, asshole! Only one of us can make death jokes and guess what, it’s me!” Jason turned to face the bats. “So. We’re from another universe, apparently. Can you help a brother-from-another-world out?”

“Why is he so much nicer?” Red Robin whispered loudly to Nightwing, making their Red Hood twitch. “Next their demon spawn is gonna be all smiles and cuddles.”

“Say that again, Drake! I’ll add your heart to missing organs!” Robin seethed darkly, hands clenching into fists.
“He has missing organs?”

Jason stiffened from in front of Dick. The tone was frosty. Positively ice cold.


“Yes. Lucky him.” Jason stole a glance at Dick. He sounded upset, but the helmet wearing man knew it wasn’t for this Red Robin. It was for his Owlet, and the idea of something like that befalling him. He was upset at the prospect of his Owlet being wounded where he couldn’t protect him.

“You still became Joker’s personal pinata?” Red Hood asked finally, facing Jason. He tried to appear intimidating. He reeked of insecurities. “Must not have if you still calling B ‘dad’.”

Jason blinked behind his helmet. He doesn’t call him Dad? Did this universe not have as good of a relationship as Jason did with Bruce? Then again, if Dick hadn’t been there… If he hadn’t shot Dick in the head…

“Get up!”

He shook his head to rid himself of the memories. “I was. Blown up and all. Woke up in a coffin six feet under. It wasn’t pretty.” Red Hood nodded in understanding. Not quite sympathy, but it was close.

“Is your Batman okay with killing then?” Red Hood tilted his head to the side, fingers never relaxing along his guns. “Since you have such a perfect relationship.” There was venom in his words, hatred that Jason couldn’t tell if was directed at himself or at Batman.

“Oh no, he hates it. Thinks of it as his ultimate failure and all that.” Jason turned to Dick. “Uh. Sorry.”

“It’s okay Owlet, I know what you mean.” Dick’s smile didn't reach his eyes. They slid back to Nightwing. “So, Nightwing, was it?” He moved forward. All at once, the Bats were on guard. “How old are you? I’m going to be 27 this year.” He paused, mentally counting. Looking to Jason for confirmation on his age, the younger man nodded.
“Oh.” Nightwing blinked. “I’m 21. Your universe must be a few years ahead?” He hummed out in thought. “Hey B-”

“I’ve already told Agent A to expect two more guests. Patrol has been quiet tonight. Let’s call it an early one.” Batman turned, his cape billowing behind him. “Just because you wear their faces doesn’t mean I trust you.”

“There he is,” Red Hood grumbled and took a step back. “Well, this has been fun. Bye bitches!” He did a backflip off the ledge of the building, disappearing into the night.

“Drama queen,” Jason grumbled to Dick, who snorted.

“Shush.”

“So is no one going to ask about the talking bat on Dick’s shoulder?” Red Robin questioned as they began to follow after Batman. “Anyone?”

“His name is Barbatos,” Dick responded as the bat slipped away into dust, receding into his soul, “and he’s like my pet.”

“TT. What a weak pet,” Robin called. Dick’s lips twitched downwards momentarily. He pushed away his thoughts and jumped off the building, chasing after the Bats.

Alfred doesn’t look surprised when they showed up. Bruce must have informed him of the situation.

“Master Jason,” Alfred spoke with a sweep over the man’s outfit, “and Master Richard, I presume?”

“Dick,” Dick responded as Jason tugged off his helmet, running a hand through his sweat-flattened
hair. “I haven’t been called Richard since I was six!” He meant it as a joke but all at once, the Bats were looking at him.

“Six?” Nightwing’s voice sounded funny. “Why six?”

“How old were you when your parents died?” Dick’s face was blank immediately, gears turning in his mind. From Wally’s recounts and memories, his Robin had been...nine? Ten? When he’d made his debut as a caped crime-fighter so-

“... Nine. Were - were you six?” Nightwing’s voice was strangled. “I don’t even remember speaking perfect English at that age!”

Jason looked between them, eyebrows creasing. He moved closer to Dick, touching his hand. Bruce’s and Robin’s eyes zeroed in on the touch.

“Hey, maybe don’t reveal your past to them? You know how much B hates you oversharing.” Dick pursed his lips together before nodding, dropping the subject.

“... Awkward.” Red Robin shed his cowl, showing a more sleep-deprived Tim than Dick would ever let happen. The Talon squished down the urge to bodily carry the teen to a bed and force sleep down his throat. This wasn’t his Owlet. “Hey Alfred, is there anything to snack on? I’m seeing doubles.”

“... Oh man,” Jason snorted out. “He sucks at jokes.”

“Shut up!” Tim’s cheeks burned pink. “I’m trying to lighten the mood, asshole!”

“Oh yeah, short-stack? Red Robin called, they wanna make you their mascot! Can you say yum?” He stilled and looked to Dick, as if expecting something. Dick blinked and tilted his head to the side. “Um. Sorry.”

“He apologizes?!” Tim cried out in awe.

“What for, Jay?” Dick asked sweetly, teeth poking through his smile.
“... Fighting?” He rubbed at his neck. Dick just nodded, content.

Nightwing, without his mask, looked so healthy and alive. He stared at Dick in awe. His eyes were more rounded, wide and sparkling. The shade of grey was lighter than Dick’s own. “You got to teach me your secret ways. I take twice as long to get them to not stab each other.”


“Once?” Tim sounded jealous. “What did you do to him?”

Dick smirked, raising a finger to his lips in a ‘secret’ gesture.

Bruce, dressed in soft PJs, coughed to get their attention. “Coffee and tea upstairs. Undress and meet in the dining hall.” He turned and left. Dick had no doubt that the entire Cave was bugged with cameras and recording devices. He had to be on his best behavior. They were in enemy territory.

Because this was not his Bruce. This was not his Grandmaster. These were not his Owlets. These were strangers. Strangers with faces that were vaguely familiar. People with names he associated with others.

He followed the group up, tagging in the back. Positioned to where if need be, he could grab Jason out of harm’s way. He’d protect his Owlet. It did not matter if he was facing people with faces of those he loved.

His Owlet’s safety was first priority.

Coffee mugs, tea cups, and plates of various pastries were spread out along the dining table. Bruce took a seat at the head of the table, Alfred standing behind him attentively. Damian and Richard took opposite sides of the man and Tim sat beside Richard, as far away from Damian as possible.

After a pause, Jason took a spot near the end of the table, scooting closer to Dick when he sat down.
“Why are you so far away?” Richard whined out, frowning. “Sit closer! Dami won’t bite!” Damian hissed like a cat, picking up a danish.

“That has cheese in it!” Dick cried out, up in a flash. He snatched the pastry out of the child’s hand faster than he could process, panicked over the prospect of the child eating dairy products.

“...I know.” Damian eyed him weirdly. “I like cheese. Give it back to me, Imposter-Grayson.”

“You aren’t vegan?” Dick blinked, lost. “He isn’t vegan.” He looked to Jason for help. Jason shrugged his shoulder and shoved a cookie into his mouth.

“Your Damian is vegan?” Bruce took a sip of his coffee, looking interested. Dick knew it was fake. He faltered before handing the danish back to the child, taking his seat once more.

“Yes. I usually make a lot of his baked goods because of it.” He ran a hand through his hand, nearly knocking his hat off. “Alfred says I’m much more proficient with vegan cooking.”

The other Alfred raised an eyebrow and swept his gaze over the man, judging him. Dick took a sip of the coffee placed in front of his chair.

He bit back a hum.

The coffee tasted disgustingly bitter. Not like how he could taste the overpowering bitter tannins in coffee when he first learned to brew. Not like an extremely dark roast of coffee. No, this tasted more bitter - salty. More notable as a foreign substance that he never tasted in coffee. It left a burning sensation that disappeared in seconds.

His eyes slid over to Jason. His Owlet’s movements were beginning to drag, his eyes growing glossy.

Dick took another sip of his coffee, lips pressing thinly together. So, that’s how this Batman played. Untrustful and cold. He didn't even hesitate to drug their food and drinks.
Unluckily for him, he wasn’t expecting a Talon to be sitting at his table.

Dick took another sip. “This is a Guatemalan light roast, isn’t it?” He pulled his lips into a smile, baring his teeth. Jason’s head bobbed. He reached out, drawing the man’s body to slowly lean against him, lest he fall out of his chair. “If you add some macadamia nut syrup to it, it makes it sweet enough without adding any cream or sugar.”

“O-Oh.” Alfred looked mildly unsettled to have him talking about caffeine and the roast. Dick drained the last of his coffee and reached for Jason’s, his Owlet unconscious against his side.

Bruce stared at him unwaveringly. Dick met his gaze and took a long gulp of the dark liquid. Tim, Damian, and Richard were uncomfortably still, eyes bouncing between the two.

“Where’s Cassandra and Stephanie? Or Barbara?” Dick made a show of looking around the long table. “What about Duke?” He kept the rest of the siblings to himself - he didn’t know if this Bruce knew about his secret love children.

“Cassandra? Her and Stephanie live with Barbara,” Richard began slowly. “Duke should be asleep. He was grounded with a fever.”

Dick mentally purred. At least they took care of their own, still. It’d be a sin not to ground them when they were ill.

“Oh.” Dick drained the last of Jason’s coffee. “May I have more please?” His smile was pleasant, innocent.

His hand shot out, snagging a knife out of the air before it could embed into Jason’s eye.

“Damian!” Bruce snarled while Tim and Richard gawked at Dick. Damian scowled fiercely at the man.

“Who are you? Grayson would never have been able to catch that-”

“Hey!”
“-and you aren’t being affected by the drugs in your coffee!”

Silence.

“Oh, no, poison and narcotics don’t work on me.” Dick placed the knife down onto the table, fingers dancing over the handle. It was a very nice knife. Almost as nice as the ones he crafted for his own little Owlet. “And don’t compare me to your Nightwing. You’ll be sorely disappointed.”

Just like Wally.

“Now.” Dick stood from his chair, easing Jason into his arms. Thank the stars that his body was designed after the Owlet’s. If he was as slim and small as Nightwing, he’d fumble to carry the unconscious man, even with his enhanced strength. It was just awkward to navigate long limbs and bulky muscles. “You want to take us to the League, don’t you?”

“Why do you think that?” Bruce stood as well, his children following with tense movements. Dick laughed.

“Because even if we’re from different universes, I know Batman. He’s paranoid, cautious, and when something threatens his own, he does everything he can to neutralize it.” Dick pushed their chairs in with his foot, humming aloud as if they were about to go on a picnic. “Martian Manhunter can read minds and Superman and Wonder Woman are probably the best people to back you up if things go south. They can detain us quite easily.”

He looked to Jason’s slumbering face and his gaze softened. “But you don’t have to worry. Until you attack what’s mine, I’ll keep myself behaved.”

“Are you a dog?” Damian sneered and Dick gave a laugh, the sound like snow flurries settling onto their exposed flesh.

“No. More of a bird of prey, really.”
The moment the two had appeared on the rooftop in a flash of light, he’d been observing and planning. He watched how the other Red Hood was defensive of the other Dick, protective to a point of overbearing.

He noted the stronger build of the other Dick, how his body seemed to mimic a weird mix of both Bruce’s own bulk and Jason’s large frame. How his emotions didn’t meet his eyes. How his expressions were stilted, like a person mirroring what they saw.

He listened to their conversations, picking apart the hidden meanings behind their words. He listened to the fat bat thing speak, listen to them call it Barbatos.

Barbatos. The Bat God he created during his time traveling adventures. Did their Batman, if they were who they said they were, also deal with time travel? Hear the legends? This Dick didn't seem like he fought crime - their reaction to Nightwing proved it.

Batman had dealt with a lot of people pretending to be someone they weren’t. He’d dealt with a lot of imposters in his family. He knew what to look for.

His curiosity was high when he’d spotted the Wayne Tech on the Dick’s ear. It was a cloaking earring. Still in its early prototype phase in this universe, only able to make a person’s body mirror the surroundings to appear invisible. Why would this Dick need one? Maybe it had to do with why he wasn’t Nightwing in their universe?

His tolerance to drugs was unbelievable though. He expected the two to be wary of their surroundings, of the food and drinks given to them. But no. They’d jumped in with gusto, their guards lowered at the sight of familiar servings.

Did their universe’s Batman not teach them the importance of doubting everything? They acted without any doubt - without any hesitance.

Or maybe they did. Maybe this Red Hood, Jason, was letting his guard down. He’d looked to his Dick for a moment before reaching for a cookie. He was placing his trust and safety into his Dick’s hands. But why? What made him feel like he could do that?

Seeing the man unaffected by the narcotics he’d had Alfred lace in their food, he understood. The man had noticed the drugs. His tightening jaw muscles had signalled he had. But he kept drinking
his coffee. He hadn’t touched his food, which was a safe choice, but his show of finishing both their drinks showed his assertion of dominance in this situation.

He was challenging Batman. Clearing broadcasting that he wasn’t going to fall for any of his tricks, play any of his games, and the moment the Bats stepped out of line, he would too.

Just what was their universe, to where this Dick acted like this?

Because he wasn’t a civilian. He wasn’t a soldier.

He was a monster.

The trip to the Watchtower was silent. Richard kept a hand on Damian’s shoulder, keeping him in place. Tim eyed the child warily, wondering if he was going to pounce their uninvited guests.

Dick, still cradling an unconscious Jason, let himself be surrounded on all sides by the Bats. It wasn’t like they could do anything to him, anyways. But it was the thought they had the upper hand that amused him.

They thought he was dangerous. He could read it in their body language. They had no idea.

They stepped out of the Zeta Tube, the computer’s voice introducing them. Dick mentally snorted at the almost confused tone the robotic voice had when saying, “Guests”. Like they never had guests.

Or maybe they didn't. After the whole Wally fiasco, the Heroes had discovered Dick’s coffee delivery service and had made good use to it, always calling him to the nearest Tube to take them their desired drinks.

Batman led them through the metal hallways and through a large door.
Zatanna looked up, looking alarmed at their entrance. The Flash, who looked to be Barry Allen by his body build, turned from Wonder Woman and Superman.

Superman’s eyes went wide and his mouth opened and closed.

“What are you doing here?” Wonder Woman asked, eyes moving to Dick and Jason. “Oh. Again?”

“Don’t.” Tim shook his head when Dick tilted his head to the side. “It’s a long story.”

“You’re the one I’ve been feeling!” Zatanna cried out just as Superman’s expression hardened. “Why do you have my magic on you?”

“He doesn’t have a heartbeat.” Superman’s fists tightened at his side. “What are you?”

The Heroes turned to Dick, who shrugged his shoulders, adjusting Jason in his arms.

“Hi, I’m Dick.” His eyes flashed yellow. “I guess you could call me a zombie?”

Nightwing wheezed, sounding like he inhaled a squeaker toy.

Chapter End Notes

Our Dick will be called Dick. Kinda-not-Canon Dick will be called Richard.

I'm saying this isn't the canon universe because 1, Ric Grayson who? 2, Because of Wally, this universe is gonna be different. 3, I'm not up to date at all with Rebirth (doesn't stop me from hating Ric) so idk what's what when it comes to canon events. So it's kinda canon, kinda not lolololol

This is gonna be a bumpy Arc. Buckle up please!
Dick eyed Nightwing with barely constructed concern. “Do you need to use an inhaler? You sound kinda wheezy.”

“Wheezy, ” Tim sniggered out, trying to hide behind Batman. Despite the growing tension, he couldn’t help but find the entire situation hilarious.

“What do you mean, zombie?” Batman growled out. Dick’s eyes flickered to him for a moment before sliding away dismissively. He jolted Jason in his arms.

“Time to move, Owlet. Your breathing changed, along with your heart-rate. You’re conscious.” Jason groaned, sounding more like a moody teen than a drugged, muddled-minded man, and wiggled out of Dick’s arms.

“You can hear his heartbeat?” Superman blinked, eyes wide. “You aren’t human.”

“Hey!” Jason snapped out, pointing a gun at the alien. They hadn’t seen him draw it. “Dick’s human, fuckwad! Don’t say that again!” He was like a cat, fur standing on end and metaphorical ears curved back.

“Don’t swear at Superman,” Dick chided. Jason bared his teeth at the bewildered alien, while Wonder Woman tried to hide a smile behind her hand. She liked this Jason look-alike. He had fire in his veins.

“What,” Batman growled out again, voice down-right acid, “do you mean, zombie?” Jason winced, knowing how much Bruce hated to repeat himself. Especially if he felt he wasn’t being taken seriously. One too many nights watching him and the Joker bicker like pre-schoolers let him know that this Batman was at his limit.
Of course, the tension only skyrocketed when Martian Manhunter made his way into the conference room. He paused, red eyes boring into the two intruders to their universe.

“Oh. Well.” The Martian moved closer to the two. “Hello.”

“Hi,” Dick waved. Jason clicked the safety back on his gun, lowering his arm as he squinted at the alien.

“You’ve seen our memories and thoughts,” the man spoke as he moved to stand in front of Dick. “Tell them to calm their tits.”

“My other self has much patience with you,” J’onn stated simply before turning to the gathered Masks and Supers. “They’re friends, not enemies.”

“He said he was a zombie!” Tim argued. “How is that not bad!!”

“Not his control,” J’onn countered and then frowned at Dick. “No, I really don’t think sharing your memories is the best idea at the moment.”

“It’s worth a try,” Dick smiled with a shrug. “I can show them instead?” He turned to Zatanna, who was eyeing him. “You probably want to inspect my earring anyways.”

“So that is the source,” she whispered to herself. “What about that soul magic I sense? I can feel other magic as well on you.”

“It’s a long story.” Dick easily slipped around Jason, who was glaring at the Bats. He lifted a hand to his earring. “It involves a demons.”

“I am not a demon!” Barbatos burst forth from Dick’s shadow, little wigs flapping. “I am the Dragon! I am a God! I am-”

“SO CUTE!” Zatanna scooped up the little demon ball, cooing with hearts in her eyes. “Oh my
“I will devour your flesh and subject your soul to eternal nightmares!” Barbatos threatened. His voice cracked from how squeaky it was.

“Oh you are just precious!” Zatanna conjured a candy. “Here you go, cutie.”

“.... You will make a good minion.” Barbatos opened his mouth, his face shrinking from how wide he opened.

“What the hell?” Robin whispered to Nightwing, who just shook his head, lost. Dick smiled in bemusement at the Sorceress before raising his hands to his earring.

“I’m a zombie,” Dick finally responded to Batman, who’s visible lower half was red with fury at being ignored for so long. “I don’t have a beating heart and or moving blood.” He unclasped the jewelry and Jason looked down at the ground with a scowl as the man’s form was instantly replaced with his Talon’s form.

“You’re a Talon,” Batman deduced with narrowed whites of his cowl, jaw tightening. The ashy flesh, black veins, and yellow eyes told him enough. “You’re with the Parliament?”

Nightwing’s jaw was hanging open, eyes wide behind his mask. Beside him, Robin and Red Robin were as shocked. They’re known that their Dick was supposed to be a Talon and wondered, in the deepest darkest parts of their heart, if this was what would have happened in Batman hadn’t intervened in his fate.

“As if,” Jason snarled low, face twisting into unforgiving rage. “They won’t get him ever again.” Dick childishly kicked at the metal flooring, frowning as he noticed that he was shorter than the other Robin. It made his heart clench, to be faced with the proof that his own youngest Owlet would soon outgrow him.

“The Parliament?” Nightwing finally whispered. “You’re… a Talon? But… But I’m working as their Talon too. And - and I don’t look like that. Like you. You’re… You look like when I was 12.”

“15, actually.” Dick’s yellow eyes glimpsed at the tense League members, pity coloring Wonder Woman’s and Superman’s features. His gaze sharpened on Nightwing. “What do you mean you are
a Talon? You do not feel like a Talon. You do not look like a Talon. You do not move like a Talon.” Jason planted a grounding hand on his bony shoulder. “You are not a Talon.”

“Ah, well,” Nightwing tried to correct, “I mean that I’m working for them. They - they, uh, tried to blackmail me with Dami’s wellbeing. I got it all fixed but am kinda...acting like a spy?” He rubbed at his neck. “I’m just kinda their lapdog right now-”

“You aren’t a Talon,” Dick repeated. “They just want you to think so.” Inside, his mind was buzzing. This Nightwing, alive and healthy and growing normally, sacrificed himself to the Court? He could understand the selflessness to protect Damian - he’d kill himself before allowing his Owlets, Pups, or Kittens any harm. But for him to act as if it wasn’t something serious…

But maybe it wasn’t. Maybe the Court wasn’t as much of a boogeyman in this universe as they were in Dick’s. Nightwing had no reason to fear their existence, to worry at every possible corner that they were there, perched, waiting to swoop in and carry off their prey.

It still made him uncomfortable, though. To have this man compare himself to Dick and act confused at their differences.

“So you… you’re… stuck? As a 15 year old?” Red Robin observed Dick. “Can’t you be fixed? I doubt your Batman can’t figure out a cure.”

“He’s working on it,” Jason spat venomously. “He ain’t stupid! It’s just a lengthy process.” His shoulders hunched up in defense. “Before we brought down the Court- Parliament - whatever, he had to make a homemade cure from trial and error. It… It’s a lengthy process.”

“Amongst over things,” J’onn acknowledged. Dick’s eyes crinkled up in amusement as he glanced to him. Zatanna, still cuddling Barbatos, hummed in thought.

“So this soul magic is connecting this cutie to you. He also has a seal on him. I take it it’s a long story too?”

“Possession and threats of world-destruction - the usual,” Jason spoke for Dick, moving to wrap an arm around his shoulder. “So, Dick’s a Talon. Now that that’s out of the way, can we please try to figure out a way to get home?”
Dick nodded solemnly. “I need to pay the girls for overtime.”

“... What?” Barry finally spoke out, the only word he’d been able to utter since Batman stormed in. He felt so confused. And as someone who’d experienced the Speed Force and regularly defied science, that was saying something.

“I was unfit to join Batman, Bluejay, and Batgirl on patrol,” Dick explained patiently. “Or Nightingale or Robin or any of the others. So I worked on my hobbies and decided to open a cafe.” He looked vaguely smug. “It’s the best cafe in Gotham.”

“Try the world,” Jason bragged with a lopsided smirk. “Though we’re, like, 72% sure he’s drugging the caffeine with mood stabilizers.”

“I am not. That’s illegal and would bring my health inspection grade down.” Dick looked offended. “Just because Wilson and Dent are regulars doesn’t mean-”

“I am so lost,” Red Robin admitted softly. Robin, though he wouldn’t voice it, agreed.

“Enough.” Batman’s growl effectively silenced the two intruders. He stood there, the fabric of his gloves audible as he clenched them tightly into fists. “That’s enough. This is a serious matter-”

“As serious as a heartbeat,” Jason interrupted. Red Robin choked back a sudden bark of laughter.

Batman’s lips twitched downwards. “You are extremely different from our Red Hood.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Jason spoke with a bat of his eyes. “Now, again, can we try to get home? I can just see the riot forming as we fuck around.”

“My cafe,” Dick whispered in horror as he adjusted his earring. Nightwing and Robin jolted back at the sudden change. “Dad is probably so worried.”

“You call him ‘dad’ so fearlessly?” Robin’s eyes were slits of white. “How? He only has one birth child-”
Jason sucked in a breath. “Yikes. They must not know-”

“Shush, Owlet. Not now.” Dick shook his head. “Bruce-” a glance at the Leaguers “-unofficially adopted me, officially adopted Jason, Tim, Duke, and the girls.” Along with a few pending adoptions in the process for others, but Dick didn't think that’d be a good idea to bring up.

“Unofficially?” Nightwing sounded almost jealous. “He adopted you?”

“I don’t exist.” Dick smiled sadly. It looked so plastic. “The Owls erased everything about me - no birth certificate, no social security card, nothing.”

Batman’s eyes were narrowed again. His body language read… Remorse? Sadness? Pain? Why? He was not the Dick of this universe - or was he imprinting based on his parental emotions towards the Nightwing across from him?

“God that was a horrible day,” Jason grumbled before he huffed. “Okay. Seriously. Enough chit-chat, can we please-”

Nightwing vanished in a flash of black light before Jason could finish his sentence.

Superman’s jaw went slack while Red Robin flailed his arms around, emitting loud squeaking noises.

Bruce Wayne, Batman, Caped Crusader of the Night and Bruiser of the Bastards, was beside himself in worry.

It’s started with a call, as was becoming a recurring theme to his hellish parental panic attacks. Tim, who’d been at the cafe under his alias Nightingale, had called him - almost to the point of
tears. From what Bruce had gathered, his eldest (and stupidest) son had volunteered to let a mage-
in-training do a spell on him.

He hadn’t had to image what else could go wrong with that scenario. To add to the never-ending nightmare, Jason had thrown himself onto his brother the moment he’d begun glowing.

The two had vanished and Deathstroke was threatening an witch hunt.

It’d taken Batman 10 minutes to get down to the cafe on his Batwing. He landed it on top of the roof and scaled the fire escape. It was no longer a secret that he associated with Dick - and the fact his former partner had disappeared made reasonable sense for him to come so quickly.

He entered to find Catherine, the magic user, sobbing hysterically while Raven and Zatanna tried to soothe her. Tim was restraining Damian back, and how had the child gotten here before Batman when they’d both been at the manor? Harley and Ivy were just staring at where Batman assumed Dick had been, speechless. A few of the tables and booths were flipped, Deathstroke surrounded by the workers and being forced to chug down machines of coffee like he was doing a keg stand.

“What’s the situation?”

“Holy summoning magic, Batman!” Catherine sobbed out. “I tried to summon a teddy bear for Mr. Grayson and somehow ended up sending him and Mr. Red Hood somewhere else!”

Batman pinched the bridge of his mask, sighing. “Do you know where?” He looked to the two other magic users. “And why are you here?”

“I sensed my magic disappear from him when he was sent away,” Zatanna explained with a sheepish shrug. “Raven had the same thing happen. Since we used our magic to seal Barbatos and his earring…”

“I - I have a vague idea of where they are in my mind,” Catherine sniffled as she wiped at her face. “I - I can try to summon them back.”

“Well what are you waiting for?” The Riddler called from the gathering crowd around Deathstroke, who was beginning to look green at the coffee he was ingesting. “Do it!”
“Can it, Riddle-man!” Morgan snapped out, shoving another coffee pot under Deathstroke's trembling arms. "CHUG!"

Batman wisely decided he was not going to pretend to even begin to understand what was going on with that corner of the cafe.

“Okay.” Catherine tried to regulate her breathing. “Okay.” She held her hands out. Her eyes flashed black and the cafe erupted into a burst of light.

A bullet whizzed past Catherine’s ear and she shrieked, ducking behind Batman.

“Who the fuck?!” The voice was gruff, muffled, and when the light faded, Red Hood stood there with his guns pointed at them.

Only he looked different. Bulkier, a bit taller, and his costume was edgier than anything Dick would ever let them walk out of the house wearing.

“What the fuck?!” Red Hood whirled to pistol whip the person who planted a hand on his shoulder, only to stop short as Nightwing leaned against him, groaning.

“That was not fun,” Nightwing whined and lifted his head. The cafe’s occupants stared back. “Oh no.”

“Oh my god,” Zatanna wheezed out, eyes moving down Nightwing’s form. “How can he be even more perfect.”

Nightwing’s ears went pink and he was subtle in hiding behind Red Hood. Batman looked between the two before turning to Catherine, who was pale and eyeing them in horror.

“You brought back the wrong ones.”

“I’m so sorry!” She sobbed out. Tim barely managed to keep Damian in a choke-hold.
“I blame Batman,” Red Hood hissed lowly to Nightwing. He gave a wheezed chuckle.

Chapter End Notes

Hey y'all, just a reminder - I don't have a uploading schedule. I just kinda post whenever I finish writing. Just so you guys don't get disappointed when I don't update every week.

Anyways, hope you enjoyed this chapter! :) There will be more character interactions between our Bois and the Canon(?) characters next chapter.

:) Along with Canon(?) Bois meeting the Roasted universe. This is gonna be fun.
Raised by the *Once Greatest Detective In the World* (they all knew Tim was the Head-Honcho), it wasn’t surprising that they’d picked up on various skills. Deductive reasoning, intense information gathering, creating 10 contingency plans in the span of seconds for the other several plans they made at the drop of a hat.

Of course only one of them decided to use their gained clue-finding. Nightwing, ever the proud Golden Boy, took in the entire cafe and its patrons in five seconds. In five seconds, he noted that almost all of the main Rogue Gallery were in the establishment, participating in coffee chugging like frat boys at a college keg party. In five seconds, he noted how the Joker was shielding Harley and Ivy, a gun pointed at them.

In five seconds, he realized that they were in a cafe, surrounded by the worst of the worst, and Batman was staring at them with barely concealed disbelief.

Red Hood, on the other hand, was one to shoot first, sulk second. A bullet buried into Joker’s shoulder, effectively making the clown drop his weapon. Harley shrieked while Ivy shoved her into a booth. Batman’s cape fluttered as the man moved to shield the patrons, Robin and the mysterious masked teen behind him drawing their own weapons.

“Where the fuck are we?” Red Hood slid, almost subtly, in front of Nightwing as he pointed his guns at Batman. His fingers twitched, restraining himself from burying a bullet between the Joker’s eyes. Instead, he relished in the pained grunts the clown was emitting from the floor, clenching at his bullet wound. “What the fuck is going on?”

“I only meant to summon back Mr. Grayson and Mr. Red Hood,” a young teen sobbed out, voice cracking.

“You only did your best,” Nightingale tried to comfort as Robin eyed the two intruders. His eyes kept moving back to the blue and black suit that the other Grayson wore.
“Um.” Nightwing shifted his footing, his gaze taking in the expensive espresso machinery. “Let’s try to be rational here.” He forced down Red Hood’s guns. “We’re allies.”

“He shot at me!” Catherine cried out, pointing an accusing finger at Red Hood. “He shot Mr. Joker! In Mr. Grayson’s cafe! That’s against the rules!”

“Rules?” Nightwing muttered under his breath.

“Shoot first, ask questions later,” Red Hood spat, eyes narrowing on the unfamiliar suit the guy beside Batman was wearing. It sounded like the Replacement. Same size and body shape too. “The fuck you supposed to be?”

Because the Replacement would never be caught in such a costume - his cowl was half-masked, covering only his eyes, noses, and ears. It was black and stretched down his neck, branching out over a tight body-suit that was shoulderless and wired with various utility belts and a detachable bo staff. Along the black-clad thighs were blue kevlar, padding his outer thighs and knees.

It looked like something out of one of Nightwing’s wet dreams.

“Nightingale,” Tim answered after a beat. He tilted his head to the side, his uncovered locks of hair dangling in front of his white slits. “You don’t have one?”

“I have a lot of things,” Red Hood deadpanned. There was something in the kid’s voice - something lively and soft, and not broken, “and a fucking Nightingale ain’t one of them.”

“This is cool and all,” Harley spoke as she peeked out from the booth. Her eyes were taking in Nightwing’s spandex suit appreciatively. “But what about our Dickie?”

“Looks like this one-” Catherine winced “- pinged off their energies that were clinging to these two,” Zatanna explained as she jerked a thumb at the two. “So, until we can adjust their energies and I can get an actual location off the magic on Dick…”

“They’re stuck here,” Robin concluded as he moved to stand in front of his father. Batman’s cape swished as it fell along his shoulders, the man being cautious with the two intruders.
They were not his Dick or Jason. The air around them spoke heavily of trauma and angst that a teenager would only wish to experience. Their bodies were nimble and layered heavily with scars that were faints to the untrained eye.

These were strangers and he would not subject his family to the darkness that cloaked them like a second skin. Not that easily.

“So…” Nightwing was eyeing the cluster of goons, henchmen, and Deathstroke in the corner, “what now?”

“You’ll come back to the Batcave until we can get this figured out.” Batman raised a hand to his cowl. “Please relay that to the rest, Oracle.”

“You got it, B. So, tell me, is the rumored butt as glorious as Wally says it is?”

Tim choked, having heard through his ear piece. Robin raised his hand to his ear, deadpan as he answered, “Adequate.”

“This is your brother we’re talking about!” Batman pinched the bridge of his nose. Nightwing and Red Hood looked at him in alarm. “Into the Batwing. Now.” He pointed sternly at the exit and Nightingale laughed, tugging Robin with him. He turned to Morgan. “Close this place down until we get Dick back.”

“We can handle it,” Morgan argued. Deathstroke tossed back four shots of espresso and gagged. “... Okay, yeah, you're right.”

“What the fuck?” Red Hood whispered, lost. Nightwing shook his head. This entire scene felt like a fever dream.

“I’ll get them out,” Calvin called and then leaned back with a whistle. “I’ll have Aion close up the cat cafe.”

“He owns a cat cafe too?!” Nightwing cried out. “What even - I want to own a cat cafe!”
“You kinda missed that opportunity, Goldie,” Red Hood dryly answered, rolling his eyes under his helmet.

He felt weird. This Batman was soft. Too soft. Nothing like Bruce who nearly killed him with a bat-a-rang to the neck or broke his jaw more than once during a heated fight. He was more emotive, more vocal about what he was thinking and feeling. It was weird.

Batman was in their personal space in a second and Red Hood tensed, waiting for the manhandling that was inevitable. The Bat raised his hand and laid it on the red helmet, being almost unbelievably gentle.

“Let’s go.” He removed his hand and Red Hood could only watch, gobsmacked behind his helmet, as he used his other gloved hand to tuck one of his guns into his utility belt. Nightwing, catching the movement, confiscated the other one. The younger man scowled, not that anyone could see.

“Uh, is it okay to just leave them?” Nightwing gestured to Two-Face, The Riddler, Joker, Harley, Ivy - everyone. “They’re the bad guys!”

“The cafe is neutral territory. No fighting, no weapons, no issues. The owner isn’t here right now but the rules still stand. As long as they are in this cafe, they are not to be touched.” He looked at Joker. “More than already so.”

“What? No, that’s-” Red Hood lurched forward as Nightwing landed a sturdy kick to his butt. He stumbled, raising his middle finger to the man. “Bitch!”

“Move it. If Batman tells us to move, we move.” He shifted his footing. “Even if he doesn’t sound like our Batman.”

Bruce raised an eyebrow from under his cowl as Red Hood snorted, jumping over the counter and knocking a few metal stands of chips off the surface. “That’s true. He sounds like you when you wore the cowl.”

Mental pin in that comment because what?
Honestly, Batman thought he was going to have to haul Red Hood over his shoulder. The man looked like he’d rather want to shoot up the entire cafe than leave but by Nightwing’s body language, he knew he wouldn’t get the chance. He also didn't have his guns. So.

The ride back to the Cave was awkward and tense. Red Hood refused to take off his helmet and Nightwing was growing visibly uncomfortable with how intense Robin and Nightingale, wasn’t it? were staring at him. Batman just hoped the rest of his children wouldn’t act as embarrassingly towards their guests as his boys were.

When they got to the Cave and landed and parked, Batman led the two over to his Batcomputer. The two guests surveyed the Cave.

“Where’s the uniform memorial?” Red Hood spoke up, shoulders tense and voice almost a growl. His hands were clenched into fists. He looked around, seeing the skeleton T-rex, the Giant Penny, hell, even Joker’s usual props. But no glass cases of their various uniforms. Instead, some rainbow monstrosity of a Batsuit was in a metal box with a glass front.

What even?

“Where’s the gymnastics equipment?” Nightwing inquired as he looked at the various nets and beams installed along the ceiling. They were hidden, barely distinguishable over the dark shadows of the Cave, but the christmas lights strewn about added faint outlines to show what they were. “What’s with the weird catwalks?”

“My oldest,” Bruce sighed as he removed his cowl. The two stared. Hard. This Bruce didn't have the stress lines theirs did. This Bruce looked livelier, healthier, not as dark or gloomy. He looked tan, actually, like he actually made it a habit to leave the computer chair every once in a while. It was weird. “Nightwing, may I?” He held up a camera and gestured to the man’s body.

“What the fuck?” Red Hood jolted backwards, confusion and wariness obvious in his tone. “Are you a pervert?”

“What?” Bruce’s eyes went comically wide and it was just so weird. “No! I - I wanted the reference. Our Dick’s-”
“Body is different, right?” Nightwing carefully removed his mask, blinking back the tears that formed from the sensation of skin pinching and pulling. “His body kind of looks really bulky. I mean… Uh. His disguise.”

“What the fuck?” Red Hood repeated. He felt like he was going to be saying that a lot. What had he missed, skipping out on meeting those two intruders?

“Of course he’d show you,” a woman’s voice spoke from the top of the exit. They turned to see a cluster of people standing there. “He doesn’t understand the concept of secret identity.”

Richard’s eyes went wide as Cass carried Barbara down the stairs, Stephanie behind her while toting her folded wheelchair. The two situated Barbara while Duke awkward hung in the back.

“You’re still in a wheelchair?” Red Hood tilted his head to the side. “Huh. Don’t have the technology to fix yourself up?”

“Nothing’s wrong with me to be fixed,” Barbara spoke with a smile. “So. What do we got, dimensional travel?” She wheeled herself over to them.

“Yes. Long story short - Dick and Jason got switched out with these two for now,” Bruce called from the computer. A small drone was circling Nightwing, scanning and cataloging his body, shape, and vitals. Richard, for his own sake, stood with his arms out and completely still.

“Oh wow.” Stephanie skipped over, hands behind her back. She walked around Dick, eyes alight. “Hey, are you a good hugger?”

“Uh-” Richard froze as Stephanie threw her arms around him. She went stiff before melting into his chest with a dramatic gasp.

“HE’S BURNING HOT!” Richard and Red Hood winced at her loud shriek. In a flash, Cass, Tim, and Damian were pressed up against him, arms clinging tightly. Richard looked ready to cry, overwhelmed by the sudden hug-attack.

“Oh my god,” Tim sighed in bliss, snuggling into his left pec. “He’s so warm.” Damian made a
hum of agreement, face buried into the man’s back, near his spine. Cass pressed into his neck, almost purring.

"They’re cuddling me." Richard sounded choked up. "I’m being snuggled."


“No,” Barbara laughed, “you’re in Gotham.”

“DAD!” The door leading to upstairs caved in as a stranger threw himself down the stairs. “What’s this emergency-”

The stranger staggered and braced himself against the nearest object, who unfortunately was Red Hood. Red Hood’s body coiled in tension as the stranger wheezed out a breathe.

“Who is this and is he single?”

“Aion,” Stephanie deadpanned, “no.”

“Aion, yes,” Aion spoke as he fanned his face. “Oh my god, he’s swol. He’s like, swoller than swol.”

“Did he just call you dad?” Red Hood kicked Aion in the back of the knee, letting the teen’s legs buckle.

“Why does he look like Selina…. OH MY GOD DID YOU TWO HAVE A KID?! ” Richard’s face went beet-red. “BRUCE!”

“Technically,” Helena called as she followed Alfred and Catwoman, Selina, down the stairs, “two kids.”

“Speaking of kids,” Barbara spoke as she looked up from her cellphone, Duke leaning along her
handlebars to read over her shoulder, “what do we tell Wally?”

Red Hood went rigid while Richard’s confused and slightly hysterical expression fell flat.

“You… You have a Wally in this universe?”

The Cave’s playful and chaotic energy took a quick nosedive as Richard’s eyebrows pinched. His bottom lip trembled.

“Oh no,” Tim whispered to Cass, who nodded.

Oh no, indeed.

Somewhere late at night...

“So.” Harley steepled her fingers together, her bangs casting long shadows along her high cheekbones, “our Dickie is stuck in another universe. The Red Hood of this universe is also stuck with him and their replacements are.. Acceptable if not an unexpected surprise.”

“Why is she trying to act like some mob boss?” A henchman whispered loudly to Penguin, who smacked them in the shin with his cane.

“What about the cafe?” Mad Hatter asked softly, fiddling with his broken pocket watch.

“Well, even if Mr. Grayson isn’t there,” Catherine squeaked out, huddled in the back by Deathstroke and The Riddler, “shouldn’t we act like we always do when he goes on his Vacations?” She almost hadn’t been invited but because she was the entire reason for this meeting, they didn’t really have a choice.

“Yeah but if others hear about the mishap,” Catwoman piped in, “they’ll try to do something
stupid. It’s a guarantee.” Beside her, Bad Luck tapped a clawed finger on a crate in boredom. He hated these stupid Villainous gatherings. Most of their meetings consisted of talking about Dick (which he wasn’t complaining about) but once those topics were over everything was just… boring.

“Why are you even here?” Two-Face grouched. With his favorite Barista gone, he was in an unbelievably sour mood. Everyone gave his corner a wide berth, pretending they didn’t seen the various coins in his hand bend under his clenching fists.

“Okay, well, that Red Shit is even more hostile than the other one - which I thought was impossible!” Joker hollered from beside Harley, bandages poking out of his shirt collar. “His trigger finger is more antsy than raccoon burrowing through the trash!”

“That makes no sense,” Killer Croc grumbled lowly to himself.

Ivy just continued to braid her wife’s hair, wishing that their Red Hood was with them. He was always their voice of reason. Catwoman used to be, but after Red Hood got roped into their meetings, she went as crazy as everyone else.

"We should poison their coffee," Joker exclaimed.

"Do they drink coffee?" The Riddler questioned aloud.

"Let's kill them in their sleep!" Deathstroke cheered, raising his fists into the air.

"They're with Batman," Harley reminded dryly, resting her chin in her palm, eyes gleaming in amusement.

Ivy sighed. She was surrounded by idiots.
Chapter Summary

“I like french vanilla creamer instead of sugar and milk,” Barbara spoke, breaking the buzzing silence. Dick looked at her. “Or salted caramel.”

Barbara was 9 the first time she met Dick Grayson. She hadn’t known it was him at the time, not until much later after years of abuse and the darkness of Gotham had latched onto him and made him almost unrecognizable.

They’d gone to the circus on one of her father’s rare off days. It’d been fun - she’d nearly gotten sick to her stomach on cotton candy and kettle corn and she saw the main attraction of the circus die a horrible death.

You know, a normal outing in Gotham.

She’d seen the death couple’s child - or who she was assuming was their child by the matching unitard - disappear in the chaos of the screaming crowd and her father hoisting her up into his arms.

After that, with the constant death one faced in Gotham, she slowly forgot about the dead couple and the boy who was spirited away.

She’s 12 when Batman practically crushes her in his landing, cape billowing behind him in the night sky. His white slits seem to narrow further in the shadows of his cowl as he regarded her.

“Barbara.” It isn’t a question and she mentally curses herself, wondering how he knew who she was. She thought her disguise was foolproof. “What are you doing out here?”

“W-who’s Barbara?” She slide further away from the man, tugging on her makeshift cape. It was
chilly at night, something she continued to underestimate. “I’m- I’m...Batgirl…” Her cheeks burned behind her cloth mask. God, this was humiliating.

“...Barbara, I know your hair.” Batman’s voice was almost amused. “And you have your name written on your converse.” Barbara turned her gaze to her All-Star, face burning even hotter at the sharpie handwriting. Oh god.

“Why are you out here?” Batman moved to sit on the ledge of the rooftop, patting the spot beside him. Something about him was familiar and comforting, weird for the rumored ass-kicker who never hesitated to punch children. “It’s dangerous.”

“Gotham needs more than just you,” Barbara stated simply as she warily moved to sit a foot away from the man. “I’m helping.”

“You’ll get yourself killed,” Batman argued. She bristled, hissing lowly at the insult.

“Nuh-uh!” He doesn’t respond to her childish snap and just looked out at the dark streets.

“Go home, Barbara. Your father doesn’t need to bury another loved one.” Barbara’s eyes went wide and before she could screech at him, he was gone.

“BITE ME BAT BOY!” Her voice rung out in the crisp air.

“Who is this?”

Batman jumped and turned in his chair, seeing Barbara dropping down from one of the ceiling beams. She smiled innocently at Jason, who hid by Batman’s arm.

“This is Jason. He’s my ward,” Batman stated simply. After 7 years of dealing with the stubborn girl, she’d grown on him as a adopted daughter and a begrudging partner in crime fighting. The 19 year old woman tilted her head to the side, humming.
“Hi there Jason, I’m-”

“You’re Batgirl!” Jason’s eyes were wary but bright. “You saved Tommy from being picked up last week!” Batgirl’s smile tensed. Oh, he was a street child. One of the lucky ones not to be snatched up by human traffickers or child molesters. She’d saved a lot of kids during her years patrolling. Too many.

“Yep, that’s me! Howdy!” She crouched down. Jason was lanky but skinny like a malnourished. He was almost literally skin and bones. “How’d you meet B-man?”

“I stole his tires,” Jason stated with a beam of pride. Batman’s face showed how amused and impressed he was with this supposed theft. “From the Batmobile!”

“Oh wow!” Barbara’s eyes were wide behind her cowl. Who could brag about that? No one. Besides this kid it seemed. “That’s amazing! Hey B, can you write me a letter of recommendation for this college?”

“For what? You’re already in school.” Batman’s attention turned to Jason, planting a hand down on his matted hair.

“I need someone to basically brag that I can take double class-loads.” Barbara rolled her eyes. “Please?” Because if anyone could do it, Bruce Wayne could.

“Fine.” Barbara smiled before turning to Jason again. “So, how do you feel about being his new partner in crime?”

It was worth being banned from eating Alfred’s cookies.

She dropped down and looked up.
She shrieked at the acid yellow eyes that stared back.

“*What* is that!?” Barbara reeled back. Jason, stil in his Bluejay costume, scrambled out of the attached showers in the Cave and moved to stand in front of the glass prison.

“Don’t scream! Dick doesn’t like that!” Jason’s childish pout was almost feral as he planted himself firmly in place, protective. The thing - *Dick* - pressed close to the glass and pressed a clawed hand to the surface. It looked almost fond of Jason.

“Who is he?” Barbara was never going off-planet again. Not even if Starfire was to be married again. She missed too much.

“This is Dick! He’s in time-out though right now. He went off the property and broke a guy’s collar-bone.” Jason turned to the glass with a frown. “Sorry Dick.”

“It’s okay, Owlet.” The voice was empty, matching the eyes. He looked like a zombie, all white skin and black veins.

It was creepy.

Those creepy unblinking eyes moved to meet her gaze. “Who are you?”

“I’m… I’m Batgirl.” Barbara looked back as Batman placed a hand on her shoulder. His cowl was off and he looked tired. “How long…?”

“Five months now,” Bruce answered. He addressed Dick, “Have you learned your lesson?” Dick nodded once and stood straight, as if waiting for an order from a superior.

Barbara didn't like that.

“Jason, go shower. Barbara, can you get Dick out and take him upstairs?” Bruce slipped away from her and gestured for Jason to follow. Barbara frowned and eyed the not-human. He couldn’t be human. But he didn't look like a Metahuman.
“Fine.”

It never registered that she’d seen him before. But you couldn’t blame her - tan skin and blue eyes couldn’t easily be connected to a still chest and soulless eyes.

“Here.”

A mug of something dark was placed down in front of her. Bruce and Jason were taking a suspiciously long time to shower and change. Alfred was also surprisingly scarce.

This felt like a set up.

Barbara took the mug and sniffed it, cautious. It smelled like coffee. She took a tentative sip, trying to ignore the intense stare Dick was giving her. Was he watching her? Why? It’s just-

The coffee spilled from her agape mouth with a ‘Bleeeehg’. It splashed across the island and she spat out, gagging.

“DID YOU PUT SALT IN THAT?!” Dick seemed to deflate, shrinking back as she wiped at her mouth. “Gross!”

Behind her, a loud thump sounded followed by muffled yelling.

“I’m sorry.” He sounded flat. “I thought it was sugar. Alfred says that people like sugar and cream in their coffee.”

Barbara studied him, hand pressed to her mouth. She exhaled through her nose and held a hand out. “Pass me a paper towel.”
Dick jumped to grab one and helped her clean up the mess. In the silence, she heard three sets of breathing from the hallway.

Losers.

“I like french vanilla creamer instead of sugar and milk,” Barbara spoke, breaking the buzzing silence. Dick looked at her. “Or salted caramel.”

He smiled. It looked fake, but it was better than the empty slate he’d shown the entire time.

Her mind stuttered to a halt, spiritually catapulted back to when she was a child and went to the circus.

Oh.

Oh.

“You’re that circus boy,” she breathed out and the smile fell and the emptiness seemed to become cold, robotic. More of a void than a nothingness. “You were taken.”

“Yes.” The two stared at each other. Barbara inhaled, exhaled, tried to organize her thoughts. She could feel the tension forming in the hallway.

“...Wanna hear about my best friend? She’s an alien.” When in doubt, talk about aliens. Dick’s head tilted to the side, like an owl.

“Sure. Thank you, Pup.” Barbara wasn’t going to ask, she wasn’t going to even spare a moment on the weird nickname. Instead she smiled, held out a hand, and waited for the teen to grab it.
Roasted! Dick meets the Canon(?) Batfam Pt. 3

Chapter Notes

edit: as of 10/07/2019 all mention of Birdflash has been removed

Short chapter but don't worry. I've got some sweet things planned out for Dick in the not-kinda-canon Batfam universe ;) if you are on the discord, you know what I'm talking about.

Whew. I had a busy last few months. Focused on my Poison Ivy cosplay, had to remake it, finished it the week of the con, got into babysitting after work, gonna be packing up to move soon, gotta get cemetery stuff situated. Just busy busy busy my dudes.

But anyways, enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“This is unfair,” Jason grumbled under his breath. Batman tore through the computer files, Tim at his side as they searched high and low for any sign of Richard in Gotham. In the world. In the universe. Wonder Woman and Green Lantern tried to be of help.

Nothing.

“Jason’s missing too.” Batman almost sounded worried. Almost. “His vitals are gone.” Because of course he’d be monitoring his vitals secretly.

“Maybe they were accidentally taken instead of them?” Barry offered in suggestion, gesturing to Dick and Jason. Damian looked lost, almost, as he watched the adults try and find any evidence of the wayward two.

“Wouldn’t be a surprise,” Jason spoke as he slung an arm around Dick’s shoulder, looking exhausted. “The chick who sent us here was a beginner in magic.”


“Oh, I hope the children behave themselves,” Dick mumbled. “Aion concerns me sometimes.”
“Cause he wants in your pants?” Jason mumbled back with a lopsided smirk. Aquaman eyed the two of them, curious.

“Oh.” Dick blinked, startled. “No. His personally is just a lot for strangers to handle. Aion doesn’t flirt with me, silly Owlet.” Jason stared at him for a moment before turning his eyes to meet Martian Manhunter, expression blank.

“I hate you sometimes.” Jason grumbled, elbowing Dick. Dick just smiled, used to the hits. Not like he felt the pain anyways.

“So what now?” Tim asked, turning to Batman. “We lock them up?”

“Uh, right here!” Jason called, making an offended little scoff in the back of his throat. “God you are a rude little tyke.” Tim sputtered.

“Rude tyke?! I’m eighteen!”

“Good for you,” Jason snapped back before turning his attention to Batman. “So, Boss-man, what’s the plan? And don’t say lock us up in the Batcave because Dickie here will not be happy. Not at all.”

“It’s true,” Dick spoke with a shrug of his shoulders. “You won’t be able to capture us, anyways.”

“You’re very confident in that,” Superman spoke slowly, eyebrow raising. “You are in The Watchtower, surrounded by members of the Justice League.”

“And Batman raised me and trained him on how to take all y’all out,” Jason pointed out as he crossed his arms over his chest. “Now we can stand here and compare our lengths but I want to get home. To our universe. Y’all suck here.”

“Owlet,” Dick chided and Jason huffed. “May we please go back to the Batcave? Standing here bickering isn’t going to solve anything.”
“He’s right,” Zatanna spoke with a frown. “I’ll contact Constantine and Raven and see if we can work to get everyone back where they’re supposed to be.” She allowed Barbatos to fly back into Dick’s arms. “Play nice for right now, boys.”

“Yes ma’am!” Dick saluted. Barbatos sunk back into his shadow, grumbling. “So Batman? Truce for right now?”

Batman’s eye slits just shrunk further.

It was 6 in the morning. Bruce slunk into the kitchen, Damian and Tim trailing behind him at a snails pace. They were exhausted, the night’s patrol having been even more stressful without Nightwing or Red Hood to help pick up the slack. And with the added stress of two intruders in their lives…

Bruce came to an immediate halt, Damian crashing into his back with a squawk.

Dick looked up from the stove, wearing one of Alfred’s aprons and stirring a wooden spoon in a pot of something. It smelled like blueberries. Tim’s stomach grumbled loudly at the deliciously sweet smell.

“Welcome back! How was patrol?” Dick smiled at them, his features rubber and tense. Dozing at the island, draped in a blanket, was Jason. “I’m making some Belgium waffles. I hope you have appetites first thing in the morning.”

Sitting at the island, sipping on a mug of coffee, Alfred looked slightly bewildered towards the men of the house.

“Am I dead?” Tim blurted out. Jason shot up with a snort, gun in hand and aimed at empty air. Dick rolled his eyes and turned back to the stove.

“Would you like a cup of coffee? It’s a Royal Dark Roast with Hazelnut accents. I think you’ll enjoy it.”
“Oh my god, I thought this was a dream,” Jason groaned as he lowered himself back onto the island counter. “Dick, don’t act friendly with these assholes. They drugged us.”

“You,” Dick corrected and turned the stove off, moving the strawberry compote to a free burner, “and I feel helpless if I don’t do something.”

“You made coffee and breakfast?” Bruce warily moved further into the kitchen, towards the french press sitting on the counter. “Is it poisoned?”

“No.” Dick’s face was blank. “You may not be my Grandmaster or Owlets but I wouldn’t needlessly poison you.”

“You say that,” Damian grumbled as he sniffed the air. “Grayson is too trusting for his own good. You aren’t Grayson. We can’t trust you at all, Talon.”

“True,” Dick mused and took a spoonful of the compote. He blew on it until steam didn't coil up from it and shoved it into Jason’s mouth. Jason gagged and reeled back, flailing as he fell backwards away from the table. “But I wouldn’t poison my Owlet.”

“Bold move,” Tim whispered to himself. “But he could be immune to any poisons you used.”

“I watched the Young Master make everything from scratch.” Alfred’s eyebrow was twitching. “There was no poison involved. Please, can we for once have a peaceful breakfast without some sort of chaos?”

“You ask too much from them,” Bruce quipped as he shuffled towards the dining room entrance. “Come on boys.”

Tim and Damian lingered before following after the man. Alfred sighed and stood from his chair, collecting his empty mug.

“This was a delicious roast,” the man spoke slowly. “Your Alfred taught you well. You should be proud of what you can make.”
“Thank you.” Dick’s smile was more genuine. “He’s done a lot to raise me to be who I am right now. He instilled a love for baking in me too. I enjoy it a lot.”

“I see that.” Alfred coughed. “Well, if you’ll excuse me.” He left. Jason moved to leave against the counter by Dick, watching him as he whisked together batter for the waffles.

“They aren’t our family,” Jason reminded cautiously. “You can’t get attached.”

“I don’t like how this Bruce acts towards them,” Dick confided with a frown, eyes flashing yellow. “He doesn’t treat them like children.”

“I know, Dickie. I know.” Jason pressed a hand against his shoulder. “But we can’t get involved. We’re outsiders. They have their own Jason and Dick. We’re gonna be outta here in no time.”

“Fine but if he raises his voice at them one more time I’m taking them with us.” Jason sighed loudly and elbowed him.

It was weird. They were trying to tiptoe around each other, being cautious and wary about what they did and said. Bruce was just tense all around, mentally cataloguing every comment they made concerning their world.

Their world seemed...calmer. Throughout breakfast Tim or Damian would try to pry information out of them, only to be shot down by a snap from Jason or a carefully constructed smile from Dick.

Though what they did let slip left Bruce intrigued. Jason had commented, after Dick’s fifth cup of coffee that he was, “Like Deathstroke after he came back from a month long mission”.

They let Villains in Gotham willy-nilly? Deathstroke was a regular at this supposed cafe? Dent too?
Just what kind of world was this?

“You don’t eat,” Damian pointed out, sulking in his chair. He was in a sour mood - would be until Nightwing returned.

“I can’t,” Dick responded. “No working organs.”

“Well then how do you digest coffee? Breathe? How are you still functioning?” Tim leaned in close, eyes lighting up. Dick’s expression warmed considerably and he smiled.

“Now those are some questions. Sadly I can’t say for sure how the Court did it.” He shrugged. “But I’d rather not think about my gastrointestinal tract.”

“So.” The table fell silent as Bruce leaned back in his chair, plate cleaned. Damn if the Talon didn't make some good breakfast. “Want to explain to me about your clothing?”

“We raided some spare bedroom,” Jason answered. “Needed to get out of the dirty clothes.” He scratched his head. “Seems like it was my counterparts old room?”

“Yep.” Tim eyed the ratty graphic T-shirt Jason was sporting. “And it fits you perfectly. Him on the other hand…” His eyes moved to the neon striped shirt and clashing plaid pants Dick was wearing. How did Jason even own those in his closet? Alfred hadn’t burnt them? “Uh.”

“They’re a bit small for my illusionary form but so comfortable!” Dick ran a hand down his chest. “I’ll be sure to wash them before we return.”

“Yeah but they look horrendous. Oh god, are you as much of a fashion disaster as our Dick?” Tim paled a bit. “Please, not another Discowing era.”

“I have so many questions but we need to backtrack so I can kick your ass!” Jason lunged up and almost tackled Tim. Dick snagged him by the belt-loop of his pants. “Dick’s colorblind, asshole!”

“They don’t know this, Owlet!” Dick rolled his eyes again and forced Jason down. “I don’t exactly go around screaming ‘I can’t see colors’.”
Tim shrunk back in his chair, bewildered by the sudden hostility. While Jason being mean wasn’t out of the norm, seeing a Jason be violet on someone else’s personal behalf was. Especially if it was another family member. Especially if it was Dick - aka Golden Boy.

Tim needed help. An adult. Someone or something to get out of this awkward mess of a conversation.

“So.” Dick coughed. “How did you enjoy the waffles?”

He stared at the equipment, mind blank. The double bars looked worse for wear, the mats imprinted from the years of use. A net hung up high in the corner, a tight rope stretching across it a good few feet above it.

He walked further into the corner, eyeing the weights and the balancing beams. He bounced up and landed on the vault, balancing perfectly.

“Do you remember the circus?”

Dick turned his head, meeting Bruce’s gaze. The man, hidden partially in the shadows, was an intimidating presence. He was watching Dick, no doubt studying his reactions and movements.

“No.” Dick plopped down onto the vault, crossing his legs close to his chest. “Cobb said that my past was pointless. Useless to the Court. A Talon does not need a family or a past.” He craned his neck back, pupils shrinking as he peered into the world of shadows only he could see. “But I wonder if I wouldn’t be a little like your Dick if I did.”

“You don’t remember your mother or father?” There was something in the man’s voice that was almost strained. “Not their faces? Their voices?”

“No.” He tried to smile. He failed terribly. “That was reprogrammed out of me.” He flopped backwards, spine curving as he molded to the arched shape of the vault. “Does that bother you?
That I don’t remember my parents or even care while you can’t even spend a day without agonizing over your own?”

Silence met his question. Dick closed his eyes, wondering how long it’d take for Jason to realize that he was no longer in the kitchen cleaning. No doubt the young adult will be hauling ass down to the cave the moment he didn't hear him pattering around the cabinets.

“Do you want to see them?”

He opened his eyes. Body moving with a fluidity that even Nightwing could only dream to possess, the Talon slide off the vault and landed in a crouch feet from Bruce.

“What do you mean?” Dick tilted his head to the side, looking like a curious child asking a series of ‘why’ to an adult.

“I have a recording. Of Mary and John Grayson. Nights before their deaths. I’d found someone who’d recorded their performances and paid for all the copies. For my - for Dick.”

Bruce shifted, stepping fully out of the shadows. He looked uncomfortable. His body language screamed tension and sorrow while his face showcased how awkward he was trying not to be.

“No thank you.” It was a lie, after all. “I’m fine not seeing them.” After his rescue from the Parliament, he couldn’t get his parents faces out of his head. Deep down, he’d unconsciously kept a sliver of them alive in him, even after all the Court and Cobb had tried to cut out. The whole fiasco with Barbatos had only reminded him of what had been stolen from him. He didn’t need another reminder from a world where Dick was never taken into the shadows.

“Why?” Bruce honestly couldn’t understand - everyone wanted to see their parents. Tim still longed for his mother, for his father. Damian, despite all the hell he suffered, wished to see his mother and grandfather. Bruce, each and every second he breathed, ached for his mother and father. He couldn’t fathom someone passing up the chance to see even a reminder of their parents. But here Dick was, doing just that.

“Because Mary and John Grayson aren’t my parents.” Dick touched his hand over his heart. “Bruce Wayne is my father.” There was something raw in his tone and his eyes, something vulnerable. Bruce felt that bubbling awkwardness coming back up.
Because this Dick talked about his Bruce like how Nightwing used to talk about Batman, back when he was still wearing the red, green, and yellow, and still cackling in the shadows to throw off dangerous minds. He still saw Batman as the ultimate Hero, as an unbreakable fighter with no chance of ever succumbing to the darkness.

He still had a trust for his Bruce that Batman no longer had with Nightwing.

Silently, jealousy crawled into his chest and settled like a cat getting cozy.

“So, do you mind if I try to use this stuff?” Dick gestured to the gymnastic equipment. “It looks more fun than my ceiling rings.”

“You are very different from Richard,” Bruce finally settled with saying, having felt the need to say so since he met the two other-worlders.

"Thanks, it's the issues." Dick's smile was sharp.

Chapter End Notes

Characters developing emotionally? What's that?

Next chapter is Canon(?) Dickjay in Roasted AU. Oh boi.
“...Why?” Tim looked between Richard and Jason, surveying their reactions. That was a weird response to hearing the Speedster’s name. “We have a Wally in this universe. What? Do you-” Something clicked in his mind. “Oh.”
“He died,” Richard confirmed softly, eyes moving to the floor. The cave was silent, basking in his admission.

“Oh.” Stephanie squeezed him tighter while Jason scowled, pointedly looking away from the scene. “I’m sorry, Dickie.”

“Dick?” Jason choked out a coughed laugh “-what?”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Just thought ours would want to know his best friend was in another universe. He has a bit of a separation issue.”

Before anyone could speak, a red blur shot into the cave from one of the many secret entrances. Flash skidded to a stop in front of Barbara, eyes wide.

“What do you mean Dick’s gone? Is it the Parliament? Did we not get all of them? Did Two-Face finally decide to act on his weird man-crush? Did Harley kidnap him? Did-”

“Wally.” Barbara held a hand up. “Breathe. Dick was transported to a different universe with Jason. But we’re working on making sure everyone goes back to their proper universe.”

Wally’s shoulders slumped and he exhaled, hanging his head low. He perked up, however, when he processed her words. “What do you mean ‘everyone goes back to their proper universe’?”

Jason coughed, catching the Speedster’s attention. He turned. He froze.

Once upon a time, Dick Grayson and Wally West were the best of friends. Once upon a time, they grew up together, partners to their crime-fighting family members. Once upon a time, Wally West and Dick Grayson founded the Young Justice team, later moving on to found the Teen Titans team.

Once upon a time, the stress became too much, life got too real, and the best friends split apart.
Wally left the life of crime-fighting and tried to settle down while Dick threw himself further into the life of busting skulls and locking up Villains.

Only Wally couldn’t leave. Not really. He was dragged back in, unable to say no to Dick’s pleading and begging, and ended up almost losing the love of his life to Dick’s plans. A rift formed between the two of them never mended.

After all, you can’t mend a broken bond with a dead man.

Wally West disappeared from the world, lost and probably dead, and Dick Grayson continued on as well as he could with a piece of his heart forever left unfilled.

“Nightwing?”

It was a whisper, as if speaking any louder would break the illusion Wally was sure was happening. Because in front of him, staring at him like he was seeing a ghost, was Nightwing. Not his Nightwing, oh god no, but a Nightwing. A Nightwing. Younger than his Nightwing, younger than his Dick, but still one all the same.

His hair was the proper shade and style. His eyes, filling up with tears, were the correct blue. His skin, flushing around his nose as the tears continued to build, was also that warm complexion. No pale skin, no mockingly dead eyes, no cheaply-poor impression of who Dick was supposed to be.

Richard Grayson, in the flesh and beating heart, stood in front of him.

Wally moved without thinking, his hands lifting up to cup at Richard’s cheeks. They were warm. So, so warm. Like he was cupping the sun in his palms. That natural body heat that rivaled Starfire’s thrummed under his touch. He’d missed it. Missed the pulse, the heat, the flushing of skin the longer he maintained eye contact.

He’d missed how full of life Nightwing was supposed to be. He’d grown to appreciate Dick for all his undead self had to offer. After all, despite how cold his body temperature was, he was still amazing at hugs. He still had a great sense of humor and could still make you smile without even
But Nightwing. Nightwing was a completely different spectrum of appreciation.

Meanwhile, Richard’s mind was a whirlwind of chaos and panic. Because the last time he’d seen Wally, the young adult had just gotten into a huge fight with him. Richard hadn’t even been able to say sorry for being a jackass.

Now here he was - well, a Wally - looking like he wanted to cry just as badly Richard did.

“Wally.” His hands vibrated, ever so slightly, his atoms and molecules in a constant state of moving, dying, growing, affected by his super speed. It created a pleasant hum along Richard’s cheeks. “Um. Hi?” He touch was warm - alive. He was real. This was real. Wally was alive and in front of him.

“Oh my god.” It was forced out like a wet bark. “You fucking would say ‘hi’ like this was just another day, you asshat.”

“I take offense to that.” The words rolled off his tongue with ease. “Asshat? Totally not crash.”

“Crash?” Wally’s nose scrunched up. His tears were still coming, just more of a trickle now. “Jesus, I feel old. Bart would say that shit, wouldn’t he?”

“He still does,” Tim unhelpfully piped up, eyebrows pinched. Damian elbowed him, trying to mouth ‘shut up’ without drawing much attention to himself.

“Oh.” Richard withdrew from Wally’s hands reluctantly. “Sorry. You just. You remind me of my Speedster, is all.” Wally’s mouth parted as he pulled his cowl back, revealing his face.

And wow, adult Wally was sure something nicer than awkward-teenager-but-not Wally. Because Wally’s jawline could fucking cut a man and he’d say ‘thank you’. He had stress lines along his eyes and mouth, framed by his freckles and-

_Hnnnnnnnnng God_ Artemis was fucking missing out.
“Does he realize he’s making that weird noise out loud?” Barbara whispered to Duke, who was trying to sink into the ground. Stephanie nodded sagely, her expression one of complete understanding.

“No, seriously, are we in fucking hell?” Jason looked so done with everything. Duke shot him a look of ‘you fucking wish’.

“It’s all good,” Wally laughed, wiping at his eyes with the palms of his gloved hands. “You remind me of my Nightwing, too.”

“Nightwing?” Richard frowned. “I thought there was no Nightwing in this universe. He said he couldn’t…”

“There is no Nightwing,” Wally confirmed. “So, long story short, I have memories of my old universe.”

“Oh my god.” Jason face-palmed. “Of course he does.” He threw his hands up. “What else? Superman is actually a zombie or something in this universe?”

“No, but want to hear about the Ninja Turtle incident?” Aion asked innocently, batting his eyelashes at the man.

“I - I don’t. Forget I asked.” Jason shied away from everyone, looking so lost and confused.

“Oh.” Richard’s eyes went wide and stayed wide, a classic expression of him not being able to process the information he was given. “Oh. Um. Oh. Okay. Yeah. Yeah. Cool. Cool cool cool cool cool cool.”

“Shut up! Just shut up!” Jason rushed forward and threw his arms between the two men. “I want to go home! This - this is no bueno! I want to leave!” He almost sounded hysterical. “This place is weird! This isn’t normal! They aren’t normal!”

“You and me both know that, buddy.” Duke looked so pitying. Jason wanted to shoot him through the head. Honestly, he wanted to shoot everyone through the head rather than even begin to unpack
Bruce coughed, rubbing at his neck as Wally and Richard continued to just marvel at each other. “Let’s move upstairs. I’ll have Alfred make some snacks.”

“Dick’s a snack,” Aion whispered as he began to help Helena with Barbara. She tossed her head back with a laugh, her giggles setting off a chain reaction between the other girls.

“Who the fuck is this small gremlin?” Jason grumbled under his breath as he grabbed Richard by the arm and jerked him after the moving group. “Fucking fun-house type shit here…”

“You okay?” Cass moved to stand behind Bruce, hands behind her back as she peered up at her father. “You’re sad.”

“I guess compromises have to happen every universe.” Cass’s lips tugged down in confusion, not understanding the statement. Bruce smiled softly at her, trying to ease her worries. Instead, they only seemed to intensify at the wrinkles that formed around his eyes.

“Those two are very broken,” Cass settled with saying. “They are very, very broken. Jason especially. But the other Dick… He’s sad too.” Bruce raised a hand, moving his fingers through her bangs and pushing them back.

“They may not have a nice family,” Bruce whispered softly. “Not every universe can be as perfect as ours.”

Cass’s eyes crinkled up as she hugged him, smile small. “Our universe is perfect. You are perfect, and so is our Dick.”

Lingering near the exit, Jason turned his head and walked through the opening into the Study.

“You’re… Vegan?” Jason asked slowly, eyeing Damian as he nibbled on his vegan cherry chip
cookies. The child assassin raised a single eyebrow before promptly ignoring him. “Shit, okay then, be rude.”

“Where’s Wally and Nightwing?” Bruce asked as he walked into the dining room, Cass lagging behind him. Alfred looked up from his tea, eyes flashing to Jason’s tensing body. “Did Aion and Helena leave?”

“Master Wallace and Master Grayson are outside, in the garden. I believe they’ve much to discuss. Mistress Selina took the two up to her room for the time being.” Alfred set his cup down and stood to pour Bruce a cup of tea. “After tea, Master Duke will help Mistress Stephanie accompany Mistress Barbara home.” Bruce nodded, taking the offered teacup from the man.

“Cain, Drake,” Damian spoke up suddenly, draining the last of his tea, “come with me to the Cave. I wish to ask for some advice.” Cass tilted her head to the side before nodding. Tim frowned, squinted at the two of them, before he sighed and stood. The three left quickly. Duke, Stephanie, and Barbara left soon after as well, leaving just Jason, Bruce, and Alfred.

Jason was tense. His heart was pounding in his chest, not liking how fast he was abandoned to be with the man. They all left too quickly. He didn't like it. He didn't like them, strangers with distant-relatives’ faces, but he didn't like the man with Bruce’s face more.

Even if his face was gentle. Even if his voice never raised from its soothing drawl. Even if his smiles and touches looked innocent, like he’d never raise a hand against any of them.

But that was impossible. A Bruce, not stricken to a maddened grief by his parents’ murders and the constant loss of his family? Impossible.

“So, Jason-”

“Don’t call me that.”

His heart constricted. Just for a moment, a very brief moment, how he’d said his name reminded him of better days. Of days before the red, green, and yellow, of days before broken bones and clawing his way through dirt and wood. Of days when Bruce would treat him to ice cream after a successful math test or binge watching all the Romeo and Juliet adaptations.
Of days when Bruce was Father and Batman was Hero.

“I’m sorry.” Jason’s insides twisted at how sincere he was. “What do you want me to call you?”

He was letting Jason set the terms. Place the boundaries. He was letting Jason control this conversation - this situation.

And that - that made him want to scream. Want to vomit and throw things and cry until he was hacking up dry coughs. Because Bruce? Bruce never gave anyone the upperhand in any given situation he was involved in.

Was this some sort of sick joke? To see how far he could push Jason? A psychological show-down? What? What was this?

“...Red Hood. Call me that.” A mantle he’d taken, warped, made his own. His own rules, his own costume, his own everything. Something, no matter how much Batman tried, couldn’t taint. Couldn’t control. “So? What? Mad we replaced your little soldiers?”

He didn't know what to feel, for a split second, at the weirdly crushed look that crossed Bruce’s face. Like something he’d said had physically stabbed him in the heart. What? Did - did this Bruce not-?

“Jason and Dick are my children.” He spoke so softly, so cautiously, like he was scared he was going to scare Jason away. “I’m very upset they are stuck where I can’t see them, but I know they’ll protect each other.”

Though, Dick would probably burn the world to the ground or create a cult before anything bad could ever happen to Jason. Not that Bruce would admit this aloud. No, he would not.

“Children?” It sounded like a foreign concept. To Jason, at least. He knew it, once upon a time, when he was first brought to the manor. And he saw it, in tiny little scraps, when he watched Batman interact with Red Robin and Robin. His children. “You honestly think that?”

Bruce’s face went stone-cold in a second and alarm bells rung out in Jason’s mind. He knew that look. He knew that look intimately well.

With Bruce, it was never the expressive anger that you had to worry about. Sure, the furrowed
brows and wild gaze and gritted teeth were enough of sight but it was the blank expression that was the real threat.

That silent anger. That hidden loathe, bubbling up under the surface. The torrent of heat and pain brewing like a storm behind his empty eyes and tight lips.

That was when you knew to duck and cover. That was when you knew to flee.

Because that was Bruce, in his angriest form, ready to direct his whirlwind of fury at the unsuspecting - usually Jason or less likely Dick when the situation called for it.

Jason tried to be subtle in scooting away from the table. Had he said something wrong? What was the trigger? What would this Bruce do? Beat him black and blue? Stab him in the neck with a batarang and let him bleed out? Banish him to the foreign Gotham streets? Cast him away like an unwanted stray begging for scraps?

“Oh Jason.” The static-like tension in his stomach spiked at the use of his name. Bruce sounded so broken. Bruce bowed his head. “What have you done?”

He needed to leave. He couldn’t breathe. The air was getting thinner, the temperature rising. He had to leave. He was in danger. He was in danger.

He was in danger.

Jason scrambled from the table and didn't even take three whole steps before Bruce was reaching for him.

“DON’T TOUCH ME!” Jason threw himself back and almost crashed into the decorative China cabinet. He slid down the wall, arms curled protectively around his stomach. Ever since the Crowbar Incident, he’d been very tender and vulnerable about his stomach in general. Always had to protect it first - had to protect his easily rupturable organs. “D-don’t-”

Because Bruce’s touches usually meant pain and bruising. Disappointment and bitterness packed up in a clean slap or a cutting punch. Because even if Bruce was better with Red Robin or Robin, he’d always have a heavy hand when it came to Jason.
Blemish of the family, black stain trailing red Jason Todd. His failure. His haunting mistake.

Bruce backed up, hands raised high for the other to see. “I won’t touch you.” His eyes were wide and wild. At Jason? No. No - they were. They were wild with seething rage. But not directed at Jason. “I will never touch you unless you give me explicit permission.”

He couldn’t help the bitter laugh that bubbled up. Bruce? Not invading his space? That was the funniest joke of the century. Bruce’s rage seemed to smolder a bit at the sound of his laugh. Despite the hysterical tinge, he didn't sound as scared as he’d been seconds before.

“Just. Just fuck off, okay? Go play daddy to some other helpless sap.” Jason curled tighter into a ball, trying to pretend he wasn’t trembling. He hated it, how small he felt in Batman’s presence. In Bruce’s.

“I brought in Jason when he was little.” Bruce moved to sit on the floor across from Jason, looking awkward and almost childish as he crossed his legs. “He was stealing the tires off the Batmobile to pay for medicine for his mother.”

Jason’s mind stuttered to a halt.

“Catherine calls every Sunday, you know. She’s in an assisted living facility funded by me.”

No.

“She willingly gave him up for adoption to me after I got her situated and her condition stable enough.”

“No.”

He hadn’t even realized he’d said it aloud. He was staring at Bruce, not really seeing him, mind spinning. Catherine Todd was dead. She died from a sickness that’d progressed too far for a cure, and Jason was left on the streets. She wasn’t alive, she wasn’t stable, she wasn’t still in his life.
This wasn’t fair. This wasn’t fair. This wasn’t - this wasn’t -

His vision blurred. “She’s dead.” His heart expanded and imploded into itself. “She’s dead.” Because, yes, Sheila was his mother but Catherine was his mom. “She’s dead.”

“She’s dead.” Bruce kept his tone a murmur. “She’s alive and fairly healthy. The bacterial infection that triggered the entire ordeal was caught early in this universe.”

Bacterial infection. Of course she’d get a fucking bacterial infection. Because while he loved her, she hadn’t been perfect, if the track marks up her arms were any indication. But to think a little more time could have saved her…

“This - no. This isn’t - that’s not-” he was grasping for straws, choking on the words he wanted to say. “No.”

“Jason’s never missed a Sunday calling before.” Bruce looked almost innocent as he peeked at Jason’s crumbled expression. “Tomorrow is Sunday.”


Bruce didn’t stop him when he fled.

“Was that a smart move, Sir?” Alfred asked, rag in hand as he wiped at the smudges along the cabinet’s glass frames. “He’s overwhelmed.”

“He’s hurt. Badly. What did that man do to him? To the both of them?” Bruce clenched his hands into fists. “Just how much have we been taking things for granted?”

“Each universe has its sacrifices,” Alfred pointed out, turning to Bruce. “They got a literal sunshine child for a broken little boy while we got a stable, emotionally functioning family with only two zombies out of it.” He paused. “Wait.”

Bruce chuckled almost on autopilot. “Thank you Alfred. I wonder how Wally is handling his ghosts?”
“So I died in your universe?” Wally pursed his lips. “Man, someone has it out for me in particular. Can I call this personal if I’ve died in two universes already?”

They were laying on their backs in the grass, staring at the night sky. It was almost habit, bodies moving in ways their minds did not know. Despite being complete strangers, their mannerisms were almost identical to each other’s lost one.

“How did you die in yours?” Richard tilted his head to the side, their pinkies interlocked as a constant reminder they were by each other’s side.

“Yikes. Really gonna ask a man the finishing question, huh?” Wally kept his eyes on the stars. “So, you’re, what, 20? My Nightwing would probably be 40 at this point.”

“You’re an old man!” His Wally would be 21 instead of 18. “So how did you recover your memories?” Richard knew an avoidance when he heard one. He guessed Wally’s death was an off-subject topic.

“Got my speed again.” Wally shrugged awkwardly. He moved his hand to lace their hands together. He was warm, familiar, but at the same time wrong. Because the hand he’d grown to fist bump and tug was cold and sold, sharp and nimble. Smooth with minimal scars from an amazing healing factor. Not calloused and literally made of sunshine. He felt his eyes burn.

“So… how did you and Dick meet if he was never Robin?”

“I started sobbing in front of him and he gave me a muffin.” Wally burst out laughing immediately after speaking. God, it sounded so stupid. “Friendship forged on food? Absolutely.”

Richard gave a surprised laughed.

Wally opened his eyes and turned his head, smiling gently at Richard. “Though let me tell you, Dick was really weird at first. Like, weirder than Star when she was first getting used to Earth.”
“Did he drink mustard?” Richard’s nose scrunched up in that cutely Dickish way and Wally felt like sobbing. “Or walk around nude because he didn’t understand the concept of flashing people?”

“What kind of shit did your Starfire get into?” Wally’s laugh was a bit choked. “No, no. He just. God. Even after 12 years of living with Batman, he’s still oblivious to certain social cues and stuff. It’s so fucking funny.”

Richard’s chest clenched.

That hole in his heart that’d slowly shrunk throughout the years from bonding with his new family and friends opened, just the tiniest bit.

“Okay, okay. Serious question.” Wally sat up, leaning to where he was almost hover over Richard. “Did you have that god-awful mullet?”

“IT WAS FASHIONABLE!” Richard shoved at him. The Speedster burst out into a barking cackle. “God, even other universes can’t handle the amazing fashion sense of Nightwing!”

“You mean fashion disaster!” Wally laughed out. He doubled over, releasing Richard’s hand to hug his stomach. His laughs shook his entire body, shoulders heaving as he gasped for air.

Until the gasping became more desperate and his laughs morphed to sobs and his eyes screwed shut as hot tears burned down his cheeks. Richard stared, eyes wide, tears already trickling down his own cheeks silently.

Wally was an ugly crier. All snot and loud wails and spit. All red faced that made his freckles stand out even more and twisted lips. He was such an ugly crier.

Richard - Richard was a silent crier, trained from years spent crying himself to sleep. Of keeping his pain hidden. Of hiding behind a smile or a black domino mask. His tears were noiseless and gentle, just one tear after another falling at a rapid pace.

The two sat there, crying under the night sky.
“Think we can keep them?” Damian asked, perched on the mansion’s rooftop. He had his knees resting on his drawn-up knees, arms hugging them close. Beside him, Tim, Cass, Duke, and Stephanie nestled close together.

“I mean, judging from how these two are acting, imagine our counterparts.” Stephanie threw an arm around Damian, drawing him close to her side. “I have no doubt Dick isn’t going to be bringing our counterparts home. He’ll fist-fight God if he has too.”

“True,” Tim agreed as Wally and Richard hugged. “…So should we honestly be watching this?”

“No,” Duke offered up immediately, tucked against Cass, “this is too intimate.”

“Yes, it is.” Bruce planted himself down on Damian’s free side, shoulders slumping. “So what did I miss?”

“Is it considered kidnapping if they just so happen to never return to their universe?” Stephanie asked innocently. Bruce’s eyebrow twitched.

Chapter End Notes

Am I salty about how Bruce beat Jason near to death? You bet your fucking ass I am. Am I going to try and fix it with my self-indulgent writing of this fic? You bet I am.

Snippet I had to remove because of the sudden tone change throughout the chapter:

Barbara turned to Duke. “You aren't gonna hug him?” Duke shrugged, leaning against the handlebars of her wheelchair.

"Nah. He isn't my Best Boy.” It was said so seriously that it took a moment for the family to process the words.

"What." Stephanie stared at him. "What did you just say?"

"Best Boy???” Tim leaned forward, all intrigue on their two guests forgotten. "Who is then?"

Wordlessly, Duke pointed to him. Tim looked alarmed and then flattered.

"Bruce is Best Dad, Cass is Best Sis, Damian is Best Bro, Stephanie is Best Batgirl, Babs is Best Girl, and Jason is Best Zombie."
"..." Bruce wiped at his eyes. "Who's Dick, then?"

Without missing a beat, Duke replied, "Best Bitch."
Roasted!Dick meets the Canon(?) Batfam Pt. 4

Chapter by widdlewed

Chapter Notes

edit: as of 10/07/2019 all mention of Birdflash has been removed

Not gonna lie - I don't like this chapter. Not at all lmao

But I can feel the writer's block beginning to creep up so I had to hurry and force this out before it became longer than a month to update.

Also, congrats on getting this fic past 1k reviews!! Y'all are amazing and I love every single one of you!

Edit: y'all weren't gonna call me out on notching Jason's OG mask name?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Manor was cold. Frigid. There wasn’t that underlying warmth that Jason’s Manor had. The world seemed bleak, almost. Colors washed out, shadows stretched longer and creepier than his own Gotham.

Bruce didn't spend time with the kids. Jason picked up on that immediately when he saw how Damian and Tim looked stiff and awkward at his presence. Did they not get together? Have family dinners? Watch movies together? Spend any sort of quality time together?

At all?

Jason shuffled down the halls, taking in the empty decor. There were no framed photographs lining the walls, showing off the various chaotic moments Alfred had been able to capture on camera. There was no distasteful wall art, chosen and hung by Dick, giving the usually haunting hallways a splash of gaudy colors.

There were no hidden weapons, courtesy of the resident assassins (Cass, Damian, and Dick) born from years of paranoia and habit to always be prepared to fight and stab someone. There were no energy bars hidden in vases or suits of armor, no constant smells of spilled energy drinks or coffee from Tim’s many spare coffee makers.
There was no life in this Manor. No personality. No hints that people lived here.

And that was just sad.

“What are you doing?” Jason turned from his spot near the top of the stairs. Tim stood three steps down, peering up at him with such a scrutinizing expression that he almost laughed.

“Thinking,” Jason commented and scratched at his neck. “Hey, you guys said Duke was sick?” He thought of his own Duke and felt a pang of sadness - he missed the sanest family member. He wondered if Duke would beg Nightwing to stay in their universe - no doubt wanting someone sane to be with him.

The family knew how off the rails they were - they were perfectly aware and content with the insane ride their lives were.

“...Yeah,” Tim spoke slowly, still staring at him, “why?” His body shifted, hands sliding towards his hidden gadgets. Jason mentally smirked- they were protective of each other, at least.

“Wanted to say hi. He’ll probably be extremely confused,” Jason explained with a frown. Did they want the kid to be confused and out of the loop? What about the women?

“Oh. Um. He’s down this way.” Tim conceded and slipped past Jason, beginning to move down the opposite hallway that Jason’s Duke’s room. He raised an eyebrow at that. This was the complete opposite direction of Bruce’s room. His own Bruce had positioned all of their rooms to be together in case someone had a nightmare or got lonely. Were these kids pushed away to the other wing of the Manor?

The walk towards Duke’s room became increasingly uncomfortable the closer they got. A few feet away, they heard Duke’s laughs, followed by Damian’s haughty retorts and - surprising both of them - Dick’s soft chides.

Tim and Jason peeked in to see Duke sitting up in his bed, a bowl of soup nestled on his lap while Damian sprawled out at the foot of the bed. Dick was sitting on the windowsill, looking almost parental at the two.

“Holy shit, he is shorter!” Duke blurted at the sight of Jason. “Wow, are those happy smile lines?”
He looked between Dick and Jason before taking a loud slurp of his soup. Jason smelt it and smiled - Dick’s homemade chicken noodles. Lucky brat.

“How are you feeling, brat?” Jason asked as he leaned against the doorframe, Tim moving to lean by the light-switch along the wall. “Dickie probably filled you in on how we’re stuck here?”

“Yeah,” Duke explained and gave a sniffle. “I feel sorry for our Jason, if what your Dick has to say about your world.”

Oh, worm.

“So, you still Signal in this universe?” Jason asked as he stepped further into the room. He caught sight of Damian’s demented doodles (wow was that a decapitated head?) and faintly smiled.

“Yeah. You’re Red Hood?” Duke shifted to get comfortable, moving his bowl to his nightstand. Tim followed suit and all but shoved Damian off the bed to take a seat by Duke’s feet.

“Yep! But before that, I was Bluejay!” He puffed his chest out proudly. “Batman’s first partner!” He would never let anyone forget it, either dammit. No matter what Babs said, he was Bat’s first crime-fighting partner.

“What?” Tim looked between the two. “Bluejay? Not Robin?” Even Damian looked intrigued, moving his attention from his drawings to the two intruders.

“Yep,” Dick hummed out, patting the spot beside him to signal Jason to sit down. “Batman didn’t have a Robin until Damian and that’s because I named him.”

Three pairs of eyebrows shot up, shocked. Jason leaned against Dick, remembering his younger days.

“Bruce picked me up after I tried to steal his tires. My mom was suffering from an illness and we needed the money and thought - hey, those would fetch a penny,” Jason laughed out. “Instead he hauled my ass back to my apartment, called my mom an ambulance, and then had the temporary foster care paperwork completed by the next day while he paid for all her medical bills.”
“... what?” Tim’s voice was forced out. Because everyone knew everyone’s backstory - it was how they bonded over who had the most tragic history. So to hear such a divergence…

“Yeah. I wowed him with my mean right hook and he took a liking to my little shit personality.” Jason nodded and then nudged Dick with his elbow. “And then this dork came crashing into our lives trying to assassinate Bruce.”

“You tried to kill Father?” Damian’s eyebrows were pinched. “And he still trusts you?”

“Bruce has a thing for orphans,” the Bird and the Bat spoke in unison. “We always joke that it’s his only known weakness.” Jason laughed again and it was so carefree that it shut the three Bats up. Because they’d never heard their own Jason laugh like that.

“But anyway, yeah, I was Bluebird until the Joker killed me.” Dick’s eyes flashed yellow at the statement and the three Bats jolted at the sudden change. “And then I rose from the dead and… well…” He faltered. “Became Red Hood.”

“How did you… become this, though?” Tim waved his hand towards all of Jason. “Did you threaten to kill your Tim?”

“What?” Dick snarled.

“Did your Batman not impale you with a Batarang?” Duke asked bluntly, eyebrows raised high. Because they’d all heard the story - heard from Jason’s mouth how much Bruce didn't love him, didn't care for him.

Dick’s expression went blank and he excused himself, saying he was going to go make himself a cup of coffee. Jason’s eyes flickered up to him for a moment before he was left with the three Bats.

“Well, um, no.” Jason scratched at his neck. “I mean, yeah, I was a bit messed up in the head but I - I’d never hurt Tim. And Bruce would never hurt me. I - I love Tim.”

Tim looked weird. Jason couldn’t decipher his expression.
“He lived with us for a few years before shit went south so I - I had no hatred for him. I- I just…”

Jason exhaled and began to tell them his story.

Bruce paused, feeling the air in the cave shift. He shoved himself back from the desk, the chair pitching backward just in time to avoid a knife cutting straight down in the air.

He rolled and froze. Dick perched himself on the desk, eyes glowing yellow against the computer screens blinding light.

“You purposely hurt your Jason?” Dick tilted his head to the side, moving to plop down onto the desk in a more relaxed position, his legs dangling over the edge.

“What-” When had he entered the Cave? “What are you talking about?” If it hadn’t been from years spent training with assassins, he’d be dead. He’d be dead right now with no one the wiser.

“You impaled him with a Batarang?”

What?

“What?” Bruce stood and warily watched Dick. One of the Talon’s long claws clicked over the keyboard, almost absently, but Bruce saw the files popping up. He knew all of Bruce’s codes, didn't he?

“We were all talking and Jason’s resurrection came up.” More claws joined and Jason’s files popped up. Medical histories, birth certificate, death certificate, new birth certificate, new social - everything.

Video files popped up, showing those horrible days when Jason had just been found out to be alive again and Batman had chased after him.
“They mentioned how you injured Jason with a Batarang.” Talon’s voice was deceptively light, dismissively. As if he hadn’t just tried to murder Bruce.

He was regretting not locking up this monster.

Those aviary eyes burned into his narrowed blue eyes and Bruce couldn’t move. He felt like a mouse under the hungry stare of an owl, talons sharp and ready to tear his insides out.

“I don’t like what I see, what I look at you,” Dick spoke softly, clicking the space bar. The video footage became to play in the background. Dick was still staring at him. “You remind me of the Owls, did you know? You’re so cold, so heartless - only seeing everyone around you as a pawn. Do you love your children?”

Bruce felt his metaphorical hackles rise. How dare this abomination come at him as if he knew how to raise children. How dare this monster act like he could love - like he was a living person instead of some disgusting puppet.

“You don’t know anything,” Bruce snarled low. His hands shook as he clenched them into fists. “You don’t know anything at all. Mind your own business. This isn’t your universe.”

“It isn’t,” Dick agreed and his eyes flickered to the screen as he heard Jason cry on camera. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t care. Do you not feel anything, seeing this?” He gestured to on-screen Jason, slumping against a wall while holding his bleeding shoulder.

“He would have been fine,” Bruce defended, “and he was going to kill the Joker.”

“Is that a bad thing?” Dick blinked owlishly. In one fluid motion, he’d shut off the video and slide off the desk. His steps made no sound as he made his way over to Bruce. Even feet shorter than the man, he could not be underestimated. “Your Joker doesn’t seem like mine. Mine’s grown calmer - tamer. Yours? Yours seems to be losing it with every minute that passes.”

“This is none of your business,” Bruce snarled again. He felt vulnerable without his suit on. Without his cowl, he felt like he’d be taken in mere seconds without any gadgets to help him.

Dick was dangerous - more so than any Talon the Bat Clan had faced before. He was a monster while the other Talons were mere toddlers compared to him.
That was a terrifying thought.

“I don’t like you,” Dick frowned. He laced his clawed hands together in front of him, like a mockery of praying to a saint while Bruce stood like a forgiving Father. “But I won’t harm you.” Yellow eyes narrowed. “Unless you do something to warrant it.”

“Like what?” What had been that attack then, if he wasn’t trying to kill Bruce? Had that been a threat - an example of what Dick could and would do to him if he overstepped?

“Keep your hands to yourself and you won’t have to find out.” Dick skipped back a step and looked Bruce up and down, looking pleased with what he saw. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

Bruce barely even heard him leave. He stood there, lost in his thoughts.

A moment of weakness, of pity over how his own Dick could have ended up, blinded him. He’d been tricked, believing this Dick was as human as his own son.

But he wasn’t and now he could see the consequences of his ignorance.

He had to leave the Manor. It wasn’t hard - Dick had been raised to sneak in and out of places without the slightest hint of detection. It was easy to slip through the holes in security that this Bruce never seemed to know or care about to fix.

Gotham felt different. He’d felt it immediately the moment they’d fallen on the rooftop and it still held true. His Gotham was lighter, quieter in ways this Gotham was filthier and loud with screeching and screams and the constant sirens blaring in the background.

He crawled through the shadows of the night, his talons digging into the bricks as he scaled walls and jumped roofs. He was silent in his progress, no destination in mind. He just had to leave the Manor - had to clear his head. His earring was tucked safely into his pocket, secured until he needed it again.
Free in his true form, he threw himself into the air, tumbling and twisting as he let his mind blank.

He wondered if the Court was active in this Gotham. The Parliament. Were they biding their time, waiting for the perfect moment to strike? Did they want to turn this world’s Dick Grayson into a Talon, as they’d done in his own Gotham?

“Barbatos,” Dick spoke as he landed in a crouch on a rooftop. The shadows around him wiggled and the bat popped into existence. “Is the Parliament here? Can you sense them?”

“I can sense the Judge,” Barbatos stated after a pause. He shifted, looking uncomfortable. “This Gotham is darker. Tainted in energy that your Gotham never had. Horrible things have happened in this universe.”

“No doubt, no doubt,” Dick whispered. He looked to his left as a figure landed onto the rooftop. Barbatos melted into the shadows as the masked person stepped forward.

“You must be Dick,” the girl spoke. She sounded like Cass, but younger. Dick narrowed his eyes at her, eyeing her muscular limbs and short stature. Definitely younger. Behind her, Strix fell from God knew where and tilted her head at him. “Batman explained the situation.”

“Talon,” Strix forced out, words choppy. Cass nodded, stopping a few feet from Dick. Still crouched, he studied the two.

They were younger than his Pups, that was for sure. Did they still act as a family though? He watched how Strix stood almost protectively by Cass, clawed hands twitching for her hidden weapons. Cass looked relaxed, the only lie to her posture being her clenched fists. They were smart.

“That’s me,” Dick greeted and moved to sit down fully onto the rooftop. “This Gotham is different from mine.”

Strix moved forward, reaching a handout. Dick let her trace her fingers along his face, her claws grazing his cheeks and eyelids. She leaned forward, her lenses glinting in the scarce moonlight.
“Jason here too?” Cass asked as Strix continued to get into his personal space. Both girls looked uncomfortable, standing out in the open. He wondered how long they’d been doing this vigilante lifestyle. Couldn’t have been long judging by their stiff movements.

“He’s back at the Cave,” Dick answered as Strix finally pulled away. She shook her head back and forth before tugging out her notepad.

Weird, she scribbled out in shaky, childish handwriting. Dick nodded. Yeah, he probably was weird to her. As the two girls moved to sit down, he wondered what else in this world was different. Was Barbara still the oldest of the Bat Clan? Was she Bat Girl? Oracle? Was she with Starfire in this universe? What?

They sat in silence.

Dick didn't want to talk to these people. They weren’t his Cass and Strix. They weren’t his Pups, his siblings. They were strangers with their names and it upset Dick horribly. He missed his Pups. He missed his Owlets. He didn't want to be in this world anymore, where the Manor was frozen and bathed in sorrow and no one seemed to know how to react to a hug.

This world was so depressing.

Dick finally stood and stretched, his back cracking when he twisted it in an impossible angle.

“I’m going to go now. Scoop out the streets, see what else is different from my Gotham. Bye.” He didn't wait for them to respond, leaving. He knew he was being rude, acting so curt with them, but he just couldn’t stand another minute with the two.

It reminded him of how blessed he was with his universe.

He leaped from one building to the next, eyes flickering around the surrounding establishments. His mind sparked in recognition. This was the street his cafe was at. He tugged his earring out and slipped it on, his fake appearance taking his place as he jumped off the edge of a rooftop.

He fell to the ground, the bystanders barely giving a glance as the shadow that fell from the sky. He made his past along the sidewalk, noting all the establishments that weren’t opened in this universe. The ice cream parlor that'd opened three doors down was an abandoned lot. Same with
the dry cleaners across the street. He tilted his head as he studied all the boarded-up windows and trashed sidewalks. There was no life in this area.

He stopped in front of the deserted lot his cafe would have been. He peered at the skeletal frame, looking at the haunting foundation and framework from the broken window. Trash and homeless people curled the floor inside the lot, hiding from the crazy pedestrians.

His chest clenched as he stepped away from the building. It was so hollow, so desolate.

It was so sad.

He frowned, turning his eyes away. The street lamp a few doors down flickered, basking the surrounding thugs in ominous lighting. He caught a few pairs of eyes staring him down. Exhaling, he pushed his hands into his pants pockets and began to walk.

He heard a broken cry that rang in the air, followed by a familiar cackle. He looked up at the sky, his eyes flashing yellow.

He wanted to go home.

“Where’s Dick?” Jason asked, fingers curling into fists against the wood of the desk. Bruce, shuffling papers, grunted. “Listen asshole, I know he came to threaten you. Where is he now?”

“Probably going for a walk,” Bruce gritted out, glaring up from his papers. He’d been in his study, trying to calm his racing mind, when this cheap imitation of his second son burst in. He was beginning to regret a lot of things.

“You just let him leave the Manor?” Jason hissed, eyes widening. “What the hell, Bruce? This isn’t our universe - the less time we stay here the better! Now he’s out there somewhere-”

He paused.
“Oh. I know where he is. Bye!” Jason turned on his heel and rushed out of the study. Bruce
pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Hey B? Bluejay sent out a distress signal,” Tim spoke as he popped his head in. “We’re suiting up
right now to go help her.”

“Joker?” Bruce asked as he stood. Tim nodded tersely and slipped away. Bruce sighed. He was
exhausted. He almost didn’t want to go help Bluejay - she got into the mess, she could save herself.
But it was the Joker and with an unpredictable Talon running around…

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’m coming.”

“Not without me,” Jason spoke. Bruce mentally startled - the guy hadn’t chased after his Talon?
Jason stomped towards them, dragging Damian - Robin - behind him. Robin scowled and tried to
wiggle out of the man’s grip. It wasn’t successful.

“I thought you left,” Bruce pointed out as he led them down to the Cave.

“I was about to leave when I heard about Blue,” Jason explained. Tim - Red Robin - paused from
his place at the computer, eyebrows visibly moving upwards under his cowl.

“What? Are you on friendly terms with Bluebird?” He sounded confused. “Or are you dating…?”

“What the fuck?” Jason reeled back as if Red Robin had spat in his face. “Why would I be dating
her?”

“Why would you care about her then?” Robin asked. He gawked at them. Were they serious? Were
they actually serious?

“Because she’s a friend and Culin has this adorable crush on Timmy so how could I not care about
her?” Jason looked between the three Bats, his stomach sinking. This world just kept getting worse.
How could they so readily abandon a member of the family?
“Who?” Robin asked the same time Red Robin blurted, “Crush?!”

Batman pinched the bridge of his nose again and it was so *Bruce* than for a moment, Jason thought he was back home.

But then the man glared and the two shut up and Jason was reminded of how shitty this world’s Batman truly was.

“Stop dragging your feet. Let’s go.” He turned with a swish of his cape, the three following in hurried steps. Jason caught his helmet that Red Robin tossed him and he slipped it on, feeling comfortable in a way he couldn’t explain.

His eyes landed on a black motorcycle and he threw himself at it without a single word. Robin did a double-take while Batman merely tossed the keys back to the guest.

“Fuck yes, I love me some two wheels,” Jason all but purred as he threw his leg over the bike, inserting the key. He started the bike, the loud growls escaping the exhaust making him give a satisfied groan.

Red Robin eyed him weirdly. Batman, in an almost comical motion, shielded Robin’s masked eyes.

“You… like bikes, huh?” Red Robin forced out as Jason adjusted the mirrors and checked the gas levels.

“Yes but I don’t ride them too much. Dickie’s worried I’m an adrenaline junkie or something and forbids it except for weekend rides.” Jason ran a hand down the exterior of the Kawasaki bike.

“…Are you a junkie?” Robin questioned as he slid into the passenger seat of the Batmobile.

“No comment,” Jason spoke. Seeing the temperature reached the proper temperature, he shifted gears with his foot while he clenched the clutch. He smirked behind his helmet and shot off without another word.
“God, I want to know what his universe is like,” Red Robin hushed, sounding weak. Batman shot him a glare.

The coordinates were easy to follow, even easier to find with how close the location was to Dick’s cafe. Or the area his cafe was at in their universe. It was confusing. Jason had a headache.

From what he understood over the comms, Bluebird had gotten into a tussle with the Joker. Jason’s hands tightened around the handlebars of the bike. From how they spoke, this Joker was crazy and unpredictable. A true mad-man. Nothing like their universe’s Joker who acted like a protective papa bear to Harley and Ivy and his daughter. Because while he was still fucking crazy, he’d mellowed out in the years since Jason’s murder and Lucy’s birth.

But this Joker? They sounded almost scared to face him. Jason mentally checked that all his weapons were loaded. He had the ammo and the means.

He may be able to kill the son of a bitch this time.

It took no time to get to the location. Jason dismounted the bike and stumbled back when the Batmobile and Red Robin’s own bike nearly ran him flat like a pancake. He flipped off Batman when they emerged from the car. Robin snarled at him in response.

It was silence as they followed Batman into the alley, the entire scene ominous and creepy with the flickering street lamps and dirty walls and ground. It was like walking into a scene from a horror movie. It was eerily silent like the world was put on mute as they crept further into the alley. Jason’s guns were out and safety clicked off by the time Batman stopped.

Dick stood over the Joker’s crumpled body, talons sunk deep into the corpse’s neck. Blood pooled at his feet, the surrounding bricks from the wall shattered into shards of red chips. The crowbar the man had no doubt been wielding was twisted like a pretzel, tossed aside after being mutilated.

Bluebird crawled weakly towards Batman, both legs mangled and dragging blood after her. Jason crouched down to help her, hands steady as the rest of the Bats fell into place behind Batman.

“...you...you killed him,” Robin whispered in disbelief. He seemed to shrink behind his father’s cape. “You killed him.” You’d think the kid had never killed someone before with how he spoke. Jason rolled his eyes behind his helmet, mind buzzing.
He felt kind of giddy if he was being honest. Giddy and SHOOK because Dick killed the Joker. Well, a Joker, but still. It felt almost like a gift, like a dead mouse from a cat.

“What have you done?” Batman whispered, sounding so lost.

“What I should have done.” Yellow eyes did not smile with the pale, bloodless lips. “I put down the clown.”

Chapter End Notes

Oof when will the next update be? wHo KnOwS
“Where are you going?” Richard’s grip on Wally’s wrist was tight, almost bone-crushing. He looked terrified, worried that if he let go, the Speedster would disappear forever.

“I was gonna stop at the cafe,” Wally explained as he gently pried the hand off him, “and make sure the girls are okay.”

“Cafe?” Richard blinked as he let his arm fall to his side limply. “The cafe this universe’s Dick owns?” Wally beamed at the mention of Dick and Richard almost had to look away, unable to face the brightness of that smile.

“Yep! He’s pretty protective of his employees and with the cat cafe too~”

“Cat cafe?!”

“-he worries. You want to come?” Wally held his hand out in invitation. “I swear, nothing will happen while there. There is a strict rule of no fighting in the cafe or cat cafe.” He waited expectantly.

“I want to see it.”

The two looked behind them, Wally momentarily startling at Jason. He flicked his cigarette away from him, expression dark. The taller, bulkier man marched forward, lips curling at Richard’s red-rimmed eyes.
“This universe’s Golden Boy opened up a cafe instead of becoming a police officer?” Jason’s eyes lightened just the tiniest bit. “I’ve got to see this.”

“We can all go,” Tim called as he popped up from behind Jason. The man had to keep his hand from flying to his guns. “I’m craving an All Nighter.”

“The fuck is an All Nighter?” Jason’s eyes narrowed as Damian joined the group, moving towards Wally with an air of nonchalant.

“Red Bull mixed with 14 shots of espresso mixed with green tea. It tastes horrible but the caffeine is worth it,” Tim explained, eyes blood-shot. He was shaking, just a bit. Richard and Jas stared - did he have an addiction just like their Tim?

“Those harpies won’t make it for you,” Damian sneered, scrunched expression hiding the concern he felt for his older brother. “You know Dick has them wrapped around his fingers.”

“I can still try,” Tim whispered weakly. The two guest Bats exchanged lost looks.

“Anyone else joining us on our adventure?” Wally asked as he ruffled his hair. He frowned, rounding to point threateningly at Jason. “You should leave your guns.”

“What the fuck?” Jason’s hands curled into fists. “I’m not leaving shit!”

“No, you should,” Domina agreed as he nodded his head sagely. “No one takes kindly to fights in the cafe. We respect the rules.” Not to mention two ex-talons that had gotten hired on as staff made sure everyone followed said rules. Between Calvin and Strix, there were barely even any table flippings anymore.

“I’m not leaving my - fuck off bitch!” Jason tried to shove off Richard, who succeeded in snagging his guns while he was distracted arguing with the gremlin. “Give me back my guns!”

“No! They said we can’t fight in the cafe and we’re going to respect that!” Richard glared at Jason. “We don’t belong in this universe so we follow their rules. Our counterparts are offering the same respect.”
Hopefully.

(Oh, if only they knew).

“Besides.” Richard dumped the guns into Wally’s awaiting hands, who zipped up to the Manor to deposit them. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

Chaos. Everything was in chaos. Harley and Ivy were sprawled out on the tables, partaking in an impromptu photoshoot with Joker as their photographer. Coffee beans were littering the women’s tables and Ivy was posing with a Supergirl (Strawberry and Vanilla ice cream blended with milk and topped with yellow sprinkles and whipped cream).

Deathstroke was in the corner with Two-Face, The Riddler, and Black Skull, holding what looked like to be an illegal card game session.

Two-Face’s henchmen and the Penguin’s men were huddled together, looking through one of the henchmen’s child’s prom photos.

Mr. Freeze (which seemed to surprise Nightingale and Robin who’d changed into their masked aliases for the trip) was near the back wall towards the public restroom, trapped in metal pillory. Henchmen and occasionally Deadshot was tossing ice cubes at him. Next to the pillory was a sign reading, “Trespassers Will Be Given The Cold Shoulder”.

Calendar Man, Crazy Quilt, and Killer Moth were hunched over a circular table, putting together a 3000 piece puzzle. It looked like a bunch of kittens in a woven basket. Cute.

Aion was leaning seductively over the counter, his uniform button-up unbuttoned at the first four to give Cullen an uncomfortable view of his chest while he chatted and played with the teen’s died blue hair.

Ketti, Jessica, and Morgan were manning the counter, faces hardened like soldiers coming back from a deployment.
Calvin kicked the kitchen swinging door open, marching out with a tray of baked goods. Strix followed, carrying a dust-pan and broom. She handed the broom off to Aion, who grumbled but ended up taking it. Carrie followed out of the kitchen, hauling a bag of cat food. She perked up at the sight of Flash, Nightingale, Robin, Red Hood, and Richard.

“Hiya guys!” Carrie beamed at them and used a hand to wave. “You must be Dickie’s other self, right?” She eyed him up and down. “You’re shorter than Boss.”

“Uh, thanks?” Richard shifted his footing as the eyes in the room continued to stare at them. Jason was struggling between Nightingale and Robin, growling at Joker’s direction. The Joker flipped him off before turning on a sepia filter to snap more pictures.

“Oh thank god!” Ketti cried as she threw herself over the counter, rushing towards the familiar faces. “Without Boss around it’s been crazy!” She stopped short, looking warily at the two guests.

“Anyone cause any problems?” Flash asked as he bent down slightly, meeting eyes with the shorter employee. She shook her head, looking frazzled.

“No, well-” her eyes flashed to Mr. Freeze “-besides him. But Deathstroke and Two-Face took care of it. Everyone’s just camping out. And since Boss isn’t here we can’t just close up during the night hours and it’s been so busy so it’s been all hands on deck and-”

“Breathe,” Nightingale instructed concernedly, putting a hand on her shoulder. “Breathe. We’ve got this.” Nightingale straightened to his full height, clearing his throat. The cafe stilled.

Richard and Jason exchanged impressed looks.

“Go home.”

With those two words the cafe bustled to more life than before, everyone straightening on their tables and chairs. Deathstroke hauled Mr. Freeze, dragging the pillory out with him as he made his way to the door. The Joker helped Ivy and Harley off the tables and guided them out, being cautious as they passed Jason. Two-Face slapped a wad of bills down on the bar counter-top, nodded to Wally, and left with his men.

Soon the entire cafe was clear of guests. Nightingale went over, flipped off the OPEN sign, and
stood by the door to deter anyone from entering.

Richard looked around, moving from the entrance to eye the decorations lining the walls. Jason watched as the employees made quick work of cleaning. Calvin looked between the dessert case to the Bats.

Jason squinted at the ex-talon.

“You used to be a talon, right? Before you were resurrected and turned human?”

Calvin and Strix froze, sharing looks before turning their attention to the guest. Wally, Tim, and Damian were staring hard at him.

“What did you just say?” Damian’s tone was deadly. Jason’s shoulders tensed up.

“Calvin Rose. You went into a Lazarus pit and resurrected without the immortality.” Jason rubbed at the back of his neck. “Did you...in this universe not do that?”

“That’s a thing?” Tim’s voice was soft. The employees were frozen still, looking between everyone at the building tension. “Oh my god, it could work.”

“But G-Grandfather is the only one with a pit-”

Richard and Jason didn't miss the way the child stumbled over the word ‘grandfather’. Damian looked pained to speak of the man. Understanding but questionable all the same.

“I don’t know the details,” Jason answered gruffly. Richard shrugged his shoulders helplessly. He hadn’t really bothered to know about Calvin Rose or the talon’s business. Damian and Tim huddled together, whispering furiously, while Richard turned his attention back to the wall decor.

“Whoa Damian Wayne drew these pictures?” Richard asked, leaning in closer to study the art. His eyebrows shot up at the sight of Tim’s photographs. God, when was the last time his Tim showed the family his camera film? Had they ever hung up any of the teen’s artwork in the Manor? Either of the kids?
After Jason’s death everything went dark and Richard was ashamed to say he helped in that cloud of bleak ugliness.

“Timothy Drake is very talented.” Could he say this? Did he have the right to say this - compliment some other Tim and not his own? Did his Tim know he was proud of him every day? Or did he think he’d cast him aside for Damian (which was true, just the tiniest bit because Tim was old enough to know Damian required priority)?

“Uh-huh,” Cullen squeaked up, shoving Aion off the counter. “He’s super cool! He changes out the photographs every month. He’s even done some pictures for the cat cafe!”

Nightingale flushed under his mask, scratching at his cheek while Aion snickered at him. Cullen just looked at the two, confused at to what was happening behind the scenes, before perking up at the entrance of his sister.

“Whoa what’s - oh. I heard about this.” Bluebird - or Harper Row out of the mask - eyed the two guests, both of which eyed her back. “Whatever. Come on Cullen, let’s go. Aion, I fucking swear, if your hands get any lower-”

“How many people just pop up here?” Richard asked. It was so weird, seeing so many familiar faces there. As if they gravitated to the cafe like it was the center of their universe.

“Too many,” Morgan called as she tossed her apron off. “Can we crash upstairs? I haven’t slept in 24 hours.”

“Weak,” Tim spoke without thought and then hunched up his shoulders like he was expecting something. A second passed before he relaxed. “I forgot Dick isn’t here.”

“Mood,” Aion called as he followed after Harper and Cullen. “Can I please just ask him on one date?”

“Jesus-” Their conversation was cut off by the closing door. Jason shook his head. He didn't even want to know.
“What’s upstairs?” Richard asked, moving to touch the plants lining the windows.

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“No idea. It’s a mystery. I mean, I have my theories when he used a duster on Superman different times but…” Morgan shrugged. Richard wheezed.

“No idea. It’s a mystery. I mean, I have my theories when he used a duster on Superman different times but…” Morgan shrugged. Richard wheezed.

“... I’m… done.” Jason turned on his heel. “I’m going to go look around. No! I won’t do anything, Goldie Locks. I don’t have my guns, remember?” Jason stood tense for a moment before leaving.
“So, wanna see Boss’s place?” Calvin asked. Richard nodded eagerly.

Jason crouched low on a rooftop. The air was warmer, the night silent. There were no tell-tale sounds of screaming or glass shattering. There was no flickering lights or sirens from hordes of police cars driving to crime scenes. There was nothing that made this place Gotham.

Jason was wary and uncomfortable.

Actually, he felt a little cheated. This Gotham seemed a hundred times lighter than his own home. This Gotham didn't rip everything Batman loved from him and left him with hollow corpses to live with him in his lonely little Manor.

He felt cheated. This Bruce seemed gentle - like how his Bruce had been when he’d first come to the Manor. This Bruce looked like he’d fistfight a literal God to protect his children while Jason knew his own Bruce would leave them as sacrificial pawns.

Because that’s all they were - pawns to trade and replace at the earliest convenience. He knew Nightwing knew this too, was beginning to see without the wool over his head. Maybe -

Maybe this universe would help that process. See how vastly different and wrong each Batman was. One who was at his ultimate form of badassery and the other who was a shadowed husk of a once-great man.

“Penny for ya thoughts?”

Jason tensed and looked over his shoulder. Poison Ivy and Harley scaled the rooftop on one of Ivy’s vines. Harley hopped down and skipped her way over, expression guarded as she kept a tight grip on her mallet.

“Go away Harley. I’m not like the wimp you know.” Because if Joker was still alive and everyone was generally on good terms then that could only mean that this Jason was a fucking loser.
“Red Hood isn’t a wimp,” Harley argued as she plopped down beside Jason. He was rigid as Ivy took his other side. “He just loves Dickie-Bird too much to act on almost all of his impulses.”

He wished he had his guns. He could kick their asses easily but the idea of having that grounding weight in his grip calmed him in ways that fists meeting flesh never did.

“Mista J used to beat me,” Harley spoke suddenly. Jason turned from staring out at the night city to look at her. “We were in the worst relationship ever.” She almost laughed at it. “And then the cafe popped up and Dick stabbed him in the hand for raising it to hit me.”

What? Jason shifted, uncomfortable with the sudden story. What did he care?

“Mista J was stupid though and didn't get the hint.” Harley twirled her curled hair around her fingers. “Until Dick made a house visit and nearly beat him to an inch of his life.”

Jason’s eyebrows shot up behind his helmet.

“He can’t kill Mista J - it’s one of those Orders. I-” Harley inhaled shakily “-I’ve seen his mind and memories. He was basically forbidden from killing him. When you were killed? He wanted to kill him so badly.”

Jason tried not to let the words affect him - this wasn’t his universe, his Dick, nothing that related to him personally. But hearing that - hearing that Dick, any Dick, would try to kill the Joker for hurting him…

“After that, Mista J got smart real quick. We’re also pretty sure he’d drugging the coffee but no one’s really complaining so.” Harley shrugged. “Dent likes the cafe ’cause after Dick found out he used to be a lawyer, he put in some law books near the back for the man to read during his visits.”

“And he was so serious about upkeeping my babies,” Ivy chimed in with a soft smile. “Usually anyone who receives my babies as gifts just gets rid of them. Not Dick. He kept coming to me asking for advice and worrying when they looked peakish.”

“And when he found out Black Mask was having money issues for a while because of a dry-spell
in the drug industry - don’t ask me I don’t know - he gave him and his men free drinks for an entire month!”

“And even Lex Luthor frequents the cafe despite being cities away,” Ivy chimed in. Jason sat between them, hunching down as the two women continued to drill into him how different and tame this Gotham was.

“And don’t even get us started on Deathstroke. For a while, we thought he was trying to sleep with Dick.” Jason gagged. “But he just seems him as a child he always wanted.”

“Why are you telling me this shit?” This wasn’t his home - their words meant nothing. Harley shrugged.

“You seemed to be struggling. I bet it’s a culture shock. You look like you never recovered from being murdered.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Jason snarled out, fists tightening along his thighs. “I’m just supposed to brush it off? I fucking died.”

“So has Dick,” Ivy pointed out. “So has Calvin. So has a lot of people and they’ve come back without any of this anger. You’re hurting, we get it, but don’t take it out on us. We’re strangers. We may be similar to your world’s but we’re not.” She leaned close, eyes deadly. “Dick has changed this Gotham for the better. Compared to six years ago, this city seemed like a completely different metropolis.”

“Fuck you two!” Jason shot up, pivoting on his heel. “I don’t have to listen to this bullshit!” The two watched him go, silent as he leaped off the roof.

“Jeez, guess we got lucky with the Red Hood we have. Could you imagine?” Harley asked Ivy. Ivy shook her head, looking put out.

Jason paused at the top of the stairs. Laughter, loud and wild, filled the hallways. It came from the theater room. He wavered before squaring his shoulders. He’d found his guns hidden in the kitchen
and had rearmed himself, feeling safer now that he had his trusty weapons.

He creaked the door open. The room fell silent and the video on the screen paused.

“Ja- Red Hood,” Bruce called in greeting. “Welcome back. None of the bad eggs gave you an issue, did they?”

Did Batman just call the Rogue Gallery bad eggs? This Gotham really was fucked up.

“Uh-” his eyes flickered to the screen, blinking at the Lego figures he saw “-no. What- what are you watching?”

“It’s called Lego Batman. Apparently Bruce made it for his Dick when he first came to the Manor. It’s hilarious. Come sit down, Little Wing, and watch it with us!” Richard called from the sofa, pressed in at all sides by the Bats. He looked so comfortable and content.

Jason stared. He hadn’t - Richard hadn’t called him that stupid nickname in a while. A good few years, honestly. Something in his chest tightened and didn't release.

“I’m just - going to the room.” He turned and left, his heart hammering. He couldn’t get his hopes up. He couldn’t pretend like Richard, couldn’t let his guard down.

Because when they went home, the expectations they’d surely have will be soured in a second.

Chapter End Notes

I posted a shitty drawing of Tim's Nightingale on my server for anyone interested. I couldn't figure out how to put the picture on here?? It was being weird so I gave up.

Sorry for short chapter - wanted something out before the move.
Roasted!Dick meets the Canon(?) Batfam Final

Chapter by widdlewed

Chapter Notes

Like usual, sorry for OOC. Tried to make it semi-realistic but this entire fic is based on crack so thought: eh screw it

edit: as of 10/07/2019 all mention of Birdflash has been removed

Edit 10/09/2019:

Hi there! For anyone who sees this while giving the fic a reread or seeing it for the first time, I wanted to share my reasoning with removing Birdflash.

Now when I say "remove" I mean for Dick and Wally. Birdflash will become a thing but I've gone through and remove any hints of Birdflash between Roasted!Dick and Wally.

Why?

Several reasons!

One, my own dumbass self forgot that Dick's physical age is 14 currently so, y'know, YikesTM even with his illusionary form of 26, it just still seems bad. I'm not for any sort of pedophilia type scenarios. Even tho Dick is biologically 26, I'd just rather not.

Another reason is when I first decided to introduce Wally, I really didn't care about a relationship for him. But it was a popular suggestion from readers so decided "ah what the hell". Only after his introduction chapters, I just kinda... Never wrote much mention of him and Dick. Like after chapter 11 and 12, it was mostly just one or two sentences scattered across the fic to basically remind people that Birdflash was still there. I forgot they were together and only ever remembered when a reader mentioned it.

There's also the fact I kinda just want to focus on Dick and his relationships with his family. Not have to write the additional romantic interest. Maybe in the future after everything is said and done with him i will write him with someone but I've decided not now.

And then the final reason: with the new addition of Richard, I feel Wally and him would be more compatible and am going to set them up together.

So while all removal of Birdflash has been removed, it's only in the sense of Dick and Wally. We've still got Richard to make Birdflash a thing.

I hope you understand and if you decide you don't want to read anymore, thank you for reading as much as you have. I hope removing a single pairing won't effect your enjoyment of reading this story.
Robin charged with a bloody war-cry. Dick leaped out of the way, back-flipping easily a good foot away. Jason abandoned Bluebird to rush to Dick’s side, guns out and safety off.

He was trembling, nerves and adrenaline pumping through him at a pace that left him giddy. He was breathless, the world feeling like it was layered over an Instagram filter. Batman was screaming something but it was warped and muffled to Jason’s ears. His gaze was zeroed in on Joker’s corpse.

*His corpse.*

“I love you so much,” Jason breathed out soft enough that only Dick could hear him. Dick gave an acknowledging hum as he tensed for another charge.

It was almost pathetically easy to knock Robin out. Dick caught the child’s suddenly limp body and hoisted him up, gentle to pillow the child’s head on his shoulder.

It frustrated him how much taller this child was to his real body. Jason, seeing the predicament, moved in front of the two protectively.

“Drop him,” Batman snarled, gadgets out and poised to attack. Tim just kept staring at the Joker’s head, expression unreadable behind that full-head cowl.

“No, no, I’ve got him,” Dick responded back conversationally, mind reeling. Great. Just great. He really fucked this up - a simple slip, a moment of letting his instincts take over and abuse the loophole of his Orders - and now they were in such a terrible mess. “I think you should take a moment to calm down.”

Like Dick had any right to say that.

“I should have locked you up the moment you got to the cave,” Batman growled deep and vicious. Tim tensed beside him, footing shifting. It was a familiar tell, one of great disagreements. Tim didn’t approve of killing but he never dictated how others lived their lives. Especially in their universe. Jason killed people - Red Hood killed people. It was his form of Justice and Tim couldn’t argue.
Bruce liked to think differently. Bruce liked to believe his way was the right way. His way was the only way. That nothing deserved death.

“Batman-” Red Robin tried to reason. Tried to stall. Because Batman would capture Dick and he would confine him. But these were strangers - intruders to their universe. They shouldn’t have to deal with that - no matter what chaos they caused. No matter what blood they spilled.

Dick was protective of what he perceived at his. Tim had picked up on that immediately. Why hadn’t Bruce? Bluebird had been attacked and Dick was only acting as he saw his right - defend his own. They may be from different universes but the feelings were the same.

Owls were territorial after all. You never attacked one of an Owl’s. It was signing your death warrant.

His cheek exploded into pain and the world tilted for a brief moment. It took a moment for the ringing in his ears to subside, allowing the influx of loud screeching to enter his sense of awareness. Tim found himself on his butt, blinking dumbly up at Batman. In the background, Jason was grappling with Dick, who was shrieking like a vicious Owl with Damian on the ground behind them.

Batman… Bruce… had just backhanded him. He’d backhanded him. The stinging along the right side of his face was testament to the attack - he knew it’d already be bruising. His fair skin bruised like a peach - fast and ugly.

“Don’t you dare try to defend them,” Batman snarled before stepping over Bluebird’s whimpering form. “They’re monsters.”

I don’t think so, Tim thought, tasting blood in his mouth. He used his tongue to poke at his cheek and winced, feeling the burn of a stretched cut. He must have bitten into his cheek when he was hit. That or his teeth cut against the fragile layer of tissue.

It wasn’t unnatural for Batman to get violent in the heat of the moment - Tim should have known to keep his tongue still. It was his own fault for trying to defend Dick. He knew that.

Didn’t stop his chest from aching though.
“I told you,” Dick hissed low, eyes glowing a toxic yellow in the shadows of the alley, “what would happen if you laid a hand against them.”

Aw. Despite the entire situation, Tim couldn’t help but be a bit touched. This man, who was nothing like their own Dick, had threatened Batman? For them? That was so sweet.

(Distantly Tim realized he was probably in shock. Either from the hit or the sight of a dead Joker, he didn’t know. But he knew he was detaching from the moment, dissociating to allow his mind peace to process all the facts.)

Batman didn’t deign an answer to Dick, instead just charging in a similar manner to Damian. Jason released Dick like he was on fire and moved to scoop up the unconscious Robin.

(Tim also knew, distantly, that Damian was going to be livid at how easily he was taken down. The child couldn’t be to hard on himself - he was only 12. This Dick had been raised as an assassin for probably longer than Damian had even been alive. He couldn’t expect to be able to match the Talon.)

Dick used the walls and his claws to scale above Batman’s head, using his natural flexibility to his advantage. Batman twisted, trying to track Dick.

Giving Jason the perfect shoot to land a rubber bullet to the inside of Batman’s knee. The man’s legs buckled at the hit and Dick appeared from the shadows, knife in hand and yellow eyes predatory.

“Okay Timbers,” Jason was suddenly beside Tim, Damian slung over his shoulder and Bluebird being hefted up onto his opposite shoulder, “I need you to snap out of your little funk and get up. Can you do that? I’ve only ever been punched by B once so I don’t know if you have a concussion. Do you have a concussion? What’s your name?”

He was rambling. And trembling. And sounding breathless in a way that made Tim eye him weirdly.

“I don’t have a concussion,” he stated simply as he used Jason’s thigh to pull himself up. He grunted, the movement flaring up fire along his face. “Only once? Wow, we really got the shit end of the stick.”
Because wouldn’t it be nice to live in a world where Bruce hadn’t nearly beaten Jason to death and hadn’t punched the shit out of Dick during a panic attack?

Jason’s eyes searched his face for a moment, ignoring the two in the background trading blows.

“Okay, so, we’re going to unpack that at a later time. For now, I need you to do me a favor. Or several.” Jason paused as Batman gave a yelp, his elbow twisted in an impossible angle. Dick had three batarangs embedded into him, one in his eye and two sticking out of his shoulders. “Yeah, several.”

“I should be capturing you,” Tim numbly stated, pursing his lips as he turned his eyes to see Dick slam a knee repeatedly into Batman’s face. The echoing crunch of cartilage snapping was almost like distorted music to his ears.

(Just how much pain could he handle seeing his father figure in and not really worry? Tim didn't want to know. He loved Bruce, he really did. He sought him out when everyone else gave up. He was loyal to the man, to his shadow, to his legacy.

But who was he really loyal to? The man he snapped pictures of or the man who raised his own hands to his children without care?)

“Should is the keyword, Timmy. Should.” Jason’s arms looked like they were shaking. He shouldn’t be exerting that much strength to carry the two - Damian was pretty light for his age and Bluebird wasn’t exactly teeming with muscles.

Ah. Adrenaline crash. Tim didn't want to think of that. Not right now. Not when his father figure was getting the shit beat out of him by a tiny gremlin-looking zombie not five feet away from them.

“What do you need?” Tim ignored the sounds of snapping bones that crept into his ears. It was fine; Bruce had had worse before. This was fine.

(But it really wasn’t. Something was telling him this was it. This was the end. He didn't know why he didn't know how but he just knew.)
“You have safe houses. You do.” Jason gave him a hard look at Tim’s grimacing lips. “Batman doesn’t know about them, right? Take us to one of them. Now.”

“Will he kill him?” Tim asked, suddenly sounding so childish and hating it. He was 17, he wasn’t a child. He hadn’t been a child since his parents died and he found out that the monsters under his bed were drug dealers and serial rapists.

“Dick!” Jason hollered in response and Dick was at their side in an instant, Batman’s slumped form abandoned behind them. The man was still breathing but it sounded labored and wheezy.

Tim wouldn’t be surprised if he had a punctured lung or two. He definitely had broken bones. Many broken bones. Enough to put him in a full body cast, for sure.

“Thank you,” Tim uttered, some sort of knot in the pit of his stomach uncoiling at the unsteady but visible rise and fall of Batman’s chest. The man wasn’t dead, his father figure wasn’t dead, there wasn’t another casket to be made for one of Tim’s loved ones-

“Let’s go, Owlet,” Dick spoke and in a blink, was standing taller than Tim. Towering, actually. And maybe a day ago, Tim would be wary of the thought of this man standing over him, now it was a comfort.

Like a shield to protect him from the world.

Tim inhaled, set off the silent emergency alarm that’d alert any nearby Cape to their location, and dropped it beside Batman’s mangled body. Hopefully Batwoman or Orphan would get it. Orphan would find them without doubt, knowing things that Bruce couldn’t, and she’d inform Barbara and Stephanie, and maybe even Duke.

Tim moved on autopilot, debating what he’d say to them when they came. Maybe they’d know. Maybe they’d understand that the storm was upon them and they were about to brace it.

Maybe.
The safehouse was small and bare, holding on the essentials - cot, first aid kit, laptop, and a Keurig coffee maker. Dick’s nose had scrunched up at the machine, looking vaguely insulted, before he set Damian down onto the cot. Jason had dropped Bluebird off with Leslie before peacing out, not giving the woman a moment to question him.

“So.” Tim shuffled over to his Keurig, absent-minded as he went through the motions of popping open the tray and inserting a K-cup. “Now what?”

“Move.” Dick batted Tim away from the coffee maker, looking ready to take a bat to it. Tim hoped he didn’t. He liked Keurig. “You will go sit.” He pointed to where Jason was slumped over on the floor beside the cot. “I will make you real coffee.”

“That is real coffee,” Tim tried to argue but dragged his feet over to slump down beside Jason anyways. “Am I a traitor?”

Jason startled at the question, wide eyes turning to him before looking to Dick for help.

“No,” Dick responded, the single word hissed out with such venom it sounded like it could kill a man. “You are a victim. That man shouldn’t have ever been able to handle you all. He is an insult to who Grandmaster is. A father loves and protects his children. He does not hurt them.”

“Bruce doesn’t hurt us,” Tim weakly argued. “It’s...correctional.”

“It’s abuse.” Dick’s blue eyes flashed yellow. “And it will never happen again. Right Barbatos?”

Tim forgot about the bat fluff-ball. He was embarrassed to admit he startled when it emerged from Dick’s shadow.

“You’ll let me do what I offered originally?” Babatos asked, sounding almost gleeful. His tiny wings flapped, making clapping noises against his round body.

“Yes.” Dick plucked Barbatos up by his wings, expression empty. “Bu you will take us back to our universe and that is it. Do I make myself clear, Barbatos? I will rip you to shreds if you do anything else.”
“Yeah, yeah, I understand.” Barbatos looked like he was rolling his eyes. “Unleash some of my Magic and I will-”

“Yes.” Dick smiled, pleased. “Now, let’s make that coffee.”

Tim looked at Jason, confused. Jason just shrugged and threw an arm around the younger boy’s shoulder, drawing him close.

“Let Dick do his thing. We don’t argue with him.”

Tim was beginning to understand the power dynamics of their universe.

Ten minutes later had Damian up and ready to attack.

“No,” was all Tim had grumbled tiredly, hugging a mug of Damn Good Coffee™ to his chest. Damian, apprehensive, had studied the three and then the safe house. His nose scrunched up before he settled back down into the cot.

“Yes.” Dick answered as he moved slow, cautious. He knelt down in front of Damian, being open and intentionally broadcasting his movements as he rested his hands on the child’s armored knees. “I would never kill your father. I did hurt him, however.”
“Why?” Damian pulled off his mask with shaking fingers and let his hands fall to his lap, the weight of the past few hours like sand in his stomach.

“He was a bad person,” Dick whispered softly, almost a mockery of sharing a secret.

“My grandfather is a bad person,” Damian shot back without heat. “Father is not a bad person.” Dick shook his head and carefully, oh so carefully, took the child’s hands in his.

“Your father may not kill or maim but that doesn’t mean he isn’t a bad person. He shouldn’t hurt you. He shouldn’t punish you. He shouldn’t treat you like a soldier.”

“He doesn’t.” Damian whispered. “He’s good to me.” He kept his eyes trained on their linked hands, head bowed to hide his face. Dick’s eyebrows pinched up. “He doesn’t treat me like a soldier.”

“Maybe not you,” Dick amended, “but it is inexcusable how he treats your siblings. Damian, look at me.” Damian’s blue eyes flickered up, meeting Dick’s under thick lashes. “I won’t keep you from your father. I would never force you apart. But if you let me, I’ll protect you.” Dick breathed in. “I will bring you to a Bruce who’d love you unconditionally. Who would never look at your past and think it an ugly blemish. Who would regard you like the sun in the sky - irreplaceable and the center of his world.”

“Fancy words won’t cover you want me to abandon my Father for some cheap copy,” Damian spat, face twisting into an ugly scowl. “Father is - Father is only human. He has his faults. I won’t be swayed so easily as to cast him- what happened to your face?”

Damian’s eyes were locked on Tim’s face, or rather the dark, attention-drawing bruise stretching along his fair skin. Tim just sipped on his coffee again, avoiding eye contact.

“Daddy Dearest doesn’t like when Bad Guys are defended,” Jason cooed out in mock awe, going as far as to flutter his eyelashes. Damian’s gaze didn't waver.

“Father hurt you?” His eyebrows creased. “He doesn’t - he wouldn’t-.”
He stopped. Because Bruce would and he did. He’d done it to Grayson, Todd, hell, he’s beaten Harper up before when she was just beginning as a vigilante. He knew he his father had a temper, it was just one of his faults, but he’d never seen it directed at Tim or himself.

“I got in the way.” Tim was staring down into his mug, exhaustion etched into his words. “I’m not going back.”

And that one single sentence let everything fall into place.

Damian squeezed weakly at the hands holding his. “I’ll be able to see Grayson again?” Because of course, he’d ask for the one who took him under his wing when he first came to the Manor.

“Of course. But remember Damian,” Dick’s eyes were firm, “this is your choice. I will not kidnap you. I will not force you. I want this to be out of your own want, your own consent to leave.”

Bruce always looked at Damian like a stain that needed cleaning. Like he was defined by his upbringing, like that was all he was.

“I want Grayson,” was all the child uttered. Dick nodded in understanding.

That was all the confirmation he needed.

Twenty minutes later, Cassandra bust in through the safehouse ceiling window. Stephanie, Duke, and Barbara behind her. She landed in a crouch, body screaming her betrayal and anger while the others stood tense and armed.

Cassandra’s expression shifted, her head tilting as she studied the fatigued acceptance wafting off her two siblings. They were huddled together with the other Jason and Dick between them, protective and poised to defend.

“Explain,” she demanded, gaze trained on Dick. His body language showed protector - leader.
Everyone else leaned towards him for guidance and safety. He would answer.

“We’re taking them back with us to our universe,” Dick explained simply as he ran a hand through Tim’s hair. Stephanie was staring at his bruise, her eyes saddened with understanding. Barbara exhaled as she pulled her mask off, looking ready to just sleep.

“You’re kidnapping them?” Duke asked, a notable rasp in his voice. Dick frowned - he was still sick, wasn’t he? Why was he out and about?

“It’s our choice,” Tim defended as he closed his eyes, leaning against Dick’s thigh. He’d been a long time since someone pampered him like this. “I don’t think I want to be here anymore.”

“It’s finally happened, hasn’t it?” Barbara gave a weak, empty laugh. “God, it’s actually finally happened. Batman’s going to be alone.”

“Well you aren’t going anywhere without me,” Stephanie huffed out, making a show of holding her head high as she marched up to Tim. “We’re a packaged deal, babe.”

“Steph…” Tim looked at her like he’d never seen her before. “You don’t have to-”

“Bruce hasn’t been anyone good in my life since I died,” she huffed, cutting Tim off, “and he stripped me of the Robin mantle. You’re mine, buddy, and not even a universe is gonna keep us apart.” She plopped down next to him and gingerly touched his bruise. “Aw, Peach.”

“Safe?” Cassandra asked as she pulled her own Cowl back, frowning at Dick. She knew how badly her family was falling apart. She knew how badly everything was becoming a failure. She knew.

“Very,” Dick reassured. He stepped away from Tim and held a hand out to her. “No one will ever hurt you. Any of you.” His eyes flashed. “I’ll make sure of it.”

“Wow is Bruce really that bad?” Duke asked, looking between them all. “I mean, I know I’m kinda new to the family but…”

“Father is not the man I was forcing myself to see,” Damian answered curtly. His teeth ground
“And that gave ya the right to beat him into a full body cast?” Duke asked, tone oddly light. He studied them all for a moment before his gaze went to Jason. He was pensive. “You’re very stable.”

“Uh-huh,” Jason so eloquently responded, eyebrows raising.

“And kind. At least a little. In a weird, Jason-asshole kinda way.” Duke squinted at the offended man. “If Jason is like this, I gotta see how your Bruce is then.” Damian was looking at him weirdly while Jason snorted, looking more bemused than insulted now that Duke was on board.

“That’s it?” Barbara asked, eyes wide as she took in the people in the room. “We’re all just going to abandon our lives here, our families, and our responsibilities? What about my dad? My job? All my friends? I can’t just - I can’t just drop that all and leave. I’m not like you guys. Sure, Batman has fucked my life over many times, but I’m not going to run just to spite him.” She frowned.

“I’m sorry, I just can’t. I - I get it, okay? I get it. If you want to leave, I won’t judge you. I won’t stop you. But I can’t go with you.” She breathed in, looking teary. “I can’t leave my only remaining family and my responsibilities. I’m sorry.” She took a step back, head bowing. “I won’t tell him where you’ve gone. I won’t.”

“Thank you,” Cassandra spoke, eyes downcasted. “Goodbye.”

“I love you guys,” Barbara spoke weakly and turned sharply, rubbing at her eyes. “Bye. Good luck.”

Barbara left in silence and out of respect, no one made a sound. Once she was gone Tim exhaled shakily and stood slowly.

“Well, that’s everyone,” he said simply and held a hand out for Stephanie. She stood beside him, their hands linked. “This is it.”

“This is it,” Jason echoed as he stretched, groaning as his bones popped. Damian moved to press against Dick’s side, looking a bit lost. Cass stepped closer to Jason, tense with anticipation.
“This is crazy,” Duke muttered as he moved to Stephanie’s other side. He looked unsure of himself. “This is just - so, so crazy.”

“Aw, you’ll get along with our Duke nicely,” Jason laughed as he used his free arm to hook around Duke’s shoulders and dragged him to his side. “Alrighty Dick, let’s go before anyone else crashes into this supposedly secret safe house.” Tim shot him a scathing glare.

“Barbatos.” The lights in the safe house flickered as Dick’s shadow writhed and expanded into a mass of squirming tendrils. “I’m releasing a small amount of your powers. Enough to send us back to our universe. Do you understand what will happen if you go against me?”

“Tell Dick not to be a practice dummy then,” Jason laughed wetly as he buried his face into the man’s neck. “So. Um. We brought home some siblings.”
“I owe Cass 20 bucks.” Bruce pulled back, surveying their new family members. They were gawking at him like he’d grown a second head. He expected much, with how the Jason and Richard upstairs reacted to him. It saddened him. Even more when he saw the ugly bruise on Tim’s face.

Jason and Dick would never let him get hurt. Much less hurt him themselves. It could only be one person.

“Grandmaster,” Dick greeted politely, head nodding. His eyes faded from yellow to the blue and he beamed. “I missed you.”

“Missed you too, chum,” Bruce breathed. He stepped towards Dick, arms spread wide, when he caught sight of Damian.

Damian who was studying him like he couldn’t understand what he wanted to feel. Bruce’s gaze softened further.

“We’ll work out names later,” he decided as he knelt down to meet Damian’s eyes. He looked a bit older than his own son. “For now, just call me Dad, okay?”

Chapter End Notes

Translation of the zalgo text: “I got it.” “Hang on tight, this is gonna get bumpy.”

And we've got 2 chapters left of this universe swap and back to the usual crack. And trust me, I've got a lot planned ;)

tbh I think this fic is gonna like....go past 50 chapters? HAH oh lordy
Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

They looked haunted. Bruce had no other way to describe it. There were shadows and skeletons that clung to them like second layers of skin. There were scars, physical and mental, that
crisscrossed the children in front of him.

He’d feared the worst, based on how Jason and Dick acted. He feared hardened soldiers. He feared children weathered down by ugly darkness and careless neglect.

They were that and so much more. The child who was his in every sense but the universe carried this look like he was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“So.” He tried to pretend the other universe children tensed at his voice. “What should I call you all?” He wondered if they were like Jason - Red Hood - and couldn’t hear their real names on his lips. He wondered if their Bruce had ruined that for them - that security.

The newcomers traded looks with each other, uncertain and uneasy.

It was surprisingly Duke who spoke up.

“You can call me Thomas,” he whispered slowly, fiddling with his fingers.

“After your family?” Bruce asked, keeping his tone neutral. Dick sent him a pleased look and the man was mildly offended. He knew how to father - he’d been doing perfectly fine with Jason before Dick came into their lives, thank you very much.

“Yeah.” Thomas bobbed his head up and down. “I… I’m used to Damian - uh, our Damian - calling me that so it won’t make that much of a difference.”

“Thomas it is then.” Bruce smiled warmly and saw how Duke’s eyes went wide at the unfamiliar expression.

Sure, they’d seen Brucie Wayne in action, but never Bruce Wayne show a genuine smile before. It was creepy.

“Zhēn,” Cassandra spoke up, standing tall as she squared her shoulders. “I go by Zhēn.” Zhēn looked very pleased with herself, smiling softly as she tucked her hair behind her ear.
“How beautiful,” Bruce complimented and smiled so gently. “I’m assuming the character for precious or rare?” Zhēn beamed and nodded, smile widening. “It’s suiting.”

“Oh man I didn’t think we’d have to make up new names,” Stephanie muttered and flushed when Bruce’s eyes landed on her. “Uuuuuh Annie? Ah crap. Um.” Stephanie’s exposed skin flushed a blistered red. “Can I just use Annie as a placeholder until I have more time and less pressure to think?”

“Take all the time you’d like, Ms. Annie,” Bruce patiently teased and Annie’s jaw dropped. Okay, wow, she felt kinda cheated. How the fuck did their Bruce turn out to be such shit when they had the possibility of ending up with someone like this?

“Jackson.” Everyone turned to Timothy, who stared blankly at the floor. “It’s my middle name. Jackson.”

“You sound like a douche,” Jason snickered. Dick elbowed him in the side to shut up. Bruce shot the two a ‘calm down’ look.

“Timothy Jackson Drake,” Bruce recited, eyes sad. “It also suits you.”

“You forgot Wayne,” Jackson whispered faintly, unable to look up at Bruce. “I was adopted.”

“Yeah, to run Wayne Enterprises,” Annie huffed with a roll of her eyes. She sounded slightly bitter about it.

“Stop, Steph,” Jackson muttered. He kept his head bowed.

“Well Jackson, if you want to continue being Wayne, I have no problems with that,” Bruce spoke cautiously. Jackson glanced up at him finally and Bruce bit back a growl. The pure resignation and exhaustion in the child’s eyes was enough to make him want to chase the ends of the universes for their Batman and beat him into sense.

He’d truly broken these kids.
Finally, all gazes turned to Damian. He was studying Bruce, his expression carefully guarded as he pursed his lips.

“*Ibn al Xu'ffasch.*” The Arabic was almost spat out from the child’s lips. “Call me Ibn since I know you plebeians would butcher it. Like the uncultured swine you are.”

“If that’s what you prefer,” Bruce soothed and then nodded. “Now I know I sound like a broken record, but that name really suits you.” *Thank Fuck* Damian, his Damian, wasn’t down at this very moment. He’d probably start a hissy fit or something. He still had a lot of issues pertaining to his childhood and his mother’s side of the family, after all.

Ibn nodded and huffed. “I want to see Grayson. Make sure he hasn’t killed himself in the time he’s been stuck here.” He crossed his arms over his chest, defensive. Bruce couldn’t blame him - or rather, any of them. They all seemed wary and defensive. He knew how strange this probably was - Red Hood still wouldn’t let his guard down and Richard wasn’t fully trusting of them despite how long he’d spent with the kids.

It was going to take time to adjust.

Good thing Bruce had the patience of a saint.

As if summoned by Ibn’s words, thunderous footsteps sounded from outside the Grandfather Clock entrance.

“**MOVE!”** Stephanie’s shriek echoed as the entrance slipped open.

“*Ow! She fucking punched me in the throat!*” Tim’s voice roared back. The new additions to the family could only watch, jaws unhinged, as their counterparts stampeded down the staircase and charged towards them.

Only they didn't stop to assess the new members. No, they fucking bulldozed right through their counterparts and, as of one mind, slammed right into Dick.

Dick let out a loud, joyous bark of laughter as Damian scaled him like a tree, clinging to him tightly
while Stephanie and Tim both took a side and squeezed. Duke was being an actual good brother and was hugging Jason, who rolled his eyes at his younger siblings’ affection. Cass moved to hug Jason as well, pecking a kiss to his cheek in greeting.

“Don’t you ever do that again!” Damian cried out, tears threatening to spill. Ibn made a startling noise in the back of his throat as he watched his counterpart nuzzle against Dick’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I promise - no more being a practice dummy for mages in training,” Dick cooed as he set Damian down. He ran a hand through the child’s hair, making little noises as he wiped at his tears. “Oh Owlet, don’t cry. You know I’d never leave you.”

“You’re a dumbass!” Stephanie sniffled as she peeled back. She wiped at her face. “Jesus, you’re going to give us serious separation anxiety with all this shit.”

“Like you don’t already have it!” Duke choked out, making a face. “You guys are the worst! At least I can handle him being gone for a week!”

“It wasn’t a week,” Tim corrected as he unlatched himself from Dick and moved to cling to Jason. Jason snorted and hugged Tim back gratefully, exhaling in relief.

And just like that, Jackson and Ibn noticed how uncoiled Jason was. For the first time since they’d met the nicer counterpart of their Red Hood, he was relaxed. Thomas blinked as well, awed by the family in front of him.

Jason hadn’t been kidding - their universe really seemed like something out of a fantasy.

Stephanie was the first to finally give their guests acknowledgment. She caught Annie’s eyes and her eyebrows went up.


“Where is Grayson?” Ibn asked haughtily, frowning. Now that they’d had their little reunion, he wanted his own brother figure. Where was his Batman?
“Aw, I knew you cared, Lil’ D!”

Ibn, along with his siblings, turned as Richard and Red Hood descended the stairs. Behind them, unfamiliar faces cautiously crept in their wake.

“Grayson!” Ibn restrained himself as Richard quickly made his way towards him. “You’re counterpart is worse than you are.”

“I bet!” Richard laughed as he raised a hand. He only hesitated for a moment before bringing it down, ruffling Ibn’s hair. “Hi.”

“Hi,” Ibn greeted back softly.

“Oh jesus, why are you all here?” Red Hood grumbled as he sidled up to them, helmet nowhere in sight and hair sticking up like he’d just gotten out of bed. Judging by his pajamas, he must have.

“We’re here to stay,” Jackson spoke up and Red Hood looked at him. At his bruised face. At his eyes.

“What’d B-man have to say about that?” Red Hood finally spoke, shifting his footing. His shoulders were tensed, the muscles under his sleep shirt tightening. “Throw a bitch-fit and clock you?”

“No, he didn't get the chance to throw a fit,” Jason shot back, voice deceitfully laidback. “He punched first and then got his ass beat by Dickie.”

Red Hood’s eyes shot over to Dick, taking a moment to eye him up and down. He’d severely dismissed the man when they’d first popped into their universe - he was regretting not taking the time to actually assess the man.

“I brought them back with me,” Dick explained. “It was their choice. They chose to come with me.” They nodded in agreement. Red Hood let his gaze lazily slide over to Annie. She stared back at him, hard.
“Well shit,” was all Red Hood could say. “What else did I miss?”

“Joker’s dead,” Jason blurted.

Silence.

“Dick,” Bruce said warningly.

“What?” Dick said back, just as warningly. The two stared seriously at each other. “He wasn’t under my Orders. Different Joker, different Orders. Loopholes sure are something, aren’t they?” He batted his eyelashes innocently. Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose.

“...What?”

Red Hood must have misheard. He must have misheard his counterpart because there is no way that crazed clown was dead. There was no way he was murdered - by a Dick Grayson no less. There had to be a misunderstanding. A miscommunication.

The Joker couldn’t have died. Batman wouldn’t have let anyone touch the criminal with such intent on their mind. Hell, he nearly murdered Jason to prevent the clown from dying from a bullet to his head.

There was no way. There was no fucking way.

“You’re lying.” Because if it wasn’t a miscommunication, then it had to be a lie. A trick. A prank. A hilarious joke. ‘Joker’s dead - psyche! Hahaha!’ Get Little Jason’s hopes up so when he went back home, it’d all come crumbling down. Because no matter how many fucking times he tried to bury than fucker six feet under, something prevented him.

It was like the universe wanted that damned clown alive. Like there was just some law or force of nature that had to be followed - keep that fucker breathing.
“I’m not,” Dick replied calmly, eyes suddenly meeting his. “I tore his head from his body-”

“Dick.”

“-and cut his chest open. I’m covered in his blood. Do you want to see?”

Distantly, Red Hood could see that other Tim bury his hands into his hair and groan as if embarrassed.

“Batman wouldn’t let you kill him.” His voice sounded too loud in his ears. It was too quiet in the cave. It was too quiet and too crowded and Red Hood needed to leave-

“Listen to me.” Dick was suddenly in his space, in his view, his hands cupping his cheeks and keeping him still. “That man didn’t know what was good from evil. That man couldn’t do anything to stop me. I killed the Joker. He’s dead.” Dick repeated the sentence more sternly, as if trying to drill it into Red Hood’s head. “He’s dead.”

“He can’t be.” He hated how his voice cracked and he had to all but punch the words out. “Batman wouldn’t let him die. Wouldn’t let him be murdered. Not even when I died.”

Dick and Bruce both picked up on Richard’s wince and how he let his eyes drop to the ground.

Red Hood was too lost in his own thoughts to even notice any of his “siblings” around him. Because if Jason’s own death couldn’t push that man over the edge, nothing could. If even the death of his own biological son couldn’t push him past that point, then nothing could. So how could this person - this Nightwing wannabe - lie to his face and say that he was able to murder the Joker and Batman couldn’t prevent it.

“That man was wrong.” Dick’s hands were ice cold and so unlike Richard’s that it let Red Hood cling to the contrast like a lifeline. “He is dead. I killed him. There is no longer a Joker in your former universe.”

Former universe. He said it like it was no longer an option to go back to. Like Red Hood was stuck here in this nightmare, in a world where the Joker ate cupcakes with Batgirl and Bruce made stupid Dad-jokes and kissed their foreheads when they went to sleep.
Like he had every right to abandon that hellish universe and not feel any regret or remorse.

“You will not go back there,” Dick continued, just as bluntly. Despite how forceful his words were, he kept his tone gentle. He wanted to get his message across without startling the man, after all. “I am sorry, but I am not letting you go back to that man. I will not let you go back to that universe.”

“Why?” Every carefully constructed wall he’d built up over the years, time and time again after each failure, cracked and shuddered threatening to crumble. Why did he kill the Joker? He could have just gone back to this universe without meddling in their affairs. He could have just caused the normally expected mayhem of switching universes and then called it a day. But instead he’d slaughtered the clown without remorse or apologies. Why?

Why did he care at all about Jason?

No one cared for Jason. He thought Bruce did, once upon a time. Back when he could call Bruce ‘dad’ unapologetically, back when Alfred taught him baking recipes and Dick stopped by on his off days. But then he’d died, come back to find his murderer still walking, and a hollowed shell of the man he’d grown to see as family.

And a replacement to his position, all starry-eyed and loved by both Bruce and Dick. There was no hostility from meeting based on bad impressions, no sneers and judgment to ‘uphold the mantle of Robin’. Not for this replacement.

And none of them cared for Jason.

None of them mourned. Bruce just scooped up another child to fill his bloody role and Dick pretended that he was a great big brother.

No one cared for Jason. He’d known that on the streets, he’d remembered it in the Manor, and he lived by it every day of his life now.

So why did this total stranger?

Or was this for his own Jason?
Of course. It had to be-

“Because someone has to protect you,” Dick stated simply. As if it was just common sense.

Too bad it wasn’t that easy.

“Fuck you!” Red Hood roared, shoving Dick away from him. “I don’t need to be protected! I’m not some snot-nosed kid! Some fucking wimp!” Something cold and light bubbled up his stomach, killing any panic and leaving only a ghostly touch in its way. The familiar burn settled in his bones, toxic green and scorching everything it touched. Rage. Unfiltered rage.

“You can’t keep me here. I’m not abandoning everything I have just because you say so!” His hands twitched. He wanted - no needed - to leave. He needed to leave now.

“Wait-” Dick looked alarmed, like he wasn’t expecting this. Like he was expecting Red Hood to bow down in submission.

Fuck that.

Jokes on him, Red Hood guessed. Looks like this universe never had to deal with someone saying ‘NO’ to this man.

Red Hood shoved him again, getting him out of his bubble of space. This wasn’t anyone he knew, anyone he trusted, anyone he could call an acquaintance. They didn’t need to be so close.

“So you killed the Joker?” His hands were trembling and he was terrified he was going to wake up any second now. “So fucking what?!”

(He was dead he was dead he was dead he was-)

“Does that somehow give you the right to keep me here against my will?” He hated this Gotham, hated this universe, hated this Bruce. It was too nice, too soft, too everything he’d always desired
and then let go of. This was every dream and hope he’d ever had for his life wrapped up neatly in a bow.

To bad he’d set fire to those fantasies long ago when he’d picked up a gun for the first time and demanded revenge.

He hated being here, in the constant reminder of what his life could have been. It nauseated him to the core.

The fury licking at his veins simmered, just the tiniest bit, and he exhaled.

“Take me home.”

“Jason-”

CRACK.

Red Hood withdrew his arm, watching the cut along Dick’s cheekbone heal instantaneously. He loosened his grip on his gun, momentarily confused as to when he’d grabbed it. And when he’d pistol-whipped Dick. But it had happened, in the tense of the cave. He’d done that. He’d just fucking done that.

“Don’t call me so familiarly,” Red Hood kept his voice like ice as he swallowed down the panic that was coming back. Shit. Shit he needed to escape. He hated that trapped feeling, the claustrophobic tightness that bore down on him the longer he stood there. “We’re not friends, freak.”

He knew Goldie and Replacement would keep to themselves, letting Red Hood handle this situation themselves. They knew his anger. They knew how he acted when he felt caged in.

“However you took them-” he pointed his gun towards the Replacement and Demon-brat “-from their Gotham. I want you to take me back. Now. I won’t ask again.”

“Dick, you can’t keep him here against his will. It’s not right,” Red Hood’s weaker double spoke
up finally, eyes giving him a hard once-over. “If he wants to go back, let him go back.”

“But…” Dick looked so lost. “He’s just going to go back to his abuser.”

Red Hood’s laugh was a sharp bark and the former Talon looked back to him.

“Like you know what the fuck is going on,” Red Hood bit out. “Fuck off and take me back. I don’t need your care or charity.” He watched the bat on Dick’s shoulder flap its tiny wings.

“Fine,” the bat spoke up. Dick scowled sharply at it.

“Little Wing,” Richard’s voice cut through the dense atmosphere, “are you sure?”

Was he sure? Was he sure he wanted to go back to his home, see for his own eyes that Joker was dead? Was he sure he wanted to keep his streets clean and protected for the inevitable backlash of Joker’s fall from Power would bring? Was he sure he wanted to handle watching Batman fall from his own grace, abandoned by everyone he’d ever had in his life?

Hell fucking yes he was sure.

“Piss off,” Red Hood gritted out. “Don’t suddenly act like you care.”

Barbatos heaved himself through the air, plopping down with an audible struggle on Red Hood’s shoulder.

“This is going to hurt,” was all the warning the Bat Demon gave before his tiny little fangs chomped down on Red Hood’s exposed neck. The man yelped, arm swinging wide to shake the little fucker off.

“What the hell!?” He swore as Barbatos fluttered down onto the ground between him and Dick.

“There. You are now bound to Dick though me. It’s a contract.” Beady black eyes blinked slowly. “If you ever wish to travel back to this universe, you now hold the ability to do so.”
“...did that bat thing just made Jase a fucking dimension hopper?” Annie whispered in numbed awe to Jackson. He just nodded back wordlessly.

“Why the fuck-”

“Because I have seen too many versions of you to care about this insignificant temper tantrum you’re throwing.” The shadows in the cave seemed to crawl towards Red Hood. “Because you will come to regret your decision. You will. For all you gripe, you care for these mortals. You will yearn for them before long. I’m just making it easier for you.”

“Aw,” Steph cooed out. A shadow smacked at her heels and she yelped. Dick just stared intently at the Bat.

“Barbatos growled out and Red Hood was consumed by his own shadow.

“Whoa,” Thomas whisperped. Barbatos gave a huff and then flapped his wings twice.

“I demand macarons!” He roared out. Jason shook his head, unable to say anything to the crazy demon who just did that.

“So,” Aion spoke up after a veil of silence had fallen along the group, “would this be a bad time to tell Dick about his cafe?”

“What about my cafe?”

Helena ‘eep’d.
“Wow,” Jackson mumbled as Wally just kept zooming around them, “and I thought our Wally was extreme.”

“Richard looks happy though,” Annie whispered as she pressed closer to his back. “Am I the only one a little uncomfortable with this entire scenario?”

“No,” Damian spoke as Ibn and Richard talked softly. His eyes narrowed on them, something displeasing him enough to show on his face. Annie and Jackson watched, a bit bewildered by how expressive he was. He seemed more emotionally stable compared to their Demon Brat - excuse me - Ibn. “It is unsettling to see your face on someone else.”

“Yep.” Thomas looked up from the Switch to stare blankly at Duke. Duke stared back.

Duke shrugged. “Honestly, this isn’t even the weirdest thing I’ve ever encountered.”

“At least they’re getting along.” Tim pointed out, jerking his chin over to Cass and Zhēn who were talking in fast flashing hand signs and rapid-changing expressions.

“So what are we going to do?” Annie asked as Wally finally came to a halt. He made a comment to Barbara, who laughed. And it was weird to see Barbara still in her wheelchair. She was still Oracle in this universe, no longer taking the mantle of Batgirl as the rightful owner.

“For now you should rest and adjust,” Dick explained, fidgeting with his new earring. Zatanna looked pleased with her work, leaning against the Batcomputer desk as she eyed his new appearance. He looked similar to Richard in color and body size, no longer having to make up for lack of evidence of genetics.

“This is still so weird,” Damian grumbled. He looked up as Dick came to his side. He didn't nearly have to crane his neck back as far thanks to the new illusionary form. He was silently thankful. “You won’t replace us, right?”

“Never, Owlet,” Dick soothed, frowning as he looked at his youngest. He looked so much taller now. Geez. Richard wasn’t short, by any means, but with how tall Bruce and Jason were, his first form had been notable in height compared to now. “We just have more Pups and Owlets.”
“If you say so.” Damian moved his gaze back to Ibn. “This reminds me of-”

“We’re not going to talk about that.” Despite how sharp and curt his words were, Dick’s expression was soft and open. “Don’t think about that woman, Owlet.”

“I’ve got to, like, read a summary of this universe,” Annie whispered to Jackson, who nodded. “I feel so lost.”

“It’s a long story, sis,” Duke stated with the deadest look in his eyes. “It’s a seriously long story. Quick Spark edition: Dick and Bruce have an adoption issue and we’re all pretty sure he’s drugging his coffee.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Jackson argued.

“Nothing does when it comes to Dick,” Tim replied with a sigh.

Chapter End Notes

Barbatos: “Begone now.”

OOF I know this chapter is short. I know. I get it. I do. But I have one more chapter left for this arc and then back to the crack. Be patient, please.
The moment he touched down on the rooftop, he could feel an unbalance. One could call him crazy, but he knew. When one grew up on the streets of Gotham, learning to live each day as it came, one gained a sense for when something was off. And Jason - Jason could immediately feel how different it was.

This was his home but everything felt like it’d been shifted slightly to the left. Even the air blew crisper again his body. He shuddered and tugged his jacket tighter around his frame, head cocked to the side as he listened.

Sirens sounded off in the distance, a familiar and welcoming noise against the whirlwind of his mind. He exhaled and tapped on his helmet.

“Red Hood to any Capes. Red Hood to any Capes.” He waited, comm link settled on a frequency that only the Gotham vigilantes used.

A beat and a click sounded, alerting him to someone hopping on.

“What the hell?” Batgirl blurted. “Why are you back?”

“Where did everyone else go?” Batwoman asked, tentative and wary. Red Hood was honestly a little shocked she was on their comm link. She never really interacted with them unless absolutely needed.

“Why the fuck would I leave my city?” Jason growled. “Same reason you stayed, Batgirl. I’ve got shit to do. I can’t just say ‘fuck you’ to my responsibilities like those assholes.”

“At the Cave, nursing a few broken bones,” Batgirl responded icily. “Listen Hood-”

“No, you listen Barbara.” The comm went silent at the use of her real name. “Those selfish fucks abandoned us and everything we’ve ever stood for.” He clenched and unclenched his hands, silently chanting a calming mantra. “I’m staying to clean up their mess.”

He hissed low under his breath. “This is my City.”

He disconnected from the comm and lunged off the roof, his grappling hook anchor latching onto another rooftop ledge. He propelled himself through the air, eyes skimming the ground below as he passed.

On the surface, nothing looked different. But he knew the chaos brewed in the underbelly of the City, hidden from the light and dwelling in the darkness where everything belonged. He knew by the end of the week, if he didn't act quickly, Gotham would fall.

Because there was a food chain - an order to the madness that Gotham embodied. Joker was on top, his moniker of Clown Prince of Crime befitting to his place in the hierarchy. Because he’d been the first and foremost most feared criminal of the Rogues. Always had been, despite his status as human. But now with him decrowned (or decapitated in this case), the throne was open to the taking.

He knew Harley wouldn’t take it. Ivy wouldn’t either because it didn't suit her needs. Maybe the Penguin would try to claim the spot as Big Bad #1. Or maybe even The Riddler or The Scarecrow. Two-Face would find it interesting but would wait for everyone else to make an attempt before even thinking of joining the fray.

So he had to act quickly. Claim the spot before anyone else got the bright idea that they could rule Gotham. Jason exhaled softly as he landed into a tuck-and-roll on a roof. It was never a dull moment for him, huh?
Alfred tugged harshly to the thread stitching Bruce’s cut closed, feeling deeply satisfied when the man flinched under his hand. Good. He deserved it.

A heat burned in his chest. How dare this man chase away his family. How dare he scare away his grandchildren. He knew Bruce’s reasoning for not killing, God did he know, but that didn't excuse his treatment to their guests and his children. It did not.

He smacked an adhesive pad against the stitches and cleaned up as Bruce slumped forward. The man was covered in plaster, stitches, and casts. The other Dick really did a number on him.

A crash sounded and the two men tensed in alert. Alfred’s eyebrows raised as Red Hood stormed into the Cave. He made a beeline for Bruce and the old man didn't even think to stop him as he punched Bruce.

“You fucker!” Jason grabbed at the front of the batsuit, shaking Bruce and uncaring that he was jarring his wounds. “You absolute piece of shit!”

Bruce just gawked at Jason like he was seeing a ghost.

“You let that two-bit imposter of the Golden Boy kill the Joker? When I had a claim on that bag of shit? What the fuck?!” Jason raised his fist back to punch him again. He let it sail, his anger not diminishing when it connected with a satisfying crunch. “And fuck you for touching the Replacement! Good fucking parenting, huh?!”

Alfred sipped on his cup of tea, watching the two over the brim of his cup. He made no move to intervene.

“You-you came back,” Bruce gritted out when Jason’s words tapered off. Jason released his suit and backed off, shoulders heaving as he huffed and puffed loudly through his nose. “You came back.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” Jason snarled. “This is my City. I’m not going to just abandon it to let it burn itself to the ground.” He took sick pleasure in seeing how Bruce’s entire body caved in on itself at the implications that Bruce was never part of the equation to his return. Yeah, fuck him.

“You need to wake the fuck up, Bruce.” Jason’s hand twitched to whip out his gun and pull the
trigger. “You’ve lost everything. Time to face the music.” He turned and marched past Alfred, high-fiving the man as he made his ascent up the stairs to the manor.

Alfred let his first child simmer in the bruised face and bruised ego for a while longer.

“You are controlled by your grief,” he spoke softly and Bruce’s dark eyes raised to meet his. “You never learned to let go. Everyone takes their time in mourning but you’ve been stuck in the steps for too long, sir.” He sighed shakily. “You’ve lost your family to your grief, Bruce, and you’ll never get them back.”

Alfred left Bruce, leaving the man to sit in the Cave under the glow of his computer.

“Please tell me they’ll be happy,” Alfred whispered. Jason paused in cracking an egg open, already covered in flour and chocolate chips spilled over the kitchen island.

“They’ll be fucking doped up on sugar and rainbows,” Jason growled as he whisked violently at his flour-egg-and-sugar concoction. Alfred wordlessly pushed the baking soda and baking powder closer to the man. Everyone in the Manor knew never to intervene with Jason’s stress baking.

“I’m going out while these are in the oven.” Jason dumped the random amount of baking soda into the mixing bowl. “Don’t fucking try and fix these. I’m force-feeding them to Bruce.”

Alfred nodded solemnly.

“Of course, sir,” he spoke and watched as Jason began to vigorously shake chili flakes into the batter. Alfred set a bottle of Tabasco sauce by his elbow. He poured the entire contents of the bottle into the bowl.

“Gotta find where he moved the body,” Jason grumbled as he smashed another egg into the bowl, shells and all, “and fucking begin working. Gonna have to pull an all-night because fuckers can’t respect the dimension hopping rules.”
Alfred watched the man as he destroyed the sacred art of baking, silently happy that at least one of his children were home. Everything was going to change, Alfred had no doubts about that, but at least Jason was there with him to brave it.

Richard looked up from his mug as Dick perched himself on the island counter, wrapped in a pink unicorn fleece blanket. Dick stared at him and it was eerie to see the exact same face. Before, he could tolerate it since the man’s face was a mixture of Bruce, Jason, and himself. Now it was unsettlingly like looking at a mirror reflection that didn't mimic your movements.

“You killed the Joker, didn't you?” Dick asked bluntly. There was just the two of them in the kitchen, everyone either patrolling or asleep in their beds. It was 4:15 in the morning, prime brooding hour for the new residence.

“I did.” Richard let his eyes fall again. He gave a weak, bitter laugh. “B resuscitated him. I just was...so furious . He killed my Little Wing.” He used a hand to hide his eyes. “God, I never told Jay.” He exhaled shakily, other hand clenching into a fist by his drink.


“It just...never came up. I couldn’t bring myself to correct him when he was so adamant that no one tried to get revenge for him.” Richard buried his face into his hands. “I fucked up.” Because how could he face his brother and tell him he’d killed the Joker? How could he look Jason in the eyes and go, “Hey, I beat the Joker to death but, uh, Batman revived him?” How could he let such a failure be known, how he almost went past the line of no return, and how even without his rage, he’d have done it over and over and over again.

“Well, when he comes back, explain it to him.” Dick handed him back his mug. “You all are bad at talking.” Richard hated how it made it sound so matter of factly that Jay would return. How he was so sure that with time, another Red Hood would be filling up their new home. It made that constant cold anger on his shoulders grow hot with each passing second.

Richard laughed, broken and wet. “I can’t argue with you there. Bruce really did a number on us developmentally. I’m pretty sure I’m only so decent because of my parents.” The two sat in silence, Richard pensive while Dick just stared blankly at the countertop. “So...Talon, huh?”
“Oh,” Dick blinked owlishly and Richard jumped as he took his earring off to show his true form, “yeah. Isn’t it funny how your life can be different at the smallest of changes?”

“How is that funny?” Richard asked, exasperated. Dick shrugged his shoulders.

“My sense of humor is not...light.” Dick leaned closer, looking like a cat about to pounce on a mouse. “You were with the circus for three years longer than me. I’m curious as to the difference that time made.”

“Oh.” Richard blinked. Hard. “Um. Well.” He lifted his elbow and pointed at a pale, jagged scar right on the flesh of his elbow. “When I was eight, I fell of Zitka and my elbow popped right through the flesh.”

“Oh,” Dick breathed, ice-cold fingers brushing the scar. “Zitka.” He leaned back, thoughtful. “She was an...elephant?”

“Yeah.” Richard’s throat tightened just the tiniest bit, as it always did when he talked about his family. No matter how many years have passed, it’d always hurt. It’s always be the tiniest bit awkward to talk about. “She used to let me ride on her. She’s a good girl.”

“I have a vague memory of her.” Talon tapped at his chin with his clawed fingers. “My time before The Court is all blurry and vague.” For the most part. But he wasn’t about to get into Barbatos’s Mind Games with Richard.

“That’s...really shitty,” Richard decided on saying. He stared at Dick with an expression he couldn’t place. “Seriously dude, that sucks.”

Yeah.” Dick moved to drum his claws against the tabletop. “Do you want cookies?”

“I-what?” Richard reeled back. “Um.” This was going to take a while to get used to.

“You have a sweet tooth and I think cookies are a must at this point,” Dick explained patiently as he replaced his earring. He slid off the table and moved to one of the lower cabinets. “Do you have food allergies or dietary restrictions?” He paused. “Also, why is Ibn not vegan?”
“Personal...choice?” Richard began slowly. “He was a vegetarian for a while when we had Batcow but…” At Dick’s blank face, he sighed. “You didn't have Batcow? Thank goodness. That was a nightmare when she died.”

“Uh-huh.” He pulled out a metal mixing bowl. “So, any allergies?”

“Tim - ah- Jackson can’t eat peanuts but other than that, everyone’s good.” Richard scratched at his neck. A small, sad smile danced on his lips. “Jay stress bakes too.”

“I don’t stress bake. I mood bake. Everything is a mood, therefore I always bake.” There was that factual tone again. Richard’s lips twitched upwards. He lurched and caught the bandana Dick tossed his way. “Tie your hair back and help me.”

“Help you? I’m pretty bad at cooking. I can make a mean bowl of cereal but don’t let me near a stove.” He tried to keep his tone light-hearted. He faltered under Dick’s intense blank stare. “It’s a joke.”

“Don’t joke about cooking.” What did Alfred do to him?! “You will learn, Tyto.”

Richard choked on the last of his coffee, nearly dropping the mug. “What did you call me?”

“Tyto. It’s a genus of owls that make up the subfamily Tytoninae of the barn owls family, Tytonidae,” Dick recited like a Google Search result. Richard eyed him weirdly as he tied back his hair and tugged the bandana on over it.

“You...know a lot about owls. Was it something the Court instilled in you?”

Dick blinked, pausing in pulling out the hand mixture. “Oh, no.” He smiled faintly, setting the device down next to his bowl. “It started when I called Jason Owlet. After that, I researched all I could on owls to make it all fit my Nest. It’s a theme.”

Richard stared. And stared, And stared. “Oh my god, you theatrical loser.”
Dick threw a stick of butter at him.

“JESUS!” Barbara jumped and whirled, ready to throw down with whoever just crashed through her window. Red Hood shook off the glass fragments from his jacket, gun already out and at his side almost lazily.

“Alright, so,” he began, ignoring the glass under his boots, “let’s talk territory. Obviously I’m taking Crime Alley and the Docks and part of the Upper End-”

“What the fuck are you doing here?!” Barbara seethed as Red Hood stomped his way over to her workbench. “What do you mean, territories?”

“Joker’s dead.” Red Hood stared at her and not for the first time, she hated the stupid blank helmet. “So that means we’ve got to claim new ground to make sure the Rogues don’t get any bright ideas about just who rules Gotham. I’ve already sent the message to Ivy and Dent-”

“That was fast,” she marveled softly.

“So I just gotta let everyone else know that Red Hood controls Gotham now. Bruce isn’t going to do shit for at least a few months - he doesn’t have anyone to take his job while he’s out of commission. Which means we’re pulling overtime.” Red Hood smoothed a map down in front of Barbara. She walked around the table, seeing the sharpied lines marking the paper. “I can keep specific drugs off the streets for a while until everyone understands the new order of things. Batwoman has agreed to sit back for a while until I get everything settled.”

“You already control the ins and outs of cocaine and marajania coming through,” Barbara pointed out, “what more can you do?”

“The Joker had a side business of dealing methamphetamine. He had some sort of deal with The Scarecrow - the shit was laced with small doses of solidified fear toxins.” Red Hood ignored Barbara’s sharp inhale. “So that’s fucking done. Harley won’t be causing any chaos for a good while - Ivy’s got her busy until she can finish mourning and rejoicing or whatever the fuck she wants to do.”
“Catwoman?” Barbara squinted at her marked territories.

“Gonna stick to the shadows. She’s a bit miffed that everyone left but is also kinda hoping this is the wake-up call Bruce needs. Bluejay says she’ll take East Side and the Fashion District until we can pull in some help.”

“Help as in who?” Barbara ran a frazzled hand through her hair. “We’ve lost everyone.”

“You still keep Strix close?” Red Hood look up at her. “Call her in. I’m getting Artemis and Bizarro to crash for a while.” Barbara pretended she didn't hear him utter, “Maybe permanently.”

“Who else?” She exhaled. “The League’s going to be pissed about everything that happened.” Maybe went unspoken. They tended to let the Bat drama stay within the Bat-family.

“Azrael, Batwing, and Hawkfire.” The two stared at each other. “Those are the only ones left who know Gotham like we do.”

“Okay.” She pushed her cowl off and dug her palms into her eyes. “Okay, we can do this.” They’d suffered under worse, after all. “Let’s figure out the next plan of action and move from there.”

Jason nodded, slipping his helmet off. He looked exhausted. There was a smear of flour along his cheek.

“Shit cookies?” She guessed as she moved to her computer. Time to call in the calvary.

“Red Death,” he corrected and Barbara winced. Oof. Those were the worst. She stared at her computer screen, not moving to do anything.

“I’m hoping this is a nightmare.” Her soft words had Jason look up from the map. “I’m hoping that tomorrow, I can meet Dick for some coffee and go see a movie with Cass and Steph. I just - I can’t imagine them gone. Permanently.”

“They don’t have to be,” Jason explained. Barbara didn't look at him. “I can jump to their dimension-universe thing now. I can take you to see them. If-if you ever want to.”
He watched the woman he’d always admired crumple, pressing her face against her hands as she all but collapsed against her computer desk. She heaved heavily, not sobbing but not dry-faced either.

“Fuck this city,” she whispered in broken words. “Just. Fuck this city.”

Jason let her withdraw into herself, leaning further over his map. His city. Because Gotham may be a shithole that took and took and took and rarely ever gave back, but it was his. And he’d stay with it until he died (for a second and hopefully permanent time).

He sat on the edge of his bed, shoulders hunched inwards. His hands, covered in plaster and bandages, were tightly wrapped around a small photograph. The photograph, taken during one of the rare moments of all his children being in the Manor during a holiday, crinkled under his white-knuckled grip.

“I made a mistake, huh?” He asked the silent bedroom. The shadows moved and Red Hood stepped away from the door. His helmet was propped under his arm and his jacket was nowhere to be seen.

“You’ve made a lot of mistakes,” he corrected. “Don’t act like you don’t know that.” Bruce dropped the photograph onto his nightstand and forced himself back to his propped pillows. “You fucked up a lot, Bruce. Don’t act like you didn't see this coming. Dick was making plans years ago about getting custody of us away from you.”

“Am I that terrible of a person?” Bruce wouldn’t meet Jason’s eyes.

“A person? No. A father? Yes. You should have never been allowed around children. You thought you were saving us. Saving us from the darkness and pain and wrong path. You just put us on an equally corrupt path.” He shifted his footing, all the fight left him.

“Grow the fuck up, Bruce. Yeah, your parents were murdered. You know what? That’s the fucking norm in Gotham. Dick’s parents were murdered, mine died, Tim’s died, Damian’s family tried to assassinate him how many fucking times. We moved on with your advice. When the fuck did you mourn and then move on?”
“I don’t think I ever did,” he whispered honestly. Jason snorted.

“Well, you’ve got a lot of fucking time to do so. Here’s some cookies. Eat them or I’m shoving them down your throat.” Jason tossed three cookies onto his comforter, near his feet. He made no move to get them closer to Bruce’s broken body. “Hope you choke.”

He pivoted and disappeared out of the room. Bruce exhaled and thumped his head back against the bed frame.

The Manor was so silent and cold.

Chapter End Notes

aaaand this Bruce becomes the Bruce from Batman Beyond.

Jk.

Or am I?

Anyways, sorry for the short chapter. And the loose ends and the characters and relationships not fleshed out. I wanted to get a chapter out quick because NaNoWriMo is starting Friday.

So that means no updates for the entirety of November. I'll resume updates after NaNoWriMo.

SEE YOU DECEMBER 1st!
Chapter 37

Chapter by widdlewed

Chapter Notes

This is a short chapter. I'll be doing a Batfam Secret Santa this year as well as traveling to a place with no wifi so until, like, the 10th I'll have no wifi ;w; and I hate writing on my phone so here's a quick update to tide y'all over...

Hopefully...

ALSO I GOT FANART!!! Of Bluejay's and Nightingale's costumes!!! Please give them love!!!!

Nightingale by I'm Not A Duck (Just Batfamily on tumblr)
Nightingale by MoonFox
Bluejay by MoonFox
Bluejay by I'm Not A Duck (Just Batfamily on tumblr)
Another Bluejay by Moonfox
Barista Dick by Diederik_Fiddlestic

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Are you sure?” Jason asked solemnly, hands gripping tight onto Dick’s own. “Are you absolutely positive?”

“Yes,” Dick said back just as solemnly, hands slipping from Jason’s loose grip. He smiled, the gesture sad and painful on his face. “I’ve made up my mind.”

“I trust your judgment.” Jason stepped back, falling into rank beside Tim and Damian. Jackson, Annie, and Richard just stared at them all like they couldn’t believe the melodrama wafting off their new siblings.

“Alright,” Bruce’s face was as grim as the Wayne graveyard, “give me your earring.”

“But are you sure?” Jason pleaded again as Dick handed the device to Bruce. “Like, I absolutely love your appearance but-”

“Richard is Richard and I am me,” Dick explained simply. “I’ve grown to love how I look like a mixture between the two of you with some features of myself.”
Bruce shook his head as he typed on the computer, drawing up the files of the original body-blueprints for the cloaking device.

“Are you serious?” Thomas whispered. “He’s acting like Dick’s dying.”

“Uhg, don’t joke about that,” Duke whispered back as Jason sniffled.

“But...you looked so nice,” Jason whined pitifully. Dick rolled his yellow eyes as he kicked his legs back and forth, propped up on the metal table by the Batcomputer.

“I still look nice, Jason. Suck it up - you’ve known this appearance for over a decade.” Jason just continued to whine and grumble.

“Here,” Bruce passed the earring over to his eldest. “There you go. Old as new.” Dick laughed and clasped the earring back on, beaming as his body expanded into the bulky but graceful figure he’d grown with.

“Welcome back,” Damian sniffed while Ibn just rolled his eyes. They acted like Dick had died and revived.

“Thanks.” Dick continued to kick his legs. “So, we also have a surprise announcement.”

“Want me to go get Cass and Zhēn?” Stephanie asked.

“No need,” Cass spoke as the two slipped from the shadows, Alfred in tow. “We got Alfred.” She pranced her way over to Dick, pressing a kiss to his cheek. “Talk?”

“Yep!” Dick shared a giddy smile with Bruce, who nodded back while trying to hide his own smile. “So.... B was able to extract the data from the Parliament's files and have developed a permanent cure for me!”

He made jazz hands in the stunned silence. After more than three seconds of silence he frowned
and lowered his hands, looking towards his father in confusion at the unexpected reaction Last time they’d all but-

Jason bodily tackled him off the table, screaming in his ear as he peppered kisses over his head and hair. Damian squeezed himself between the two, hugging Dick with all he was worth. Tim was hugging Bruce, crying into his chest while thanking him profusely. Stephanie and Cass were hugging each other and Alfred, their giddy shrieking and sobs making the unfamiliar siblings confused and concerned.

“When when when?” Duke asked, on his knees beside the dog-pile of birds. Damian shoved Jason off of Dick, helping him sit up as he continued to laugh deeply.

“Next week. Bruce is trying to get into contact with a few people to help make the process smoother. It’s going to be crazy,” Dick explained as he ran a hand through Damian’s hair. He used the other hand to draw Duke into a hug.

“How?” Annie asked as she shifted her footing, looking uncomfortable with the entire emotional scene. They were all too emotive. They were all too physical and expressive. It was weird.

“His heart hasn’t beaten in years ,” Tim explained as he wiped at his eyes, trying to collect himself. “Last time we tried this, he had a panic attack on the table.”

“Oh yeah,” Dick said breezily.

“Oh my god,” Richard whispered, pale at the idea and thought of all the complications this sort of thing could cause.

“Now,” Bruce coughed and all eyes turned to him, “since you’ll be staying here permanently, I also have something for you all. Hope you like jewelry.”

“Now we’re going to slowly add the flour- slowly . Slowly - not that fast!” Dick gave a whine as Jackson and Annie dumped the entire measured out bowl of flour into the silver mixing bowl. Plumes of flour puffed up, making them cough. “It’s going to make it harder to mix in.”
“Shouldn’t we add milk?” Jackson asked, using a shirt sleeve to wipe flour across his cheek.

“That’s for cake,” Dick explained as he gently wiped the white baking ingredient off Annie’s forehead.

“No, I’m pretty sure we need to add milk,” Annie echoed. Damian and Aion, perched near the kitchen sink, rolled their eyes at the two.

“No,” Dick patiently explained. “Now. Stir it.” He handed the two wooden spoons. “Use your muscles.”

They side-eyed the electric mixers across the kitchen.

“No.” Dick planted his hands on the metal tabletop, frowning. “Best to do it with your hands. Makes the idea of ‘from-scratch’ more...homely.”

“Homely,” Jackson echoed. “How did I get roped into working at your cafe when Tim doesn’t?”

“He had a corporation to run,” Dick replied as he braided Annie’s hair into a bun. “And since we can’t have two Tims in public, you’re working here.” He tapped Annie’s earring, the device matching his and Jackson’s. While the two were at the cafe, they’d wear earrings that’d hide their true appearances.

Annie’s blonde hair was replaced by black, her eyes hazel color. Jackson’s hair was blonde and his eyes were a grey color. Their features were changed, noses pinches or jaws narrowed or height changed. Enough to make them look familiar but not enough to point fingers.

“I could run it,” Jackson grumbled. He stabbed viciously at the egg yolks in his bowl. “This sucks.”

“This is so much fun!” Annie laughed over his grumbling. “What next?”

“Next we add the salt, cinnamon, and chocolate chips,” Dick listed off. Jackson hadn’t even begun to stir his bowl yet. Annie was beating the mixture together like a madwoman, cackling as she
“After that, we’ll take pinches of the mixture and form them into balls to place on the cookie trays,” he continued and then gestured to the oven. “The oven has been set to 400-degrees Fahrenheit. We’ll put them in for about nine minutes and then check them every minute or so until the edges are beginning to brown.”

“When can we eat them?” Annie asked, dumping handfuls of choco chips into her bowl. Dick had given up on making her measure her ingredients. The two were terrible at following directions.

“After they cool off.” Dick checked on his own cookies, rising in the oven. “Damian, your cookies will be finished in five minutes.”

“Thank you, Grayson,” the child sniffed. “And thank you for not having these two imbeciles make mine.”

“I’m the only one who’s allowed to bake for you, besides Alfred,” Dick laughed as he stretched. Aion’s eyes went over him once out of habit more than anything else. Damian elbowed him.

“Hey Boss, Deathstroke doesn’t believe you’re back. Can you please come to see him?” Ketti asked, peeking into the kitchen. “He says if it’s a lie, he’s stealing the espresso grinder.”

“Sure! I’ll be right back. Owlet, Chatton, watch them please!” Dick slipped out of the kitchen and they could hear him yell, “WILSON! Drop that machine or you’ll be inhaling tabasco sauce through a straw!”

Aion practically materialized beside Jackson in mere seconds.

“So,” the feline began with a purr, “you single?”

“No,” Annie hissed as she tugged Jackson closer to her with a glare, “he’s not.” The two stared each other down while Jackson just continued to stab into his cookie mixture. It was beginning to look like wet goop. His eyebrows furrowed. Where was this moisture coming from? He peeked a look at Annie’s. Yeah, definitely wrong.
“Pity,” Aion sighed dramatically, “he could be doing so much better.” He curled his lip up at the girl. She grinned sharply back, expression downright vicious.

“He’s not a big fan of pu-”

“Putting up with Satan, praise Jesus, amen,” Jackson cut in as Dick came back into the kitchen. He blinked at Aion and Annie sandwiching Jackson between them and turned to Damian who was doodling in his sketchbook.

“Don’t ask,” the child commented. Dick nodded in understanding and went to check on his cookies.

Richard sat at the kitchen island, a spoonful of sugary cereal forgotten as he gawked at Dick.

The talon himself was sitting on the opposite countertop, feeding the gorgeous barn owl perched on his shoulder something red and bloody.

Jason walked into the kitchen, caught sight of the owl, and nearly crashed into the pantry door.

“DAD!” He screeched and the owl on Dick’s shoulder flapped its wing at the sudden loud noise. “HE HAS AN OWL!”

“A WHAT?!” Tim and Jackson both roared from somewhere in the manor. Thunderous footsteps echoed as Damian and Ibn both crashed into the kitchen, Damian’s eyes alight while Ibn’s looked more on guard.

“Why?” Jason whispered softly as Dick cooed at his owl.

“I made a friend,” he explained simply as his yellow eyes met the owl. The owl hooted. “His name is-”

“It’s Steph’s turn to name any stray,” Bruce cut in as he trudged into the kitchen, Duke, and
Thomas at his heels. Stephanie gave a cackle while Annie trailed behind her.

Cass and her counterpart were nowhere to be seen.

“There will be no owls in the kitchen!” Alfred chided as he made his way into the chaotic mess. Richard just continued to gawk at the owl.

“Sorry,” Dick apologized and slid off the counter. He turned to Jason, who was closest to him. “Want to pet him?”

“Fuck yeah I do,” Jason reached a hand out to touch the bird. The owl’s wings flapped haphazardly at the approaching appendage. Dick made a soft cooing noise and the owl settled.

“Is Owl-speaking something you learned for the aesthetic too?” Richard asked as Jason’s fingers ran through the soft feathers. Dick just smiled secretively at him.


“You get used to it,” Stephanie shrugged and tapped her chin with a hum. “It’s my turn, yeah? Let’s go with…..Hooters.”

“No,” Tim and Damian shot down immediately. Tim looked exasperatedly at her. “You are not naming the owl after a restaurant chain. Especially Hooters.”

“Why?” Ibn asked, tone almost innocent.

A beat of silence.

“You don’t-” Stephanie’s mouth opened and closed. “Nobody tell him. Okay, Hooters is a no. How about...Tootsie Pop?”

“From that old commercial, squirt! Y’know-” He coughed, “How many licks does it take to get to the center of a tootsie pop? Let’s find out!’ That one?” Damian’s expression flattened at Jason’s sudden voice acting of an old man.

“No and never do that voice again,” the child spoke and crossed his arms over his chest. “BatOwl.”

“No,” Bruce exhaled. “Tootsie Pop is it.” Stephanie gave a cheer while the other siblings, still getting accustomed to the craziness, shook their heads.

Tootsie Pop gave a hoot, flapping her wings as if agreeing to her new name. Dick hummed and cooed back at her, smile wide.

“Now.” The family members winced at Alfred’s icy tone. “Out of my kitchen or we’re having Owl for supper.”

Dick laughed as he rushed towards the back door, Tootsie Pop’s head twisting around to glare at the old man. He raised his rolling pin threateningly.

“Uh.” Thomas stared from the dining room table as Dick walked by with a child, maybe no older than eight or nine, slung over his shoulder. “UH.”

“Dick,” Duke called out warily. Thomas sent him a wide-eyed look. How could he sound so nonchalant about the sight of Dick carting around a kid like he’d picked him off the streets?! Wasn’t that technically kidnapping?! Dick paused from exiting the room, child wiggling to get more comfortable. “Who is that?”

“This is Matt,” Dick explained and Matt waved. He looked eerily similar to Bruce in coloring and eye shape. “He’s my newest Owlet.”

“Nope.” Thomas watched as his counterpart threw his hands up. “Nope. I’m not - we’re not qualified for this. I’m calling Bruce.” Duke leaned back in his chair and, in a pitch that even Thomas flinched at, shrieked, “DAD!”
Footsteps thundered throughout the Manor as Bruce crashed into the dining room, Cass, Zhēn, and Jason piling in after him. Bruce caught sight of Matt and buried his face into his hands.


Damian froze at the sight of Matt. “ANOTHER ONE!?”

“What do you mean another?” Ibn roared out, face twisted, aghast.

“Did he kidnap a kid?” Richard flailed. Matt giggled and Dick gave a soft coo.

“They’re funny,” Matt laughed. “Terry’s gonna love them!”

“Yes he is,” Dick agreed readily with a beam.

“Who’s Terry?”

A window crashing answered him. Everyone watched as a man, maybe a little younger than Jason, rolled into the dining room and shot up, looking furious.

“Gimme back my brother, you sicko!” The teen roared as he charged. Dick’s eyes were bright as he set Matt down and snatched the thrown fist out of the air. The stranger looked startled.

“This is Terry! My other new Owlet!”

“What is wrong with him?” Thomas whispered in horror. He was watching a kidnapping. He was watching a kidnapping happening in front of him. Oh god, was he an accomplice? Were they all accomplices? Commissioner Gordon was going to arrest them all and laugh about it the entire way to prison.
“Dick.” Bruce was slow in approaching the two, telegraphing his movements purposefully to Terry. “You can’t just grab them off the streets.”

“Why?” Dick blinked almost childishly at his father. “They’re yours and they’re homeless!”

“Ooooh,” Steph’s voice called from the dining room entryway. She punched Tim on the shoulder. “Homeless! You owe me 50.”

“Hey, no,” Tim argued as Jackson and Annie traded lost looks. “They’re also Bruce’s kids so that means I won my bet!”

“You both owe me 60,” Jason said as he slung his arms around their shoulders, pulling them apart. “I said the next Owlet was gonna be a boy. Look, both boys.” He beamed down at them smugly.

“You bet on this?” Thomas whispered, aghast. Duke nodded morosely.

“It happens enough. We all secretly think that by the time Dick’s 30, he’s gonna have at least 50 Owlets or Pups. Also, we’re pretty sure Bruce drunkenly donated, like, half his sperm to sperm banks.”

“Gross,” Annie wheezed, expression twisting.

“I’m calling the police!” Terry roared, seeing red. “Now drop my brother, you sicko!”

“Isn’t he adorable?” Dick beamed. He pulled Terry to his side, grip tight to keep him from thrashing. “Look at the resemblance!”

“You’re delusional-” Terry went stiff as Bruce gently and slowly took his chin and tilted it from side to side. Bruce gave a hum and then crouched down to meet Matt’s eyes. Doing the same to the giggling child, he closed his eyes and stood back up.

“I’ll set up the DNA test,” he said patiently. “For now, do you want some pie?” He turned the question to Matt, who gasped with wide eyes.
“PIE! Terry, they have pie!” He tugged on Terry’s arm, eyes bright.

“Matt, this is textbook kidnapping techniques. Offering sweets to children is a tactic to develop trust,” Terry said seriously. Dick snickered while the other children, teens, and adults rolled their eyes.

“Don’t worry,” Jason spoke as he let his accent get a little thicker, words a bit rougher, and stance more guarded. Terry’s eyes sharpened at the sure signs of street on him. “Ya won’ needta worry ‘bout that.”

“Uh-huh.” Stephanie, catching onto Jason’s fun, smiled sharply. “We dun’ stay for da’ sweets.”

“Yeah,” Duke said as he coolly threw an arm around Stephanie’s waist, eyes dark. “What they said.”

“You don’t need to act tough with me,” Terry snarled, hands balling into fists. “Just ’cause you were on the streets don’t mean shit. Just cause you have the experience doesn’t mean we’re gonna be, like, best friends and I’ll just agree with my brother being kidnapped.”

“What happened to Street Kid Solidarity?” Annie whispered to Steph. She shrugged.

“Also, what the fuck is with all these twins?!” Terry wretched himself away from Dick and scooped Matt up, glaring at everyone in the dining room.


Terry tensed before glancing at Matt. Matt batted his big doe eyes at the older man and he groaned softly. Fuck. He hated the logic in doing this for his baby brother.

“...what kind of pie?” Terry begrudgingly asked, slowly lowering Matt to the floor. Matt gave a loud cheer.
“I can’t believe the ‘kid want some candy’ tactic worked,” Thomas whispered to Duke as they watched Matt down another slice of cherry pie. Terry was just watching him protectively like a hawk, his own mug of hot chocolate and a slice of pie untouched. “Well, kinda.”

“Don’t worry too much about it,” Tim whispered as he leaned close to the two. “He’s gonna fit right in.”

“How do you know?” Annie asked with an exaggerated blink of her eyes.

“He’s like, Jason 2.0,” Jackson pointed out as he waved his fork idly. “Ready to fight and very protective.” Cass nodded in agreement.

“You aren’t eating?” Matt asked as he looked up from his fifth slice of pie, cheeks smeared with the cherry filling. Dick hummed around his mug of coffee, smile soft.

“I can’t eat right now,” he explained honestly, “but in a few days, I will!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Terry asked as he crossed his arms.

“I’m undead.” Bruce’s hand spasmed to snatch at Dick’s wrist but he was too far and Dick removed his earring.

Matt gasped like he’d just been introduced to the coolest thing in the world while Terry nearly bucked backward in alarm.

Richard shook his head. “Why does he do this?”

“Isn’t it great?” Jason sounded too proud of the situation.

“What the fuck?” Terry gawked at Dick while Matt poked at Dick’s cheek. “What the fuck?!”
“Welcome to the family,” Damian grumbled as Ibn stabbed at his pie slice.

“100 bucks the next kid to come into the family is Billy Batson,” Stephanie whispered to Tim. He bumped their fists together in agreement to the bet and Jason smiled pointedly at the two.

Terry just buried his hands into his hair and groaned loudly. Matt poked at Dick’s cheek again.

Chapter End Notes

I beat NaNo on day 17 lmao but didn't actually finish writing my book until, like, the 25th. So like.... man writing 70k of an original story is so much harder than 70k of a fanfic. I struggled so god damn much but it was fun! Thank you for all the well-wishes on NaNo and for those of you who also participated, amazing job! Even if you didn't hit 50k or not, you still did absolutely amazing!!

I'm also doing a holiday one-shot for Roasted. For those in the discord, you already got a hint as to what it's gonna be. For those not in the discord, let me ask you: Do you believe?
Chapter 38

Chapter by widdlewed

Chapter Notes

Short chapter again. Oof.

HAPPY NEW YEAR! We're in 2020 now my dudes. WOW!!

Thanks for waiting patiently for this chapter, despite it being short! ENJOY!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So,” Aion began slowly as he hesitantly stroked Tootsie’s feathers, “you’re a half-sibling?” His eyes gave Terry a once-over, disappointment clear in his tone.

“Yeah,” Terry said as he crossed his arms, glare down-right scathing, “and you’re Catwoman’s kid?”

“Why are all the good looking ones related to me?” Aion bemoaned without answering the older man’s question, Tootsie giving an understanding hoot. Helena snorted from the patio chair, Matt beside her as he chatted about his coloring book’s pages. Across the table, Damian and Ibn were both silently sketching out their own drawings.

Terry pursed his lips, not even wanting to think about the implications of that statement, and turned his eyes to the expanding yard. Tim and Jackson were sprawled out in the grass, Steph and Annie were talking beside the two napping night-bats, Duke and Thomas tossing a football at each other a bit further away. Cass and Zhen were near the trees, messing with the added tire-swing. It looks like the two were trying to knock each other off it.

“Where’s that weird one?” Terry asked as he searched for the two oldest siblings. “And the one with that white stripe in his hair?” Those two stood out to Terry - one physically kidnapped his kid brother off the streets and the other seemed to be the (slightly insane) voice of reason out of all the weirdos. Not seeing them made him a bit uncomfortable for some reason he couldn’t explain.

“Dick’s at his apartment,” Steph called, looking up from the flower crown she was weaving, “and Jason’s...huh. Where’s Jason?” She turned to her counterpart, who shrugged.
“Todd’s on a mission,” Damian explained without looking up from his sketch, “He’s with Bizzaro and Artemis.”

“Huh.” Duke caught the thrown football. “Not Roy and Starfire?” He all but aimed for Thomas’s head.

“Do I look like his keeper?” Damian sent the slightly older teen a blank stare. His face was lined with irritation, his eyebrows furrowed. “I have better things to worry about.”

“Like Dick’s surgery?” Annie asked innocently, ducking back as if expecting a tossed knife. Ibn looked at her with disgust while Damian frowned thoughtfully at her.

“Yes,” he answered honestly. Annie’s eyes went wide. No matter how many hours she spent with this kid, it was weird how much nicer he was. Better adjusted. Ibn grumbled something under his breath and Damian shrugged. “I am worried about Grayson’s surgery. We all are.”

“Yeah,” Aion said dismissively, “so - uh - what does Tootsie eat?” He eyed the owl warily when the bird stared him right in the face. “And aren’t they supposed to be nocturnal?”

Richard chose this moment to poke his head out, leaning against the glass door leading into the kitchen. “Hey, Jon, Colin, and Billy are here.” His eyes followed Damian and Ibn as they began to gather their drawings. “Matt, do you want to play with them? We’ll be playing with the Switch.”

“Can I? Please Terry!” Matt hopped up from the table, scrambling to Terry’s side. “Pleeeeease?” He set his wide eyes onto his brother’s face. Terry stared down at him blankly.

“Fine,” he relented with a sigh. Matt had no sense of stranger-danger. The moment he’d heard Bruce was their biological father (and what a fucking ride that whole ordeal was to be told) he was immediately gun-ho about treating everyone as family. It was a bit worrying how readily he trusted these people. Terry would have to be more vigilant for the two of them, it seemed.

“Thank you!” Matt hugged Terry before rushing after the two older children, a bounce in his step. Ibn sneered at him while Damian just nodded in acceptable to the new addition to their play-date.

“You’re going to play with them?” Aion asked curiously to Richard, movements slow to not jostle Tootsie as he made his way over to the man.
“Yeah. It’s…good for my Dami to get some social interactions outside of…well..us,” Richard explained with a shrug. “Besides, in our universe, he stopped hanging out with Colin for unknown reasons. No idea what happened but he seemed pretty excited to meet this one.” The man’s expression was soft as he smiled sadly.

“God,” Aion blurted, “you’re all fucked up.” Terry gave a startled bark of laughter from his position by Helena, eyes wide as he watched the two. Richard shrugged his shoulders again.

“Aion cackled loudly while Terry joined in, unable to help it. Richard left, smug smile in place. As he passed by the kitchen exit, he spotted Bruce coming out of the pantry.

“I’m not a Batsona, whatever that is,” Bruce argued, arms laden with sugary boxes of cereal. Richard paused, eyeing the seven - actually seven - boxes of oats. “Please don’t give them new names to call me. I’m still getting teased about being a furry.”

“What are you doing?” He asked, eyebrows raising. Bruce hugged the boxes to his chest protectively, frown guarded. He wasn’t going to point out that if Bruce knew what a furry was, he would most likely know what a Sona was but he wasn’t going to ask. It was bad enough as it was.

“I’m bringing these over to Dick’s apartment. Alfred is out grocery-shopping.” Ah. Richard nodded sagely. Best time to steal and hoard food without fear of one’s life. “I left the marshmallow ones.”

“Uh-huh.” Richard backed out of the kitchen slowly. “We’re going to be playing Mario Party in the game room if you want to join us.”

Bruce tilted his head thoughtfully, humming. “After I drop these off, sure. Clark’s probably at the cafe if Jon’s here. I may bring him back for lunch.”

Richard squinted at him. God, that was still so weird to wrap his head around - Bruce openly broadcasting his friendship to Superman. Uhg. Gross. It’d taken years for Richard’s own Bruce to even admit that he saw Superman as anything more than a danger to the world.
“See you then,” he said and Bruce left with his cereal boxes. He shook his head. This family was so weird.

“What is this?” Slade slapped a paper down onto the counter, nearly knocking over the newly decorated tip jar. He scooted the paper closer to Dick, who glanced at it lazily. “This says you’re going to have the cafe closed for a month. A month. What the hell, Barista?”

“Boss is taking a leave of absence for personal reasons,” Ketti butted in, nostrils flaring protectively as she elbowed Dick away from the counter, “and since his last leave didn’t do so well, we agreed it would be best that he close it down.”

“What leave?” Harley called from her booth, squished between the Joker and Ivy. They had some card game between them, the colors bright and an electronic circular device in the middle flashing.

“Medical,” Dick explained patiently as Slade glared daggers at Ketti. She glared back. “I don’t know the exact side effects of a surgery-”

“What surgery?” Ivy cut in, tossing her red hair over her shoulder. “I thought you were…” She waved a hand at him.

“In two days, I hopefully won’t be anymore!” He beamed at the cafe’s patrons and a spoon dropped in the stunned silence.

“And if that works,” Calvin spoke slowly, “then we’re all fixed, yeah?” He looked hopefully at the man, one hand in the dessert display case and the other holding a tray of freshly baked goods. Dick nodded.

“If you need legal advice on how to get a new social security card or birth certificate,” Dent piped up from his table, “I have your paperwork ready. I just need a signature.”

“What?” Bruce turned in his seat, having been sharing a table with Clark. “Dent, did you just say-”

“I don’t care!” Slade reached across the counter and grabbed Dick’s shoulders, shaking him. “A
“When did he grow so dependent on it?” Morgan whispered to Ketti, who shrugged and went to get the broom. Sometimes Slade only listened when he was treated like a bug.

Dick let himself be shaken, eyes rolling at the dramatic behavior. “Sorry.” He batted Slade’s hands from his body, moving backwards. “How about this. Give me a week and I’ll make you a cup of coffee at my apartment.”

Another spoon dropped. Bruce exhaled loudly, rubbing at his face while Clark looked between the two in alarm. Harley opened her mouth, seemed to think better of it, and closed it.

“Well if he gets special treatment,” Dent began, “I want a house visit too.”

“Fuck you, Scarface, I’m getting a goddamn espresso!” Slade waved his gun towards the man. Two-Face just raised an eyebrow, unimpressed.

“Y’know,” Ivy spoke up innocently, “we’ve never seen your apartment.”

“You don’t need to,” Bruce bit out. No one listened to him.

“We need to give you a house warming!” Joker laughed out.

“Are they serious?” Clark whispered, horrified.

“Sadly, yes,” Bruce whispered back as Dent nodded in agreement with Joker’s comment.

“I’ve been living in my apartment for a few years now, though,” Dick pointed out with a frown.

“Details,” Harley said with a wave of her hand. “So, give us a date and we’ll have a housewarming party! And you can make Deathstroke his coffee or whatever.” She eyed the older man. “Maybe you should take up smoking.”
“Maybe you should fix up your makeup, clown. Not seeing too much lipstick now-a-days, Bobo,” Slade shot back. Dick shared a look with the Girls, used to the antics.

“Will the Cat Cafe still be open?” A mobster asked innocently, ducking down when a few people looked at them.

“Of course!” Dick beamed. “Calvin here will be managing it with the usual workers!” A few other customers muttered their satisfaction at that, already having made a habit of visiting the felines when they could.

“A week,” Slade demanded and left with a stomp. The patrons watched him leave.

“Damn he needs to get laid,” a goon spoke up. Everyone kept their mouths shut.

He stared at his ceiling, the city lights bleeding stripes of monochromatic lines across the apartment. Barbatos laid against his head, snuggled into his pillow. It was rare he just lay there, the plush material under him feeling foreign and uncomfortable. His bed was molded to too many bodies not his own, dipped and worn from siblings and not himself.

He laid there, hearing picking up everything. He heard the murmured conversations in the cafe below, heard the crashing of windows a few blocks away - no doubt a robbery in progress. Heard the clunking of boots and the whipping of grappling hooks as the nighttime vigilantes took to the sky. Heard heartbeats and rushing blood and voices and noises expanding miles and miles from him.

Would he lose this, when he’s fixed? His hands tightened in his sheets, fistng the material as his talons cut into the fabric. He tried to imagine a world of silence, of nothing but the faint wails of sirens and the soft breathing of Barbatos. Tried to remember Before and could barely even manage scraps of elephants trumpeting and crowd cheering. Tried to remember the uneasy silence of the Labyrinth, of the ringing in his ears from too much silence.

His thoughts trailed, sinking down like warm blood from a slit to the throat. What else would change, when he was fixed? His healing ability would most likely disappear. (His blanket tore under his talons). He’d be so fragile. So easy to kill. What did that entail, honestly? He could be mugged, could get hit by a car, could die -
He raised his hands up to his face, pressing the palms of his hands against his eyes. He pressed as hard as he could, stars exploding behind the pressure. He was putting himself at a disadvantage, throwing away his immortality for a chance to be normal again. What were the pros? Color? Hunger? He would lose so much protection just for a sliver of normality. Was it worth it? Could he risk it all for something so whimsical?

His window slid open and a body fell heavily onto the foot of his bed. He removed his eyes, seeing Bruce remove his cowl.

“Scared?” The man asked, setting his cowl down by Dick’s feet. “It’s alright to be nervous. I know the first time was a bit of an experience. This isn’t going to be a slow progression - this is a permanent and instant fix.”

“Is it worth it? I’m going to be so...mortal,” Dick whispered into the darkness of his apartment. “I won’t be able to protect my Nest like I do now. I won’t be the same. Will I still be feared? Respected? What if the people of my cafe only keep in line because-”

“You know,” Bruce interrupted, “I can say with certainty that no one will think differently of you. Wilson and Dent have literally invited themselves to your place to make sure you’re okay. Hell, Dent has your paperwork ready to go without any prompting. He just cares that much about you.” Bruce sounded pained to admit that. “You’re loved, Dick. You don’t lose anything from becoming more...mortal. You’re not going to change in any way that matters.”

“Besides all the ways that do matter.” Dick looked down at his hands. “I’ll become weak.”

Bruce shifted, moving closer to Dick. He reached out, taking one of his hands in his. “Weaknesses make us stronger, Dick. The Court may not have believed that, but it’s true. You’ll be stronger than ever before because you’ll strive to compensate for your weaknesses.” He tilted his chin up, yellow meeting tired blue. “And that makes us human.”


“I know,” Bruce ran a hand through the buzz-cut, expression solemn. “And that’s alright.”

“I’m having doubts,” Dick confessed, eyes falling to his lap in shame. “I don’t know if I can do this.”
“That’s alright too,” Bruce whispered as his hand moved to cup the back of Dick’s neck. “Whatever you decide, we will all understand and love you no matter what.”

Dick squeezed Bruce’s hand tightly, mindful of his strength. Strength he wouldn’t have if he went through with the surgery. His family was excited, ready to have a warm body to cuddle and hold.

Was he ready?

“You’ll stay with me the entire time, right?” Dick peeked up at Bruce. “You’ll stay by my side the entire time?”


Dick didn’t want him too. And he knew, if he forwent the surgery, he’d watch them all die without being able to stop it. He could protect them all from everything but the sands of time. He didn’t think he could bear to watch that happen, knowing he’d never follow a similar fate.

“Thank you,” Dick whispered and moved to hug Bruce. He pressed his nose into the kevlar encasing the man’s throat, all but crawling into his lap. “Thank you.”

There was a vibration in his chest. A rhythmic THUMP THUMP THUMP that increased in speed the longer he became aware of it. Something was rushing in his ears and everything felt tingly, starting from his fingertips to his spine.

He shuddered. His vision was a tiny bit duller than what he was used too, colors not as bright and everything looking further away from him (but closer at the exact same time). But the colors - the colors made tears spring up in his eyes. No more black, grey, and white. No more living through a world of monochromatic drab. His eyes burned as the onslaught of bright hues, his mind unable to process so many at once.

A tightness in his chest made him gasp, the sound wet and making the tightness release a bit. More tears, no longer black like ink, trickled down his flushed cheeks as he curled into himself. He
continued to gasp, his chest moving up and down erratically as air came and went through his lungs. He was breathing. He was breathing!

A warm hand soothed down his back and he curled tighter into a ball, hiding his sobbing as the warmth lingered along his back and seeped into his flesh. He felt the roughness of his shirt’s material, the sensation no longer dulled from nerves and senses hampered.

“You’re okay,” Bruce soothed as he continued to rub at Dick’s back. His hand paused near his shoulder blades, feeling the thumping against his palm. His own heart increased in pace, tears forming at the thought that his oldest son had an actual beating heart. The gangly 26 year old in the body of a 14 year old sobbed louder. He turned and buried himself into Bruce’s chest.

“Well,” Leslie breathed out as she removed her blood gloves, “that was…” She had no words to describe what just transpired. One minute the black was thick as sludge and the moment the antidote was inserted, it turned into red blood. She had no words. No words at all.

Bruce looked at her and she held her hands up, moving away from the two. She exited the room, pausing at the crowded Cave. Bruce, for this surgery, had requested that only her and him in the make-shift operation room. The last time bad been enough for the siblings - they had no idea what’d happen this time. And she was glad because halfway through the process Dick had begun screaming bloody murder, his nerves alighting with a vengence after years of being numbed.

“How is he?” Jason croaked out, eyes bloodshot and red-rimmed. Tim was clinging to his arm, Damian on his other side. Zhen and Cass were sitting on the floor, Steph and Annie huddled close while Barbara sat with Ibn and Thomas. Duke looked up from his pacing, eyes wild while Helena and Aion sat by Alfred and Selena.

“He’s …processing. It’s going to be a while before he can have visitors,” Leslie said, wincing when Dick’s loud wailing echoed throughout the Cave. “But,” she was quick to say, “he has a heartbeat and bleeds as red as you and me so…”

The words were supposed to be reassuring but she only got grime expressions in return. “Where’s Richard and Jackson?”

“They,” Tim croaked out, “went to get stuff. Some clothes and..uh..applesauce.” Leslie nodded slowly.
“He’s alive,” Jason whispered softly. Damian sniffled. “He’s alive.”

Chapter End Notes

So poll time:

Should I keep Dick physically 14 and have him age or Magic Mumbo Jumbo Crap to make him physically 26? Y’all decide because I can't.
Chapter 39

Chapter by widdlewed

Chapter Notes

Short chapter! I recently started a new medication and it's affected my productivity and ability to focus long enough to write. So until my body gets used to the new dose, gonna be a bit of a stretch between chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He stared at the ceiling, eyes watering the longer his gaze wavered against the spotting lighting. Jason was pressed against his side, arms wrapped protectively around him like a blanket. Damian was against his other side, chin digging painfully into his collar-bone. Tim was sprawled out on top of Jason, hands fisting Dick’s shirt material. Stephanie was spooning Damian, her hands overlapping Tim’s hand. Cass and Barbara were on the outside of the pile, Duke claiming their legs like a unyielding cat.

It was all too much.

He could feel the waves of heat radiating off the bodies surrounding him, usually comforting but now unbearably stifling. He felt choked, trapped and suffocating as he tried to remember to breathe. In. Out. In. Out. It was a conscious effort, his brain not yet getting the hint that it had to keep him alive after so long without.

He could hear his heartbeat in his ears, a constantly deafening THUMP-THUMP-THUMP that startled him to no end. His chest felt tight, a pressure settling along the cavity between his ribs and continuously pressing down. His eyes itched, heat flushing his cheeks uncomfortably.

He felt tight, compressed to the point of pain. His limbs were stiff and the longer he laid still, the more he became aware that his entire body felt wrong.

It was all too much.

It was an effort to slip out of the tangle of bodies. He knew, even if no one opened their eyes, that they were all awake but keeping their distance. He stumbled out of the bedroom, hands tugging on his sleep shirt. The soft cotton felt restricting on his moving chest, his warm body flushing with cold chills as he made his way down the hall.
His socked feet nearly slipped on the carpeted stairs. A hand snagged his upper arm, keeping him on his feet.

“Whatcha need?” Jason asked sleepily, hair crazy and eyes squinted from strain.

“W-water,” Dick stuttered out. Jason wasted no time in scooping Dick up, arms warm and sturdy under him as he carried him down the rest of the stairs. Dick pressed his face into Jason’s shoulder, eyes burning.

He hated this. He felt all types of wrong and hated that his fears and insecurities were attacking him with a vengeance. He was weak. He was so weak.

“I’ve dreamed of being able to carry you,” Jason whispered as the two made their way into the darkened kitchen. Dick blinked back tears as the taller man set him down onto the countertop. Blue eyes tracked Jason as he got him a cup of water, nails digging into his thighs.

“What do you mean?” Dick asked as his unsteady hands took the offered cup of water. He sipped tentatively at the cold liquid, body shuddering at the foreign substance. After so long on only coffee, it was weird to drink something cold and tasteless.

“You always carried us around like we were nothing but sacks of flour,” Jason laughed as he leaned against the counter beside Dick. “It was frustrating because you were so much stronger than us.”

“Why would you want to carry me?” Dick looked down at his water. His stomach churned. He was unable to discern if it was from hunger or if the water upset his sensitive organs.

“Because you needed to be spoiled and loved as much as we were,” Jason said simply, head tilting to the side. His eyes, soft, were glistening with moisture. “I guess I’m the older brother now.”

“No.” Dick’s voice came out as a heated snap and he looked as surprised as Jason. “I’m the oldest. I may not look it anymore but...but I am the oldest.” He pressed a hand to his chest to punctuate his point, eyes beseeching the man to understand. He needed this. He needed this reminder that despite the changes, he wasn’t worthless. He wasn’t someone to be babied or protected.
“Yeah,” Jason mused as he took the cup of water from Dick’s trembling hand, “you are.” Without waiting for the smaller one to respond, he scooped him back up. Dick shuddered, hating how easily Jason could maneuver his gangly limbs.

“You are still my Owlet.” He hated how wet his words sounded. He hid his face against Jason’s neck as the man began to ascend the stairs. He could hear various doors opening, no doubt the light sleepers checking out who was awake so late.

“I know,” Jason soothed as he nodded to Richard and Ibn. The two closed their bedroom doors again while Bruce kept his open. He waved the two over and Jason pivoted to the man.

“You two alright?” Bruce whispered into the silence of the hallway. Jason nodded while Dick sniffled. His expression pinched up and he nodded. “Want to sleep with me?” He knew it was unorthodox, asking if his two oldest wanted to share a bed with him. But one look at Dick’s wet eyes (so weird without the black ooze) and he abandoned the awkwardness.

“Thanks Dad,” Jason hushed as he set Dick down on Bruce’s cold sheets. The man hadn’t even laid down yet. Patrol had been light and fast, the Villains giving a week of rest since they knew Batman would be handling Dick’s post-surgery recovery.

“Yep. Dick,” Bruce called as he sat at the edge of the mattress. Dick looked up from Jason’s side. “Ivy said to say hi and hoped you were doing okay.” The former talon gave a wet little snort and buried his face into Jason’s stomach. The two men shared looks.

Bruce got a weird sense of nostalgia, seeing his two oldest cuddling in his bed. It reminded him of when Dick had first come to the Manor, Orders in place and protective streak already cementing his devotion to the nocturnal family.

Jason and Dick had become inseparable so quickly, he’d been worried about the physiological implications of such attachments. But after watching them, he’d learned that the two had just grown protective over who they saw as needing protection. Dick saw the embodiment of life in Jason while Jason saw the corruption and darkness of Gotham’s mark in Dick. The two had connected on the understanding that they wanted to heal and keep safe the beauty they both saw in each other.

Looking at them now, Bruce was reminded of their bond. Of the two children he’d vowed to keep happy. The two children who made his life so full, so loved. Who gave him a new family to love and protect. Jason had been the beginning but Dick had been the catalyst.
Bruce reached over and ran his hand through Jason’s hair. The man blinked curiously at him.

“Go to sleep, you two,” he whispered and Jason nodded, understanding crossing his eyes. He tucked Dick up more close to his body and closed his eyes, trying to get Dick to mimic his breathing.

Bruce stayed awake, watching the two. He knew, more than anyone, that this was going to be a rough night.

Breakfast was tense. Everyone kept glancing at Dick who stared blankly at his bowl of oatmeal. The bland, plain food stared back at him, untouched.

Everyone in the Manor had woken up from his screaming, his dreams terrorized by nightmares and memories. No one was going to talk about them. Nightmares and night terrors were common and respected.

“You should eat,” Tim whispered helpfully. Dick blinked dazily at the teen before moving back to his oatmeal. Alfred had decided until the resurrected teen was able to handle his functions again, he’d be on a strict bland diet. No need to overwhelm his senses so early on.

Dick lifted his spoon, stomach clenching as he hesitantly brought it to his mouth. His teeth scraped against the metal, clicking loudly, as he swallowed the mashed oats. The table watched with great intensity, eyes burning into his hunched form as he kept his lips pressed together in habit.

After a moment, he exhaled.

“How’s that taste?” Damian asked, leaning forward over his plate of maple oatmeal. The family had agreed to sticking to Dick’s bland diet, not wanting to mock him with savory meals.

“Good?” Dick’s eyebrows furrowed. “It’s...sweet.” He took another spoonful. He chewed thoughtfully. “Yeah, sweet. I remember sweets.”
“You remember sweets,” Richard whispered in physical pain, poking at his cinnamon apple slices in his oatmeal. Ibn looked equally as pained. He was a bit disturbed by all this.

“Well, I guess even the blandest food is going to have some sort of taste right now,” Stephanie said, making a face at her own breakfast. “After breakfast, want to come with me to your apartment?”

“My apartment?” Dick looked up from his spoon, blue eyes unnervingly wide. “Why are you going there?”

“Getting some of your stuff, check on the cafe,” Stephanie said with a half shrug, “the usual.” She pushed her bowl away, finished with her meal. “What do you say?”

“Yes please,” Dick said and shoved another spoonful into his mouth. He pushed his bowl away, hopping up from his seat. “Now?”

“Go shower first,” she laughed and Dick nodded hurriedly.

“Don’t have the water too hot!” Bruce yelled after him. They all knew the former talon had to shower on the hottest water setting. “It’ll burn!”

Not five minutes later, they all heard a yelp. Tim and Jason sighed, shaking their heads.


“So are you going to fix the other talons?” Annie asked as she took a sip of her orange juice. Bruce nodded, settling back into his chair.

“Yes. After Dick’s done healing and processing everything, I’ll administer the antidote to Calvin and Strix.”

“Good call,” Jackson said as he finished off his own breakfast. The table lapsed into silence, each member getting lost in their thoughts.
“God this family is weird,” Terry blurted.

“I feel like I should be insulted,” Dick said as he adjusted the sweatshirt over his form again. Even with the warmer temperatures, he was shivering under the thick material. “This is your old sweatshirt.”

“Yeah but Dami’s don’t fit you and Timmy’s is too big. Dad wanted to upgrade your wardrobe since you can see color again and knows that fabrics are gonna feel different to you now so…” Stephanie shrugged her shoulders as the two walked up the stairs to his apartment.

“Still. I could have kept my old clothes,” Dick grumbled as he unlocked the apartment. He blinked at the doorway, Stephanie at his shoulder. Sitting on his coffee table was a toppling mound of presents.

The two stared.

“You need better locks,” the girl whispered as she moved around him, checking the gifts. Not hearing anything ticking or leaking liquids, she deemed them safe enough to touch. Dick just stayed still, blinking at the wrapped boxes.

“I don’t...who are they from?” Dick ventured closer. Stephanie picked up one of the boxes, checking the card attached.

“Looks like a lot of the Heroes and Villains that frequent the cafe. I guess they couldn’t have waited for your little housewarming party.” She smiled in bemusement as she set the gift back down. “We can collect these later, if you want?”

“Oh.” Dick settled down into his couch, eyes still trained on the gifts like he could physically wrap his head around the idea of someone giving him a present. “Um…”

Stephanie checked to make sure all of his appliances were off and there weren’t any leaking faucets or sparking plugs before turning to him. Her eyes were unreadable as she considered him for a moment.
“I’m going to go downstairs to say hi to the Cat Cafe,” she began slowly. “You can stay here if you want.” Dick nodded dazedly and Stephanie left with a smile.

He slowly lifted a wrapped cylinder package, the weight startling him. He checked the attached tag and saw it was from one of Penguin’s goons. He checked another gift. This one was from one of his civilian customers. Another gift - Ivy. Another - Dent. Another - Wonder Woman.

He leaned back from the gifts, hands shaking.

“Boss!”

Dick looked up, heart lurching to his throat as Ketti, Morgan, and Jessica trampled up the steps. The three stopped at his opened doorway, smiles wide and blinding.

“What are you three doing here?” Dick asked as the three scrambled into the apartment. They rushed over, stopping short from tackling him.

“We were checking in on the Cat gang and making sure no one had broken into the Cafe,” Ketti said, ignoring Morgan’s coughed, “Deathstroke”.

“Oh.” Dick huddled back into the cushions as the girls just stared at him expectantly. “Um. Hi?”

“How are you?” Jessica asked as she eyed the pile of gifts. “And don’t lie.”

Dick bit at his bottom lip, the sharp pain comforting as he tried to answer the girl’s questions. He’d worked with them long enough that they could detect even the smallest lie from him. For only ever being work friends, they were observant of him and his habits.

“I… It’s a struggle,” Dick answered honestly.

“That’s fine,” Morgan said immediately as she plopped down onto the far cushion, turning to face him. “I mean, what, you were dead for 12 years? I bet it’s a lot to take in.” She smiled in easy
“Yeah.” Dick’s shoulders slumped. “Yeah. Um. I know this is going to change a lot of things—”

“Are you leaving the Cafe?” Ketti asked as she made herself a spot on the table to perch. Jessica said next to Morgan, the three shared matching expressions of worry.

“Never,” Dick said without any doubt. “Just… It’s going to be weird. I mean… I look like I’m a child even though I’m 26. I don’t think any of the customers are going to continue respecting me. The Rules of the Cafe might not hold up any more—”

“Oh, yeah, no, they will.” Jessica waved a hand dismissively. “Boss, the reason that people follow the Rules isn’t because you were a Talon and could essentially kick all their asses. Remember, even before you were outed as a Talon, everyone listened to you and respected the Cafe. It’s because it was you. And you haven’t changed.” Her eyes pierced him. “Maybe physically but you’re still our dorky Boss.”

Morgan and Ketti nodded in agreement. Dick swallowed the lump in his throat, eyes itching. He looked down at his lap, nails picking at his sweater hem.

“Thank you,” he whispered and sniffled. The three girls crowded him, hugging him tightly. “Thank you so much.”

The sense of nostalgia was repeatedly sucker-punching Bruce in the face. He came to an abrupt halt as he watched the scene before him unfold.

“What are you doing?” He asked hesitantly. Tim looked up, Dick hanging in his arms like a disgruntled teddy bear. Beside him, Jason and Damian glared at Bruce for disrupting them. It was eerily reminiscent of too many past moments of Dick manhandling others like they were nothing but his playthings.

Judging by his sulking face, he knew too and seemed to understand this was some form of revenge.
“We’re going to build a fort. All of us. Terry’s collecting all the bedding while everyone else gets pillows and materials to build our fort,” Tim explained and seemed too pleased with himself as Dick just let himself be held.

Like Jason all those years ago, his expression clearly read, “This is my life now”.

“Oh.” Bruce took a slow step backward. “Okay. Have fun with that.” Like the coward he was he fled. Dick’s eyes burned in betrayal. Bruce thought he deserved it.

Karma was a bitch.

“Ouch.”

Dick stared down at his hand. Looked over at the rose bush. Look back to his hand. Red bubbled up from the punctured skin, forming small beads.

And continued to stare as the small wounds closed back up slowly, the blood trickling back in at a snail’s pace.

His mind blanked.

In an instant, his knife was in hand. Richard, settled on the patio with a glass of lemonade, squinted at the sudden glint of metal.

“What are you doing?!!”

Richard’s holler caught the attention of every member outside as they watched Dick sink his knife into his thigh. Stephanie shrieked while Annie dashed towards him, alabaster skin paling further. Jason was on her heel, Tim running inside to get Bruce.

Damian and Ibn, who’d been closest to the small ex-Talon, were at his side in an instant and forming his hands away from the knife still stuck in his leg.
Dick’s breathing was erratic, eyes wide as his body trembled.

“Are you stupid?” Richard asked as he came over with Bruce, Tim and Jackson behind them. Jason looked like he was close to crying as everyone tried to crowd the teen. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“It hurts,” Dick choked out and Tim gave a whine, “but - but my healing-” He forced his arm out of Damian’s hold and against the sudden outcry of everyone present, wretched the knife out of his thigh.

Bruce sucked in a sharp breath as he watched the stab wound painstakingly slowly close up. Damian fell back onto his backside as everyone released a collective exhale.

“You still have your healing,” Tim whispered, “though it looks like it’s slower.”

“Of course he still has his healing,” Barbatos exploded from atop the rose bush. Everyone turned their eyes to him. “He also has his strength.”

“Really?” Annie asked, eyebrows pinched up. “So he kept some of the Talon side effects?” Barbatos snorted, fluttering down onto Dick’s healed thigh.

“Imbeciles. My precious host could never be fully mortal anymore. Not only because of what the Court did to him to make him the perfect body for me, but because the Contract between us keeps him connected to me in more than just Magic. When I possessed him originally, I made sure to make sure safety precautions were in place.”

“You what?” Bruce’s face darkened. “Why are we just hearing about this now?”

“Didn’t seem important. He will die like a mortal of old age,” Barbatos said dismissively, “but he will continue to have his healing and strength. He is my precious host, after all.” The bat demon nuzzled into Dick’s thigh. “Now, feed me cookies.”

“What the fuck is this family?” Terry asked. Duke gave him a look. He’d spent enough time now that he should know the answer to that.
Chapter End Notes

All aboard the fluffy-angst train.

End Notes

COME JOIN THE DISCORD SERVER! We also talk about Batman/comic book/normal/crazy stuff too!

https://discord.gg/ZvMAP5a

Works inspired by this one: **He has a tattoo?!** by Marionette01

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